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# IN MY SEVENTH LIFE, I MET A PINCESS PRINCESS





# Copyright



### **SAMMBON**

### Translation by Haydn Trowell Cover art by nama2e

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BOKU HA NANADOME NO JINSEI DE, KAIBUTSU HIME WO TENI IRETA

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## The End of My Sixth Life

Not once since the moment I was born had I ever been truly loved.

I came into this world as the eldest son of Marquis Jacob Grenville, the current head of the noble house governing the easternmost part of the Empire of Southenklein.

My mother was Ava Norfolk, the daughter of Margrave Norfolk, but she passed away soon after giving birth to me, as if trading her own life for mine.

When I was old enough to understand, my nanny gleefully informed me that my parents' marriage had been a matter of political expedience for both families. My father hadn't shed so much as a single tear at my mother's death—he simply stared down at her lifeless body, and at me, the infant crying beside her.

Having done his duty, my father went on to take one Angela Hill, the daughter of Baron Hill, as his second wife.

Then, less than six months after my birth, the pair was gifted with a second son, my younger brother, Louis. In other words, my father and stepmother must have already been deeply involved while I was still in my mother's womb. Unlike when I was born, it was said that my father was extraordinarily pleased with the birth of my brother.

Two years later, my younger sister, Anna, came into the world, and the four of them—my father, stepmother, and two half siblings—were, to all outward appearances, a happy, picture-perfect family.

I alone was relegated to a cottage detached from the main house to live a

lonely life with only my nanny and a few additional maids.

I saw my father no more than once a year, when Margrave Norfolk, my maternal grandfather, came to visit.

And yet my grandfather never once spoke to me—he merely gave me a quick once-over and was done. And so, whenever my father and grandfather met, I would simply stand nearby, as still as a wooden doll.

Even my stepmother hated me, criticizing and cursing me whenever she saw my face. Sometimes, she even disciplined me by whipping my back or legs.

Unlike me, my brother and sister were raised with their parents' boundless love and care, and they grew up happy, arrogant, and haughty.

And that was why—

"Brother, I accidentally broke one of Father's favorite vases. Could you apologize to him for me?"

—requests such as these were more or less a daily occurrence.

Why did I always have to take the fall in my brother's place? I thought it unfair, but that didn't stop me from going along with it every time.

"Yeah. Got it, Louis," I said with a faint smile as I picked up the shattered pieces of the vase.

I understood, of course, why my stepmother found me such an eyesore. I was the son of her husband's late wife, after all. I also knew that Louis and Anna considered me a nuisance and an obstacle. We were only half siblings, and their mother already had it in for me.

My parents' marriage was never anything more than a political arrangement, and now that a second son had been born into the family as a potential heir, my presence was unnecessary.

And yet...

...all I wanted was to be part of the family.

I desperately hoped that if I took the blame for my brother, maybe, just maybe, he would come to see me in a positive light.

If everyone thought I'd been the one to break the vase, maybe my sister would worry about me and ask if I was hurt.

Then maybe my father and stepmother would praise me for looking out for my younger siblings. Well done. You're always there for your brother and sister.

Possessed by that simple dream, more impossible than the most fantastical of fairy tales, I took responsibility for yet another of my brother's mistakes.

What awaited me instead was a month-long confinement in a dim, damp shed without so much as a single window to the outside.

And yet still I dreamed of being recognized as a member of the family, and to that end, I continued to make every effort to improve myself.

But unlike Louis and Anna, I was never allowed to learn such things as academics or swordsmanship or etiquette. And so I taught myself, by sneaking into the book vault to read as much as I could while no one was looking, or by lying low and watching my siblings while they studied with their tutors. Neglected as I was, I had nothing but time, and thus plenty of opportunities to better myself.

Eventually, I reached the summer of my fourteenth year—when, for whatever reason, I ended up in a swordsmanship match with a knight in the family's service.

Of course, everyone knew that I had never learned how to properly wield a sword. But still they arranged the match without my knowledge... My stepmother, it seemed, simply wanted to see me suffer.

Yet I thought to myself... If I could manage to defeat the knight, maybe, just maybe, my father would finally accept me. Clinging to that hope, I gave the bout my all.

"I—I give up!" the knight cried, admitting defeat as he prostrated himself on the ground.

I glanced up, my eyes filled with expectation.

Ha-ha... At last, Father will finally take notice of me!

I turned his way... And he looked back at me and nodded in satisfaction!

What joy! My body trembled with delight.

Ah... Maybe now he would finally treat me as part of the family.

After that, I was recognized for my prowess with the blade and placed in the care of a middle-aged tutor. Under his instruction, I was thoroughly educated in the art of combat. His training was merciless, and often left me coughing up blood or screaming at the top of my lungs... And in time, I became an assassin.

From that point on, I was dispatched to kill my father's enemies—young and old, man and woman, high-born and low.

But as I committed these murders, I was happy. When I was killing people, I felt as though I was truly part of the family.

And after I had carried out all those assassinations for him, my father, having seized control of the Empire of Southenklein, executed me for a string of murders involving nobles.

And so my first life came to a close.



After the curtain fell on my first life, I found myself waking up in bed one day before my match with the knight.

I was stupefied, of course, unable to grasp my situation—but when I gazed on the still-childish face staring back at me in the mirror, I finally realized that I had been sent back in time.

And so, learning from my mistakes, I deliberately let my opponent get the better of me.

Of course, I still had all the assassination skills I had picked up during my first

life, so if I really wanted to, I could have killed him at any moment... But I knew that if I did, I would never be accepted as part of the family.

Instead, I dodged the man's attacks, let him get in a couple of nonlethal blows, and ultimately surrendered. Satisfied by this display, my stepmother stood up from her seat, positively beaming.

Ha-ha... Will she pay a little more attention to me now?

From that point on, I decided to make a name for myself not in swordsmanship but in academics. Perhaps if the others didn't see me as a powerful swordsman, they wouldn't be so eager to keep their distance.

I continued my independent studies, mastering a wide range of subjects—history, business management, jurisprudence, and even imperial governance. By the time I had finished, I had committed to memory almost every book in the family's collection.

All that was left was to obtain my father's approval, so I decided to enlist my brother's assistance. To gain his trust, I completed several assignments for him to submit to the Imperial Academy, where he was enrolled as a student.

And as a result—

"Ha-ha! Thanks, Brother! Because of you, I got the highest score in class!"

"I see... That's great news."

-my brother finally acknowledged me as his own flesh and blood.

As proof of his regard, from that point on, he turned to me for all his assignments at the Imperial Academy. I even pretended to be him and took exams in his place. Who could have guessed that the disguise techniques I picked up in my first life as an assassin might come in handy here, of all places?

Before long, Louis was even asking me to attend his classes.

I was overjoyed to have won his trust, but more than anything else, I relished the time I spent as him at the academy.

I could study to my heart's content, and I even found someone I could legitimately call my friend...

And yet...it was all my brother's life...

I had my misgivings, but I continued living as his stand-in.

And then...when we were both eighteen years old and it came time for us to graduate from the academy—I met my end, poisoned by my own brother.

And so my second life came to a close.



In my third life, I perished at nineteen, when my stepmother set fire to the detached cottage I had grown up in.

My *fourth life* ended when I was seventeen. I was torn to pieces by a beast my father had purchased illegally to appease my sister's selfish whims.

In my fifth life, I was mistaken for my brother and assassinated at the age of sixteen.

And then came my sixth life...

"...Hugo. You are to be executed for conspiring to overthrow the government. The sentence will be carried out at noon tomorrow."

My own father read out my death sentence, impassively announcing my fate before my cell in the Imperial Palace's deepest dungeon, where only the empire's most serious criminals were kept.

"You should consider this an honor, Hugo... Though you were useless in life, you can still die for your brother, Louis—no, for all of House Grenville."

This time, I had elected to do nothing.

I hadn't become an assassin and killed at my father's behest.

I hadn't stood in for my brother and bolstered his academic reputation.

I had done nothing at all for my stepmother, my sister, my grandfather, my house, or my country.

And as a result of my idle life—I was to die as a scapegoat for my brother, who had allowed himself to get caught up in some stupid plot.

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"Hah. Ha-ha..."
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"...Hugo?"

Laughter built up inside me...I couldn't hold it in any longer.

When the man I had always looked up to most, my dear father, appeared before me, I had let myself hope he was there to save me. Or if he wouldn't save me...I thought perhaps he had come to tell me that he had finally accepted me as his own, as a parting gift before saying farewell.

Ah... I was such an idiot. I couldn't help laughing at myself.

It was pointless to hope for anything from a man like him. I should've known that.

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"...So you've finally lost your mind?"
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Lost my mind? Yes, that's right.

I was broken, beyond repair... I had no need for this family anymore.

And so—

"...?!"

—I plunged the dagger I kept concealed on my person straight into my own chest.

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"Ha-ha... Ha... Next time... I'll make sure..."
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As the man who used to be my father stared back at me, I raised the corners of my mouth into a smirk.

Next time...

You... Louis... Stepmother... Anna... Every member of rotten House Grenville... I'll make sure all of you suffer.

And so my sixth life came to a close.

### The Morning of My Seventh Life

"Ngh..."

When I opened my eyes, I was staring up at a familiar ceiling.

...Somehow, I had returned once again to the day before that fateful match.

"Well then...," I muttered to myself as I got up from my hard bed. "I suppose it's time to—"

Bang!

"Master Hugo! How long are you planning to stay in bed?! If you don't hurry..." The door was thrown wide open, and in strode Molly, my former nanny and now my chamberlain. She fixed me with a frown and began nagging me in a loud voice. "What? You're already awake? Then come down to the dining room! Quickly!"

She was an irreverent woman who monitored my every move at my stepmother's behest. She didn't have even an ounce of respect for the man she ostensibly served.

"...I don't want breakfast in the dining hall today," I said. "Bring it here."

"What? It's too early for such nonsense! You're in no position to be making selfish demands!"

"You're the one who should watch your tongue. A mere servant like you ought to be more careful about how you address your master."

"...?!"

Molly flinched at this cold warning, but it wasn't long before her surprise gave way to anger.

"...Enough of this, Master Hugo. Or do you want me to tell the madam about your behavior?"

Ha-ha... Up until the end of my sixth life, that threat might have actually scared me...

I had always tried to stay on Molly's good side because I didn't want to be despised by the people I looked up to as my parents, regardless of whether we were related by blood.

But there were things Molly didn't know: I had already walked this earth six times before, and I had now given up on ever becoming a part of this family.

"Then perhaps I'll tell Father how you and the head cook have been embezzling the money he set aside for bringing me up. Oh, right... I'll probably see him tomorrow before the match. Maybe I can tell him then?"

"...?!"

Ha-ha, that has her spooked.

Yes... From the moment she took over as my nanny, Molly had been misappropriating the funds set aside for my living expenses.

Because my maternal grandfather was Margrave Norfolk, my father couldn't afford to be seen neglecting my upbringing—outwardly, at least. As such, a certain amount of money had been dedicated to my needs—and yet everything in my life, from my food to my clothing and furniture, was cheap and low quality. This was the reason why.

...In any case, Molly and the head cook's wanton theft was usually brought to light about three years from now without my having to lift a finger.

"...You can't be serious, Master Hugo. What evidence do you have for that accusation...?"

"Evidence? What does *that* matter? The minute I tell Father, he'll investigate and find all the evidence he needs."

At this, Molly's face turned stark white.

Honestly... She should have realized the second I raised the matter who had the upper hand here. You're going to do as I say now. That's your reality.

"So...I'll be eating breakfast in my room."

"U-understood...," she said with a bow before slipping out the door.

"Phew..."

Ha-ha... I could hardly believe what a relief it was not having to tiptoe around all the time worrying about everyone's reactions... But what should I do now...?

I could use the assassination skills I'd picked up in my first life to slaughter my entire family, but that would just leave me a fugitive throughout the empire. What would be the point in that? Besides...

"...I won't be satisfied unless I've brought them to the brink of despair. I can't choke the life out of them until then."

I mean, they had already caused my death six times over. I wanted them to pay for what they'd done, to suffer as they had made me suffer.

"...I guess I should start by leaving this house."

So long as I stayed here, I had no future.

Was there anyone in this world who might accept me, who might assist me in my quest for revenge...?

I rested a hand under my chin and sank deep into thought.

I couldn't expect much from my maternal grandfather, Margrave Norfolk. He had casually married my mother, his only daughter, into this family for political gain. And on top of that...he only ever spared me a glance once a year. And even then, I could see the contempt in his cold eyes.

In that case...

Knock-knock.

"E-excuse me. I've brought your breakfast..."

Molly, looking visibly apprehensive, stepped into the room with a group of maids and began setting up my meal.

She now understood that I could report her crimes at the slightest provocation. That would ensure her good behavior, at least until she could get rid of any incriminating evidence.

"I-if there's anything else you need, please feel free to call..."

"Call you? How?" I asked in a low voice, glancing about my room.

My servants had never so much as given me the time of day, much less furnished my living quarters with a bell. How was I supposed to call them?

"I-in that case, I'll attend to you here, in person!" offered one of the maids.

Her name was Ellen, and throughout all six of my past lives, she was the only one who had ever treated me with kindness.

"I see... Then can I ask a favor of you?" I said with a soft smile.

"O-of course!" she responded brightly.



"I-in that case..."

Acting like their work was done, Molly and the other maids filed out of my room.

"I guess I'll dig in, then," I said, picking up my knife and fork at the small table in my room.

"Please eat at your leisure!" Ellen called out.

Ha-ha... I guess it was too much to expect any improvements in the food.

"U-um, if you don't mind my asking...," Ellen began as she timidly poured me a glass of water. "Why did Miss Molly have such a sudden change of heart...?"

"Who knows? I'm just grateful she did," I answered with a shrug and a wry smile.

"I—I see. Apologies for asking..." Ellen withdrew to the back of the room.

"More importantly...I'm hoping to do something to serve my father...," I muttered insincerely, my gaze locked on the table in front of me.

"For His Lordship, you mean...?"

"Yes... I'd like to dedicate myself to serving the family in some way...for my father's heir, Louis, and for my sister, Anna..."

"Master Hugo..." Ellen's eyes softened and filled with emotion. She was deeply moved, it seemed, by this show of dedication to House Grenville.

"Hmm... What if I were to be adopted into another family of similar or greater standing—one that could benefit House Grenville in some way...? Like a ducal house or a foreign noble family?"

"Th-that sounds like a wonderful idea!" Ellen leaned in closer, a smile spreading across her face. My suggestion, it seemed, had met with her approval.

"Mm... Maybe if I win the match tomorrow, I'll suggest as much to my father. Ha-ha... Thanks for your support, Ellen."

"N-not at all! I'll be here for you whenever you need me!"

"Yes... You're the only one in this house I can trust... Well, I'd better finish eating, or I'll wind up causing you trouble." I chuckled softly.

After that, I hastily finished my breakfast and let Ellen gather the dishes and leave the room. Once she was gone, my lips curled up in a mischievous smirk.

"Ha-ha..."

I was well aware, of course, that Ellen—the only maid who ever treated me with compassion—was actually one of my father's spies, sent here to keep an eye on me. I had known this ever since my third life.

I still remembered the view from my cottage's window as it went up in flames around me, leaving me no means of escape—how I had seen Ellen there, standing outside in my stepmother's shadow.

In other words—she had been one of them from the very beginning.

And yet...when I saw her through the window, it was the oddest thing. She seemed to be laughing and bawling her eyes out at the same time. I still couldn't make heads or tails of her expression... But this was hardly the time to worry about such things.

At any rate, I had no doubt she would run off to report our conversation to my father at the first opportunity. Very soon, I suspected, I would be offered up as a prize—to the one and only archducal family in the whole empire, House Woodstock.

The noble House Woodstock had been founded by Cyril, the first Archduke Woodstock and uncle to the current emperor, His Majesty Edward von Southenklein. To this day, the archduke continued to reign over the northernmost part of the empire.

What's more, Archduke Woodstock had lost his son and heir during the war, leaving his granddaughter as his only possible successor. However...

"... There are all sorts of rumors about his granddaughter."

It was said she wielded absolute authority throughout her family's holdings and that she was wont to kidnap innocent people from among their subjects to indulge in her favorite pastime—torturing her victims, bathing in their blood, and delighting in their frantic screams.

People claimed that she was actually a demon and that everyone who knew the truth of her identity had been permanently erased.

They had even given her a nickname behind her back:

"The archduke's pet monster."



The main reason for these rumors was that the young lady's father, the archduke's late son, was said to have fallen head over heels in love with a demon.

This, in turn, was largely because the young lady's mother, despite being a future archduchess, never made any social appearances. Eventually even her very existence was called into question.

When the young lady's father died, his passing was announced by the archduke himself, and only he, his granddaughter, and a handful of retainers attended the funeral. This, of course, only served to further fuel the gossip.

Meanwhile, the archduke was said to be a very doting grandfather.

There had been several attempts by nobles to use their money and influence to set up their second or third son as the young lady's future husband. These potential suitors had even met with the archduke and his granddaughter... But after those meetings, it was said that none of them were ever heard from again.

These days, the empire's nobles tended to keep their distance from Archduke Woodstock's granddaughter. And yet...

"...I know just how ambitious my father is. Deep down, he wants the archduke's title for himself. That, and his wealth, and everything else."

Precisely because of how isolated they had become, if I were to join the archduke's family by wedding his sole heir, my father would effectively gain control of the entire noble house—or so he believed.

Fortunately, House Grenville was one of the most influential aristocratic families in the empire, with impeccable social standing. That would be enough to get my foot in the door.

As for my dreadful stepmother, I was sure she would relish the thought of finally being rid of me.

Of course, given the rumors, there were no guarantees I'd come out unscathed, but it was worth the risk. This was a chance to survive and to seek revenge for my past lives.

"...I don't care what she's like. I'll ingratiate myself with the archduke and his granddaughter, and I'll gain my own power beyond this accursed family's reach. And then..."

I'll lay waste to House Grenville once and for all.

## A Clash with a Knight

"...We will now proceed with the match between Master Hugo Grenville and Knight Kenneth Rogers. Will both men please step forward?"

"Understood."

"Yes!"

At those words from the captain of the knights, my opponent and I both stepped forward, swords in hand. This time around, I would face him in earnest.

It didn't come as much of a surprise—I had already found myself in this very situation six times before, after all—but my family were letting me, a boy who as far as they knew had never held a sword in his life, face off against an active knight. This alone was proof enough that they didn't care a whit what happened to me.

On top of that—

"Get out there! Go for it, Kenneth!"

"Oh-ho... Don't hold back, Sir Rogers..."

—Louis was excitedly cheering on my opponent, while my stepmother dished out instructions to him, covering her mouth behind a folding fan.

Why had I been so desperate to win these people's affections, always buttering them up and trying to earn their approval?

"Ready..."

My opponent and I pulled our swords from their sheaths. Holding them out, we each aimed the tip of our blade at the point right between the other's eyes.

And then—

"Begin!"

"Heh-heh... Don't take this personally, kid." Kenneth chuckled, his lips curling in a grin.

Right back at you, Kenneth... I'm in a particularly foul mood at the moment, so don't resent me if I end up killing you.

Whoosh!

Gripping my sword's hilt with both hands, I hit the ground running and closed in with one swift motion.

"Whoa! You're quick, huh?"

Kenneth was impressed, but his tone was still full of confidence and composure. He must have believed he could parry my attack with ease.

But he was wrong.

"...Ugh!"

Without warning, I dropped low to the ground and lashed out at my foe's shins. As usual, his defenses around his feet were sorely lacking.

And yet... *Ha-ha*. Unlike Kenneth's, my weapon's blade had been purposely dulled, and it failed to cut through.

There was something seriously wrong with my family, going this far to thwart a fourteen-year-old kid who had never once held a sword. Not that it mattered.

"Damn you!"

After taking the blow to his shins, Kenneth was fuming mad. Blood rushed to his face as he angrily brought down his blade at a steep angle—leaving his shoulder completely open.

Kshck.

"Gaaauuugggh!"

Without the slightest hesitation, I gouged a chunk out of his left shoulder.

"Whoooaaa?!"

"Eeeeeeeeep!"

Louis and Anna both screamed at the top of their lungs as Kenneth's blood spattered over the ground. If they were that squeamish, what were they doing watching a sword fight in the first place?

"...Hugo!" my stepmother screeched, quivering with rage as she jumped to her feet. "How dare you harm one of this family's most crucial retainers?!"

She was the one who had arranged this as a legitimate match, of course.

"...Captain!" Covered in blood, I called out to the leader of the knights to declare the bout over.

"Th-that's enough! Master Hugo is the victor! Wh-what are you all doing?! Get Kenneth to the healer at once!"

"R-right!"

Several knights, dumbfounded by the contest's unexpected conclusion, rushed Kenneth away to tend to his wounds. The cut I'd made in his shoulder was rather deep, however. Even with a healer's services, he was probably finished as a knight.

But that was none of my concern. I had something more important to attend to.

"I dedicate this victory to you, Father, and to all of House Grenville."

Without betraying my emotions, I dropped to my knees and bowed my head.

"I didn't know you had such talent," he replied. "It seems I underestimated you."

Now then...if my first life was anything to go by, he would probably want to raise me as an assassin...

"...You've successfully defeated one of our most skilled knights. I suppose I ought to grant you some kind of reward."

"Y-your Lordship?! You mustn't praise him for such a thing...!" Taken aback, my stepmother cried out in anger, only to fall silent when my father fixed her with a baleful glare. "N-never mind... My apologies..."

"Was there anything in particular you wanted as a prize?" he asked me.

As if he didn't already know. He must really like these stupid theatrics.

"...I only have one request."

"Then speak."

Throughout all my previous lives, I would have wished only to be recognized as a member of the family. But now...that dream was dead.

"Yes... I ask that you consider using me, a boy with nothing else to offer, to build a relationship with another noble house."

"...What cheek!" exclaimed my stepmother. How amusing, coming from a lowly baron's daughter.

"Hmm... You're saying you want me to marry you off to some nobleman's daughter?" asked my father.

"Yes, if you agree. And once I've settled into the family and gained control of their fortunes..."

"I see... If you're that determined, I'll say no more." My father grinned. How careless for a marquis to let his ambition show so brazenly.

From his perspective, of course, I had just presented him with a win-win opportunity. Even if I failed, he would be rid of an unwanted son. Either way, he came out on top.

"Very well. I will find you a suitable partner," he said. "Until then, continue your studies at your residence."

"Thank you, Father."

Nodding to himself in satisfaction, my father headed back to his mansion. My stepmother, still red with anger, and my pale-faced half siblings followed him.

"Ah-ha-ha...!"

Success.

After this, my father would surely approach Archduke Woodstock—and until I entered the archduke's household, no one, not even my stepmother, would dare lay a hand on me. They couldn't risk losing their chance to sell me off to such an important buyer, after all.

sheathed my sword and rose to my feet, ignoring the glares of the reghts as I made my way back to my cottage.	emaining

### First Steps on the Road to Revenge

"It's a pleasure to meet you. My name is Hugo, the eldest son of Marquis Grenville."

"Hmm... So you're the one..."

A week had passed since my bout with Kenneth.

As soon as my father approached Archduke Woodstock with a marriage proposal for his granddaughter, the man promptly dropped by the main residence—in person.

Ha-ha... He must be pretty hungry for his next sacrifice.

Then again...from the archduke's point of view, a marquis had just offered to hand over his son with zero preconditions. Given the rumors surrounding the man's granddaughter, it was only natural that he would jump at the opportunity.

"What do you think, Your Grace?" asked my father.

"Hmm... The boy's manners and bearing reflect well on you, Lord Grenville," the archduke answered with a satisfied nod. If I wasn't mistaken, it seemed I had already found favor with him. "When would be a good time to have him meet my granddaughter?"

"What do you say, Hugo?"

The two of them stared back at me. I could see it in their eyes—they both wanted this to happen right away.

"I'm available anytime...," I replied. "But I would like to meet her as soon as possible, if I could."

"Oh-ho! In that case, I'll return in a week!" said the archduke.

"Very well," my father replied. "I will make the necessary arrangements with Hugo."

With the conversation settled, my father and I saw the archduke off at the front entrance.

"Ah, yes," he said, turning back. "My granddaughter resides in my family's holdings rather than here in the capital, so we'll use the portal at my mansion to jump there instantaneously."

"Understood," I replied.

*Impressive.* Given its incredible cost, teleportation magic was rarely used even by the most high-ranking nobles. To think that Archduke Woodstock had a portal set aside for his exclusive use...

"Hmm, yes... This was a very worthwhile meeting!" With a huge grin on his face, the archduke stepped into his carriage and set off back to his mansion.

"...You understand your duty, I hope, Hugo?" my father asked sternly.

"Of course. You can count on me."

"Mm. Then you may go."

"Very well. Excuse me, Father."

Offering him a respectful bow, I made my way back to my cottage.

"... Just one week to go...," I murmured under my breath as I sat back in my chair.

It was official—in seven days, I would be meeting Archduke Woodstock's granddaughter for the first time.

And yet...other than the rumors, I didn't know the first thing about her. Through all six of my previous lifetimes, I had never heard anyone describe what she looked like or even mention her name.

My father might know, but we weren't exactly on speaking terms... If we were close, I would never have set out on this quest for revenge in the first place.

"...I wonder what she's like..."

To put it bluntly, I was simply using the archduke's granddaughter as a

stepping stone on my path of revenge. In truth, I didn't particularly care what sort of woman she was. It wouldn't matter even if the rumors were true, and she really was a monster in human form.

"...Yes," I told myself, shaking my head. "After my past six lives, I've given up on family... All I want now is revenge. If that means using her for my own ends, so be it. It's none of my concern what becomes of her."

It was as though I was trying to uproot the guilt and hesitation growing inside of me.

"... Maybe I should get some air."

With that thought, I stepped outside and headed for the garden.

Compared to the main residence where the rest of my family lived, the cottage had only the smallest of gardens. But throughout the past fourteen years of my life—no, my combined *forty-six* years of life—it had been my only refuge.

"Ha-ha... I guess I'll have to say good-bye to this place forever when I leave to join House Woodstock."

I gazed at the flowers blooming in the garden as emotion welled up within me.



"Good morning, Master Hugo!"

A week had passed, and it was finally time for me to meet the archduke's granddaughter.

Ellen came to wake me up early in the morning—or strictly speaking, sometime before dawn.

"...It's still dark outside, Ellen."

"What on earth are you saying? Today's the day you're due to meet your future wife! You need plenty of time to prepare!"

According to Ellen, this was how such things were done.

"Your bath has already been drawn, so please come with me!"

"Ah, r-right..."

Ellen all but dragged me into the bathroom and pushed me into the tub.

...Isn't this going a little far? I mean, flower petals floating on the surface?

"Would you like me to add more hot water, Master Hugo?" she asked.

"No, this is fine..."

What I wanted was for her to step outside. Washing in front of her was too embarrassing...

"Then please come over here..."

"...I can dry off and change by myself, so could you wait outside, Ellen?"

"I'm sorry? There's no need to be shy, Master Hugo..." She looked like she wanted to say more, but she ultimately succumbed to my forceful stare and changed course. "Understood. Excuse me," she said and hastily left the bathroom.

She probably didn't want to cause any problems on such an important day.

After quickly drying myself off, I put on my underwear, shirt, and pants, then joined her outside.

"Now then, this way, please."

Next, she made me sit in front of a mirror as she put me in one outfit after another. I felt like one of my sister's dolls.

I usually went about in shabby attire, but today, I wore clothes from a famous designer in the imperial capital. Personally, I couldn't see the point in dressing me up like a peacock after all this time.

In any event, after a three-hour-long fitting session, I stood up.

"...I left something in my room," I said. "I'll be right back."

"...You forgot something?" Ellen tilted her head to one side.

It was only natural she was confused. After all, I didn't own a thing in this house. Leaving her to mull this over, I returned to my room and opened my

desk drawer.

"…"

Inside was a hair ornament adorned with a unique design—the only memento I had to remember my late mother by.

Ha-ha... Didn't I make up my mind to be rid of family...?

With a dry chuckle, I plucked up the ornament and slipped it into my pocket. Then I returned to Ellen.

"Let us join His Lordship," she said, guiding me to the main residence.

As I left, I couldn't help but notice the relieved look on Molly's face.

If the rumors were to be believed, my trip to the Woodstock Estate was tantamount to a death sentence.

Of course, from the moment I began my seventh life, I had made my peace with such risks. I was ready.

It was a momentous day—I would be taking the first step on my path to revenge.

### The Archduke's Pet Monster

"Your Lordship. I have Master Hugo with me," Ellen announced.

"Pardon me," I said. Then, without waiting for a response from my father, I stepped into his office.

"I hope you understand what this means, Hugo. Our family's fortunes are riding on your ability to sell yourself to the archduke."

"I understand," I answered, crouching down on one knee with my head bowed.

Ha-ha. There's no way he could have predicted such a fortuitous turn of events, so why is he acting so pretentious?

"Good. Remember, today is merely a meeting between you and Archduke Woodstock's esteemed granddaughter. The timing of your entry into their household, should it be approved, will be coordinated between His Grace and myself."

"I understand."

"Mm... Then get going."

"Excuse me," I said, offering him another courteous bow.

After that, I left the mansion and boarded the waiting carriage.

Despite the rumors about the Woodstock girl's former suitors, only Ellen came to see me off. What more proof could I need that my family considered me a thorn in their side? Well... At least I needn't feel any qualms about pushing ahead.

"Master Hugo!" Ellen called out. "When you leave to join House Woodstock, I'll accompany you as your loyal retainer!"

"Ah-ha-ha... Yes, I see."

My father clearly intended to keep an eye on me even after I was gone, to make sure I was able to take control of the archduke's household.

"I'll be off, then," I said.

"Do take care."

I instructed the coachman to head for Archduke Woodstock's mansion at the center of the imperial capital. Even proceeding slowly, it would only take around thirty minutes for us to arrive.

"Ah-ha-ha...!"

I clenched my sweaty palms in my lap and let out a soft chuckle.

At long last, I've escaped House Grenville...!

All that remained was for me to make the archduke's power my own and eliminate the marguis once and for all.

With that thought in mind, I stared out the window at my father's estate until it faded from view.



"It's great to see you, Hugo!"

As soon as I arrived at the archduke's mansion, the man himself came out to greet me, grinning from ear to ear. Frankly, I was a little taken aback by this welcome.

"I—I'm honored you came to greet me in person."

"Ha-ha! There's no need to stand on formality, my boy! We'll be family soon!" The archduke laughed heartily and patted me warmly on the back.

Wow... He's acting way more relaxed than the last time I saw him...

"Well, I'm sure she's anxious to meet you, so let's be off," he said.

"Yes, of course."

The archduke led me into the mansion, then straight to the innermost

chamber.

"Is this...?" I asked.

"Mm. Yes, this portal leads back to my main residence."

Engraved into the floor in the center of the room was a magic circle around six meters in diameter. Four pedestals surrounded it, each topped with a magicite crystal the size of a human head.

How much does a magicite crystal that size cost...?

"Ha-ha. Surprised?" said the archduke.

"Y-yes... It's incredible..."

"I see, I see." The archduke gazed at me kindly. "Well, Hugo, my boy—if you join us, this will all be yours."

...He spoke as if he could see right through me—or rather, through Marquis Grenville's ambitions.

"Now then, stand in the middle of the circle," he said.

"R-right."

The stewards and maids standing around the room bowed reverently.

"Have a safe trip, Your Grace, Master Hugo."

The next moment, the magic circle filled the room with a blinding light—and our surroundings were replaced with those of an entirely different residence.

"Welcome back, Your Grace. And Master Hugo—welcome."

A different set of stewards and maids bowed their heads.

"Hmm... Is Mel keeping well?" the archduke asked the group.

"Yes, she is in good health," a steward answered.

"Yes, yes. Good, good." The archduke nodded.

"Excuse me, Your Grace... By 'Mel,' do you mean the lady I am to meet?"

Based on what I had just heard, I was 90 percent sure he was referring to *her*, but I had to make sure.

"Oh, your father didn't tell you? Meltreza of Woodstock is my granddaughter."

"I see... Please excuse my ignorance..."

"No, no. If no one told you, it's only natural to ask." The archduke laughed, brushing off my apology.

Though I wasn't sure why, when I saw his friendly reaction, I couldn't help averting my gaze.

"All right. It's time for you to finally meet her, then," the archduke said, leading me out of the room and up a long staircase farther into the mansion.

At long last...I was to meet his granddaughter, Lady Meltreza. Clenching my fists, I followed the archduke all the way to the mansion's highest room.

"She's in here," he said.

The archduke's gentle demeanor of a few minutes ago had completely dissipated, and his words came out sharp and intimidating.

Once I stepped inside, there would be no turning back. I would either join House Woodstock, or I would be erased.

That warning seemed to lurk beneath the archduke's words.

I knew what I had to do.

"Then I will go introduce myself to the lady," I said, relaxing my expression.

The archduke seemed puzzled for a moment, then his face suddenly brightened. "Bwah-ha-ha! Ah, yes, quite right! Enjoy yourself, then!" he said with a hearty laugh, slapping me on the back in amusement. Perhaps he had realized just how serious I was about this.

With one last nod to the archduke, I placed a hand on the door handle.

"Excuse me...," I called out, stepping inside. "...?!"

The moment I opened the door and walked in, my breath caught in my throat.

The windows were tightly shuttered, plunging the room into a night-like darkness. The only illumination came from candelabras, set here and there throughout the space. In the center of this strange scene, a girl stood facing the wall, her back turned.

There could be no doubt—this was Lady Meltreza.

...She seems so mysterious...

Her long, jet-black hair fell all the way down to her waist, and her skin was so pale and white that I could make it out even in the sparse candlelight.

From her appearance alone, it was hard to believe anyone would call her a demon or a madwoman as the rumors implied, let alone a *monster*. If anything, she came across as fragile and delicate, like a piece of porcelain that might break at any moment.

"...I'm Hugo Grenville, Marquis Grenville's eldest son," I said in greeting, dropping down to one knee and bowing my head.

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"...Lift your face."
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*"*...!*"* 

Her voice was so gentle and soothing, I could have listened to it forever. And yet it also possessed an unyielding strength, one that would brook no dissent.

At the sound of her voice, composed as it was of these two conflicting natures, my heart skipped a beat.

Unable to resist, I ventured to look up at her.

*"…"* 

I was rendered speechless by what I saw.

A pair of crimson eyes, gleaming like rubies. A well-defined nasal bridge, high and regal. Cherry-colored lips standing out vividly against her white, almost transparent skin.

Meltreza was so beautiful that such doubts welled up inside me. The woman before me was nothing short of a goddess.

"Meltreza of Woodstock, Archduke Woodstock's granddaughter...," she said.

"...Lady Meltreza..." I reached out to take her outstretched hand in my own and softly kissed it.

"...I assume my grandfather dragged you here...," she said bashfully.

"No," I replied, firm and decisive. "I came because I wanted to meet you."

Yes... No one had dragged me here. I had come on my own behalf.

"I see... Master Hugo, I'm sure you've heard the rumors about me..."

"...Seeing you in person and speaking with you myself, I realize now they were merely envious gossip."

Setting aside her otherworldly appearance, there was no way someone with such a gentle demeanor could possibly be a *monster*... Even I, seeing her today for the first time, could tell that much.

But when I said this, I received a somewhat unexpected reaction.

"Oh-ho-ho..."

For some reason, Meltreza let out a low chuckle.

"...But they *are* true," she said, the corners of her mouth turning up into a smirk.

That was when I saw them—a pair of fangs peeking out between her lips.

"Ho-ho... Did you see? The truth is, I'm a vampire... Or rather, half-human, half-vampire." She giggled, raising a finger to her lips as if asking me to keep a secret.

Vampires were the most powerful of monsters, renowned for their captivating beauty, overwhelming strength, and ability to enthrall unsuspecting victims.

Ah-ha-ha... So the rumors were true after all. It seemed Archduke

Woodstock's son had fallen in love with a monster—a vampire.

"Well, then... What shall we do now? Perhaps I'll torture you as they say in the rumors. I could burn you alive, tear you apart, maybe drown you in your own blood. How about it?"

Unable to hold it in, Meltreza chortled with laughter.

Not once in my life—in all *six* of my lives—had fortune turned in my favor. All I knew was betrayal and murder at the hands of my own family.

But not this time. Not in my seventh life. Never again.

That thought alone was a weight off my chest. And if I dared make a wish...I hoped this would all stop here, and there would be no eighth lifetime to worry about...

"...Why are you so calm...?" she asked, the faintest hint of irritation in her voice.

But of course I was calm. I thought that if she killed me, it might well be my salvation.

"...Because if I can meet my death at your hands, that will be a wish fulfilled."

She let out an astonished gasp. "... Are you trying to commit suicide?"

"Ha-ha... I wonder," I answered with a wry grin.

It was true—I dreamed of reaching the end of this wretched repetition. Yet the raging inferno in my chest, ignited at the tail end of my sixth life, still burned desperately inside me, calling out for revenge...

"...If you would show me the smallest mercy," I said, "I'd ask that you grant me one wish..."

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"A wish...?"
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"Yes."

My request must have come as a surprise to her; Meltreza raised a hand to her cheek in contemplation.

"...Very well," she said at last. "Say it."

"Thank you. What I want..."

I glanced upward and looked straight into her crimson eyes.

"...is to take revenge on House Grenville...on my family."

As soon as I made this declaration, Meltreza's eyes went wide.

"...What do you mean?" she asked suspiciously. "Aren't you hoping to marry me in order to benefit Marquis Grenville?"

"That's just what he wants. It isn't my wish," I answered, shaking my head.

"...May I ask why?"

Why...?

There was no way she would believe me if I said I'd lived through six separate lifetimes before this one. Yet something told me she would never trust me if I didn't tell her the truth. There was something about the look in her eyes—like she was sick of people trying to deceive her.

"Right... This is going to sound ridiculous, but please allow me to tell you the story of my foolish life..."

And so I told her everything I had been through thus far—how I was the product of a political marriage; how I had been shunned by every last member of House Grenville since the day I lost my mother; how I had tried so desperately to stay on everyone's good side, to be accepted as part of the family; and how I had done so again and again over six separate lifetimes, only to be killed by my family every single time.

"...This is my seventh attempt."

"I...see..."

Unburdening myself for the first time ever left me feeling strangely relieved. Maybe all I'd ever needed was someone to hear me out.

"I know you may find my story hard to believe. And so I leave it up to you,

Lady Meltreza, to decide what to do with me."

I hung my head and awaited her judgment. And then—

Squeeze.

"I'm amazed you managed to endure for so long...," she said warmly as she caught me in an embrace.

I was taken aback, unsure how to respond.

"L-Lady Meltreza...?"

"I've seen all sorts of malice and met people spewing every kind of lie imaginable... But I don't sense anything remotely like that in you."

"N-no..."

I could feel my heart trembling at the sound of her sweet whispers.

"So I'll take you at your word," she said, slowly pulling away and fixing me with a delicate grin.

"A-ah...!"

For the first time, I, forever ostracized, forever scorned, forever treated like a burden, was being addressed with such gentle kindness...!

Maybe this was a game to her. Perhaps she merely pitied me.

"Aaah...!"

But even so...

"Aaaaah...!"

I was...so happy...



"...Are you okay?"

I bawled my eyes out like a baby. When I finally regained my composure, I saw Meltreza peering worriedly into my face.



"Y-yes...," I said. "I didn't mean to break down like that in front of you..."

I squeezed my eyes shut, hoping to keep any more tears from spilling out.

"Don't be too hard on yourself. I'm the one who forced it out of you. I'm sorry..." She bowed deeply.

"P-please, don't! You haven't done anything wrong!" I stammered, urging her to stand up straight.

"B-but...I was so insensitive, asking you a question like that..."

"Not at all! You had every right not to trust me. Besides..."

"...Besides?"

"I hate to admit it...but I'm glad you asked..."

Yes... I was happy she had heard me out and overjoyed that she was willing to believe me.

"...Hearing you say that sets my heart at ease."

While I stayed down on one knee, Meltreza carefully rose to her feet.

"Master Hugo... I, Meltreza of Woodstock, will grant your wish."

"...Th-thank you!" I quivered with joy at her bold declaration.

And yet...I felt unsure. Just what was I so happy about? Was it the prospect of taking revenge on my family—on my father, my stepmother, my half siblings, and all of House Grenville? Or was it because Meltreza had seen me for who I truly was...and believed me?

"Ho-ho... In that case, Master Hugo, I believe we should start by announcing our engagement."

"Ah..."

Right... I came here hoping to be married into House Woodstock, so naturally, I would be wed to Meltreza.

That meant I would be sacrificing her in my quest for revenge...

With that thought, a sudden pain shot through my chest.

I swore after my sixth death that I would dedicate myself to vengeance and nothing else, and yet...

"...Rest assured. We will not have to get married for real," Meltreza said with a sad smile.

Uh-oh, I've given her the wrong idea.

"Th-that's not what I meant...!" I pleaded, desperately trying to keep her from misunderstanding. "I genuinely want to be with you, even putting aside what I said about revenge. I'm just worried I'd be using you for my own ends..."

To be perfectly honest, Meltreza was simply too good for the likes of me. I no longer cared that she was a vampire. It was guilt, more than anything else, that pulled at my heart...

"Oh-ho-ho..." She stared back at me for a moment in wide-eyed wonder. Then, as if to cover up her reaction, she continued, "You're a strange one. Despite your agenda, I can't imagine you'd be happy with a vampire like me..."

But Meltreza had believed my incredible story. And so I felt she would know that my next words came straight from the heart.

"You're the most beautiful woman I've ever met... And I don't just mean in terms of looks. I mean your soul, as well."

"Ah..."

At that, she began to grow increasingly flustered. Even knowing my words were sincere, perhaps she couldn't quite bring herself to believe them. How could I get her to accept my feelings for what they were...?

After giving it some thought, I came up with an idea.

"Lady Meltreza."

"Y-yes?" she asked in a high voice, evidently still somewhat rattled.

I paused for a moment to take a deep breath. "Um... If you don't mind, would you consider *turning* me...?"

"What?!" Her face twisted in confusion.

I had read in a book that vampires were capable of turning humans by

drinking their blood. If I were to become a vampire, her servant, perhaps that would be enough to gain her trust. Besides...I didn't want to keep taking from her without giving anything back.

But she only glared at me. "What on earth are you thinking?! Becoming a vampire means giving up your humanity! That isn't something to suggest lightly!"

She drew close to me, her expression a complex mix of anger, sadness, guilt, and anticipation.

Gentle soul that she was, perhaps she couldn't stand by in the face of such a drastic proposal.

"I mean it," I said. "I didn't suggest it lightly."

"No! You aren't thinking clearly!" she cried in a trembling voice, and grabbed me by the collar. "You have no idea what it's like to be a *monster*...to be something other than human...!"

Deep in those rich, crimson eyes of hers, I could see tears welling up.

No doubt she had lived through her own unique blend of hardship and strife. I suspected she had revealed her true identity as a vampire so quickly to keep me at a distance and prevent herself from getting hurt.

I had made the suggestion in the hope of gaining her trust after she had deigned to hear me out. But now she was doing all she could to reject my offer.

Ah... She's so incredibly gracious.

"I...I don't care if I stop being human," I said.

"...B-but—"

"I've lived through six separate lifetimes, and all I've seen from humans is ugliness. I don't want to rely on people like that... I'd sooner be a gentle monster, like you," I said, fixing her with a smile.

"Ho... Ho-ho... I see. Then so be it... But you'll regret it, becoming a monster like me..."

Seeing that I wasn't about to back down, Meltreza bared her fangs with a cute

little simper. Then, drawing close, she pressed them up against my neck.

"...You can still turn back. It's now or never, you know?" she declared gravely, her words carrying the weight of a final warning. Both her voice and her body, however, were shaking.

"This... This means joining you for real, doesn't it?"

"...You're a fool... A real idiot...!" she muttered tearfully.

"I know..." I nodded and closed my eyes.

...Yet the pain I expected never came. Instead, I felt warm drops land on my neck and trickle down my skin.



*"…"* 

*""* 

After a long while, she pulled herself away from my body and stared down at me with a stern look. Was she angry...?

"L-Lady Meltreza...?"

"...You're a sneak."

Um... What's that supposed to mean...?

"The other men my grandfather brought to me—they would praise me at first, but the second I showed them my fangs and revealed my true nature, they all ran back to the door screaming bloody murder."

*"…"* 

"But you didn't run. No, you even asked me to turn you...," she said with a pout.

A moment ago she'd had the bewitching aura of a vampire, but now she seemed like a typical young girl.

"... Just so we're clear, half vampires don't have the power to turn anyone. Did you already know that...?"

"Huh?! R-really?!" I stammered, caught off guard.

I had assumed all vampires were capable of turning humans and recruiting them as their servants...

But when Meltreza saw my reaction—

Squeeze.

"Y-you really are...!"

—she leaped into my arms, nuzzling her beautiful face against my chest. I could feel her slender shoulders shaking with each breath.

"...Will you believe me now?" I asked.

"...Believe what?" she said as I wiped the tears from her cheeks with my shirt.

"That I want to be with you, of course. That you're the most beautiful woman I've ever met."

"Ugh... Th-that's enough..."

No sooner had the words left my mouth than Meltreza's skin, so pale you could almost see through it, flushed scarlet, and she buried her face in my chest again.

Ha-ha... So the rumors weren't to be trusted after all...

"...From now on...," she began.

"Yes...?"

"We're going to be together from now on... So I want you to tell me everything there is to know about you..."

It seemed she was ready to accept me—even my selfish, calculating side.

"All right," I said. "And I want to know everything about you, too, Lady Meltreza."

"...You really are a sneak," she said, pursing her lips once more.

But as she spoke, her crimson eyes were as clear and serene as could be.

# **Curses and Brainwashing**

"Right... Yes..."

After that, Meltreza and I shared everything about ourselves until there was nothing left to say.

We covered our origins, our lives so far, our hobbies and tastes—anything and everything, holding nothing back.

I learned so much about her.

She told me how her father met her mother, a true vampire, while on a monster-slaying expedition, and how they fell in love, resulting in her birth.

At first, the archduke was fiercely opposed to their relationship. But with his son so adamant, and knowing deep down that he wouldn't be able to compete with a vampire should the situation come to blows, he eventually gave up on trying to separate them.

Eventually, Meltreza was born from their love. She was treasured not only by her parents but by the archduke, too, who found his granddaughter exceptionally adorable.

Then, shortly after her first birthday...her father and his forces suffered a devastating defeat while on an expedition to the neighboring Kingdom of Orléans and were never heard from again.

When Meltreza's mother learned of this, she set off in search of her husband. Yet she, too, failed to return.

"...My mother is a true vampire, so she couldn't have died so easily. That's why I believe she'll come back to us, one day," Meltreza said with a soft smile.

"I see..."

She must have been terribly lonely. I swore that from then on, I would stay by her side and do everything in my power to ease her anguish.

"By the way, I was wondering... How do you know so much about yourself—even things from before you were born?" I asked.

"Ho-ho... I've gleaned a lot from my grandfather and from the diary my mother left me."

"A diary?"

So her mother had written something for her in advance. Had she had an inkling of what would befall her?

"She wrote about me in it...or about vampires, rather, in considerable detail. Their basic abilities, for instance, and how they might have unique powers of their own..." With that, she started chuckling under her breath. "Ho-ho... My special ability, as it happens, is the power to see through people's lies and ill intent."

"Oh... I—I see..."

R-right... So that was why she accepted my ridiculous-sounding life story...

"S-so do half vampires need to drink human blood like full vampires do? Do you get cravings or anything?"

"Ah... Y-yes... I do get thirsty, sometimes...," she whispered, averting her gaze.

"I hope this isn't a rude question, but... What do you do when you get thirsty...?"

"Oh... W-well, seeing as I'm only half-vampire, half a glassful a month is usually enough to quench my thirst... We recruit volunteers from around our territories, and I buy blood from them."

"I see..."

That must be how the rumors started.

"Can I ask a favor of you, Lady Meltreza?"

"What is it...?"

"From now on, if you need blood, could you make do with drinking only

mine?"

"Wh-what are you...?!" She stared back at me in shock.

That would put an end to the rumors—and more importantly, I didn't want her to drink anyone else's blood but mine. *Could it be that I'm jealous...?* 

"U-um... Are you sure...?" she asked gingerly.

"Yes. It's what I want," I said with a forceful nod.

"You... You're so...!"

"L-Lady Meltreza?!"

All at once, she burst into tears, leaving me stumped as to how to respond.

"I-if you want, you can take some right now!" I blurted out reflexively, desperate to cheer her up.

The next moment, she leaped toward me and wrapped her arms around my neck.

Chomp.

Then she sank her teeth into the nape of my neck and began to slowly savor my blood.

"Ngh... Mmm..."

"H-how does it taste...?"

Wh-what in the world am I asking...?

"Sorry," she said the instant she pulled her fangs away from my neck. "Do you mind if I look into your eyes for a moment?"

"Huh...? S-sure...," I answered, not fully understanding.

*"…"* 

Her crimson irises were beautiful and mesmerizing, all but drawing me inside. I could feel my heart pounding in my chest.

"... Just as I thought," she said. "It's faint, but there's something blended in."

"Huh? 'Blended in'...?" I repeated, failing to comprehend what she meant.

What was blended in, exactly...?

"...It seems like a small amount of monster blood runs through your veins...

Though I'm not sure how many generations ago it entered your bloodline..."

"M-monster blood?! Me?" I cried out in surprise.

"Yes...," she said with a slow nod.

But there was no such history in the Grenville family, nor on my mother's side, with the Norfolks...

"Perhaps it's that blood that allows you to keep coming back from death," she suggested.

"Y-you think so ...?"

Ha...ha-ha... So all those times I died and found myself alive again at age fourteen... All of it was due to some monster's ability...? No, some monster's curse...?

"Master Hugo..." Sensing my distress, Meltreza fixed me with a concerned look.

Oh... As a vampire, she's a monster, too. Acting upset over something like this in front of her would be terribly rude.

"I-I'm sorry. I was a little surprised, is all," I explained. "I suppose we're somewhat similar, then."

"...Y-you...! You always say the very words I most wish to hear...," she murmured, snuggling into my chest. "And j-just so you know..."

"Y-yes?"

"You're the first person...I've ever bitten on the neck like that..." She blushed all the way to her ears.

I could feel my own cheeks growing hot at the sight of her.



"I-it's already this late...?" Meltreza murmured, moving to open the curtains in an effort to hide her embarrassment.

Night had already descended outside, and a crescent moon shone brightly overhead.

"Ah-ha-ha... I didn't notice."

"...Will you be returning to the Grenville residence, Master Hugo?" she asked with a worried look.

*"…"* 

I bit my lip and sank into a deep silence. To be perfectly honest, I would have preferred to stay far away from that place for the rest of my days. There was nothing for me there.

"Or, well... I-it's already quite late, so perhaps you'd like to stay the night here...?" she asked nervously, staring into my eyes with expectation.

Ah-ha-ha... Have I ever in my life been so wanted...so accepted, as this?

"As long as I won't be troubling you."

"...O-of course not!" Meltreza exclaimed, clasping her hands together and flashing me a radiant smile.

What an incredible woman...

"I-I'll have someone prepare a meal right away!" she said. "And we'll have someone set up one of the guest rooms, and..."

"There's no need to rush, Lady Meltreza," I reminded her, holding back a grin.

"Oh... S-sorry...," she whispered, averting her gaze. "Um, Master Hugo...? Hoho... Are there any foods you don't like?"

"I can eat just about anything."

It was true... Back at my father's mansion, there were times I had to make do with nothing better than stale, moldy bread...

"Oh-ho! Then I'll have our head chef show off his skills!"

"Ah-ha-ha..."

I could tell that Meltreza was overjoyed to welcome me into her home. And for my part...I was truly glad I had decided to take this gamble.

"B-by the way...," she said. "D-does this mean we're engaged now...?"

"Yes. Once our families have finished with all the formal procedures, that is."

"In that case, I have a favor to ask you..."

"A favor...?"

What could be on her mind...? With so little to my name, there wasn't a whole lot I could offer her.

"Um... I'd prefer it if you weren't so formal with me. You don't need to call me Lady Meltreza all the time..."

"Oh..."

S-so I was being too formal with her...

I had overheard the archduke refer to her simply as Mel...

"H-how about Lady Mel, then?"

"...My grandfather calls me that, so I'd prefer something special just for you...
You can leave off the *Lady* part, as well."

"R-right..."

Her crisp, no-nonsense tone of voice left me scratching my head.

B-but if Mel is no good... Her name is Meltreza, so...

Melt? Hmm... That feels a little strange.

Mellie? That one's a bit weird, too.

After giving it considerable thought, I said nervously, "How about Melza...?"

"Melza... Thank you!" Meltreza—no, Melza—exclaimed, shyly taking my hand in her own.

She seemed to like the name, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

"In that case...M-Melza..." *Ugh... Calling her by a special nickname all of a sudden is pretty embarrassing...* "Could you think of something other than *Master Hugo* for me? I—I mean, I've never been called anything else before, so, er... You would be the first person to give me a nickname."

"Oh-ho! In that case, may I call you Hugh?"

"C-certainly!"

So I'm Hugh, now...? The sound of it filled me with joy.

"Ho-ho. I'm sure Grandfather is waiting for us with bated breath. Shall we go find him, Hugh?"

"Of course, Melza." I took her hand and turned around. But all of a sudden, she stopped.

"...Hugh? Excuse me, but..." For some reason, Melza was staring fixedly at my back.

"I-is there something wrong?"

"... There are traces of psychic magic on you."

"Huh...?" I said blankly.

"I'm going to figure out what exactly it is. Could you hold still?"

"O-of course..."

As she examined my back, I could feel my chest growing increasingly tight and painful. There was only one person who could have placed such a spell on me—my father.

Ha...Ha-ha... What exactly did that bastard do to me...?

After a few moments, Melza spoke again.

"This technique...," she said, her voice tense. "You've been brainwashed, Hugh. So that you would have a favorable view of someone..."

Ah... It all makes sense now... That naive, idiotic compulsion I had to be recognized as part of the family—it wasn't even mine... I...!

"U-ugh... Nnnnnnggggggggggggh!"

"...Hugh?!"

My legs buckled beneath me and I fell to my knees. I wailed, pounding the floor over and over again.

Damn them all... House Grenville... To think they would take even my free will...! There's no way in hell I'll ever forgive them...!

"Hugh! I'm here for you! I'll always be here for you!"

"Ugh... Melza... Melzaaa...!"

She caught me in an embrace as I cried out. I buried my face, scrunched up in anguish, against her chest.

It was too much... I couldn't hold on...

Tears rolled down my face nonstop, and my sobs filled the room.

Then I blacked out.

#### Solace

#### ■ Meltreza of Woodstock's POV

"Zzz... Zzz..."

Hugh had cried himself to sleep and now lay breathing peacefully on my lap. Learning about the psychic spell placed on him must have come as quite a shock...

"I should have chosen my words more carefully... Now look what I've done..."

My crimson eyes had the power to see through malice and lies, and as a vampire, I could also perceive the flow of magic and read the composition of spells and techniques.

The traces I detected on Hugh's back were old, their effects already beginning to unravel. Perhaps it was because he had given up on everything after his sixth life that the spell had lost its potency.

"...Unbelievable! How could anyone do such a thing to their own son...!"

My heart flooded with grief and hopelessness at the thought of everything he had been through.

Why did those people insist on making such a kindhearted boy suffer...?! All Hugh wanted was the love and affection from his family that all children deserve! Why did he alone have to endure so much...?!

If I could, I would tear those wretched Grenvilles apart with my own two hands.

Consumed by rage, I gently stroked Hugh's hair as he slept.

Knock-knock.

"Pardon me...," said my grandfather as he stepped into the room. "Huh?! H-Hugo?! What in blazes happened?!" Seeing Hugh asleep on my lap, he began to make a fuss, but I raised my finger to my lips to silence him.

"Shhh... He cried himself to sleep, that's all."

"I—I see... But what do you mean, 'he cried himself to sleep'? He didn't...?" My grandfather paused there, his expression turning grim. He probably thought Hugh had collapsed in fear upon learning my true nature.

"...It isn't what you're thinking, Grandfather. He... !"

"M-Mel?!"

Tears welled up in my eyes at the mere thought of Hugh's many hardships. I told my grandfather everything I had learned about the boy sleeping on my lap—the injustices thrust upon him without end and his six lifetimes of despair.

"Hmm... It beggars belief, but if that's what you saw, then it must be true..." Stroking his beard, my grandfather cast his sharp gaze down on Hugh.

"He told me himself that the reason Marquis Grenville proposed this arrangement was to seize control of House Woodstock."

"Oh ...? So you're saying Hugo is only here at that weaselly Marquis's behest?"

"No!" I shook my head. "There's more to it than that."

"More, you say?" my grandfather repeated dubiously.

"Yes... Marrying into our family was originally Hugh's idea."

"Wh-what now?! You're telling me he wanted to seize our family's power for himself?!"

"No! Hugh knew he would be in danger if he stayed with House Grenville, so he chose our family, thinking we'd be the most likely to accept him and that the Grenvilles wouldn't dare touch us."

"I—I see..." My grandfather nodded, finally comprehending.

"But as far as I'm concerned... I couldn't be happier that he chose us... It's a blessing..."

Yes, a true blessing... How lucky I am to have met you—to have you accept me not as a monster, but as myself...

"Ha-ha! I never thought I'd see you look at a man like that, Mel!" my grandfather bellowed, stroking his beard and beaming at me.

"I'd like Hugh to stay here tonight, with me. Could you let House Grenville know, Grandfather?"

"Th-that's all well and good, but you two aren't even properly engaged yet..."

My grandfather, it seemed, was concerned about *how* precisely we meant to spend the night.

"It will be fine. Hugh is a man of integrity. I'm sure he would never violate our trust."

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"I—I see..."
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"What is it, Grandfather?"

"...N-no, I'm quite sure you're right!"

Though I sensed he was skeptical, once I fixed him with a sharp glare, he hurriedly agreed.

"In that case, Grandfather—would you mind leaving us for now?"

"Oh, I suppose so..." With that, he slumped his shoulders and headed for the door.

"...Grandfather?"

"Hmm?"

"Tomorrow...would you hear him out for yourself...?"

"Ha-ha. Of course." Then, with a quick wave, he left us to ourselves.

"Now, then..." Gently lifting Hugh up from my lap, I carried him to the bed and laid him down on top of the sheets. "Ho-ho... I wonder if my strength would intimidate him...," I murmured as I watched his sleeping face. But deep down, I knew that Hugh would never feel that way.

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"S-still..."
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"Zzz... Zzz..."
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My chest tightened, my heart racing as I peered into his face, still puffy from crying.

"P-pardon me...," I murmured as I lay down beside him.

Then all of a sudden—

"...?!"

"Ugh... Ugh...!"

—he reached out and clung to me. He was still shedding tears even in his sleep.

"Hugh..." I stroked his hair with the gentlest of touches.

...I prayed he would find solace in his dreams, at least.

## **Objectives**

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"Ngh..."
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I awoke to something covering my face and a stimulating scent tickling my nose.

...I guess I fell asleep after all that.

But this soft sensation against my face—it couldn't be...!

"H-hwaggggh?!"

Realizing what it was, I cried out at the top of my lungs. After all, that soft, pleasant sensation was...Melza's chest!

"Ah... Ho-ho. Good morning."

Melza, still drowsy, slowly opened her eyes and fixed me with a gentle smile.

"I-I'm so sorry!" I bowed earnestly, unsure what else to do.

To think I had not only shared a bed with her...but I had also slept with my face pressed up against her chest...!

"There's no need for that. I should be apologizing for making you sleep in this cramped bed with me." Melza bowed as well.

In response, I bowed even lower. "N-not at all! All of this is my fault!"

Then suddenly—

"...Oh-ho-ho!"

"...Ah-ha-ha!"

—we both broke into laughter over our shared awkwardness.

"Ho-ho. You didn't eat anything yesterday, so you must be hungry. Let's go

and have some breakfast."

"Oh. Y-yes..."

Melza rose from the bed and rang a small bell.

A maid appeared and said, "Good morning, Milady."

"Hugh and I will have breakfast now," said Melza. "Could you get everything ready?"

"Would you like it brought to your room?"

"No, the dining hall will be fine."

"Understood." With a polite bow, the maid withdrew.

"U-um... I'm really sorry, but..." Melza fidgeted nervously.

**"...?"** 

Huh...? Is something the matter...?

"Er... I—I need to change clothes... So if you could go to another room for a few minutes..."

"Oh! R-right! Of course!"

"Wai-..."

Snapping back to my senses, I hurried outside—I didn't even notice that Melza wasn't done speaking. Before long, I had gotten utterly lost in the vast mansion.

"Uhh... Where the heck am I...?"

...I figured I had better start looking for someone to help me regain my bearings. With that thought, I started down the corridor in front of me.

"Ha-ha. Did you sleep well?"

The first person to cross my path was none other than the archduke himself.

"Good morning, Your Grace," I said, quickly lowering my head.

"Mm. Morning. But what are you doing out here, my boy? I don't see Mel with you..." He glanced about, searching for her.

"...Actually, Melza—I mean, Lady Meltreza—wanted to get changed, so I ran outside. But I think I got lost..."

"Ha-ha, I see. Perhaps you could accompany me for a bit, then?"

"S-sure...," I said vaguely, uncertain of the archduke's intentions.

"Mm. Then follow me." Soon, he'd brought me outside.

"Is this...a training ground?" I asked.

"Indeed, it is. Let's see... Given your build and stature... Yes, this ought to do."

The archduke picked up a wooden sword leaning against a nearby wall and handed it to me.

"Um..."

"Since we're here, I thought we might as well work up a sweat together."

"A-are you sure...?"

Apparently, the archduke wanted to spar with me.

I was well aware that Archduke Woodstock was in charge of the Southenklein Empire's military affairs and that despite his advanced age, he was still hailed as the realm's greatest warrior.

I'm beyond honored...but I'm only familiar with the art of assassination.

I didn't want to poison the archduke's view of me by relying on underhanded techniques...

"No need to hold back! Come at me!" His Grace declared with a dauntless grin, arms spread wide.

It looked like I didn't have much choice... I lowered my stance and placed my right hand on the sparring sword's hilt.

"Hmm... Impressive." The archduke's eyes gleamed in recognition.

And yet...I can't see even the slightest opening in his defensive stance.

Before either of us had so much as exchanged blows, it was clear that he was far superior to Kenneth, the knight whom I had so easily defeated.

"Here goes!" I shouted, and quickly closed the distance between us.

Swaying from side to side so as not to become a target, I lashed out at what I judged to be his most vulnerable point—his shins.

"Hmm... Assassination techniques, is it?" he murmured, brushing me aside as if shaking a twig off his jacket.

"Gah?!"

The next thing I knew, he'd struck me on the back with the hilt of his blade and sent me tumbling facedown into the ground.

"Ah..."

"Ha-ha. You move well, but attacks like that are far from appropriate if you wish to be my successor. From now on, Hugo, my boy, I'll teach you how to fight like a true warrior. Now, stand up."

Cautiously, I accepted his proffered hand. It was large and rough, and his grip was strong.

"Now, then... Watch and learn!"

"Yes!"

Again and again, I challenged the archduke only to be defeated each and every time. Over and over, he sent me crashing to the ground. Each blow was strong and severe, sending bolts of pain shooting through my bones. And yet...

"Hmm? Wh-what's wrong?!" the archduke exclaimed.

"Ugh...!" Before I knew it, I had fallen to my knees and burst into tears. The old man rushed over in concern.

"...Hugh!" a girl's voice called out.

Ah-ha-ha... And now Melza's here...

"Grandfather! What in the world have you done to him?!" she demanded angrily.

"I—I don't know...," he said, bewildered. "I was simply giving young Hugo here some sparring tips..."

...But such a thing was bound to bring me to tears. After all, the archduke was earnestly trying to improve my fighting form. His every blow was harsh and

sharp...and at the same time, so full of warmth and compassion.



"I-I'm sorry..." I sniffled. I'd ended up worrying both Melza and the archduke.

"N-not at all... Are you sure you're all right, Hugh...?"

"Yes... His Grace was going easy on me."

"H-he was...?" On hearing this, Melza finally breathed a sigh of relief.

"But why were you crying, my boy ...?" the archduke asked with concern.

"W-well... I suppose...I've never had someone teach me like that before... strict, and at the same time gentle... I was moved to tears...," I answered truthfully.

"I—I see... Well, if it's training you want, I'll give you as much as you need! I'll turn you into the empire's fittest fighter in no time!" The archduke flushed and gave me a hearty slap on the back.

Ha-ha... It hurts, but it feels good, too...

"Ah, m-more importantly... Is it okay for you to be outside, Melza?" I asked.

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"I mean... Aren't vampires weakened by sunlight...?"

For what seemed like ages, she stared back at me with a puzzled look. Then she chuckled. "Ho-ho... Don't worry. I have a parasol, see? And even if I am exposed, all it will do is burn me. My skin just turns red and stings, that's all." She flashed me a smile as if to say it was nothing.

"B-but if you're going to burn, then you should go back inside!"

"Really, it's no big deal..."



"C-come on. I don't want to see your beautiful skin get damaged!"

"Aww... Hugh... You're even more overprotective than I'd imagined." Melza put on a wry grin and peered at my face.

Is it my imagination, or does she sound kind of happy...?

"Ha-ha!" the archduke guffawed. "Well, well, well. I'm glad to see you both getting along so splendidly after just one day!"

"Oh-ho... But of course. This is Hugh we're talking about," Melza answered, puffing her chest out with pride.

"Ha-ha..." My expression softened as I watched their exchange.



"A-amazing...!"

After wiping away the light sweat I had built up sparring, I stepped into the dining hall—and marveled at the multitude of dishes lined up on the table.

U-um... We're just eating breakfast, right...?

"Oh-ho. The head chef put his heart and soul into this meal, you see."

"D-did he...?"

"Ha-ha! Well, let's be seated." At the archduke's urging, I took the chair across from Melza. "Now, then... Welcome to House Woodstock, Hugo, my boy. A toast to the newest member of our family!"

"Cheers," said Melza and her father.

"Ch-cheers."

To think, the archduke himself was raising a toast to me. To be honest, I had never done anything like this before. I nervously imitated the others and lifted my glass into the air.

"This duck terrine is the head chef's specialty, Hugh," said Melza.

"I—I see..."

I did spend some time studying table manners in preparation for this day, so maybe I can manage...

"Something the matter, my boy? You seem a little stiff."

"D-do I...? Sorry..."

"Oh-ho... There's no need to feel apprehensive, Hugh."

Ah-ha-ha... It looks like Melza saw straight through me.

I awkwardly cut off a bite-sized piece of duck terrine and brought it to my mouth.

"I-it's delicious...," I mumbled.

"Ho-ho. Do you like it?"

"Yes! Whoa... I've never tasted anything this good before...!"

I knew there had to be better food out there than stale bread and vegetable scraps, but never in my wildest dreams had I imagined something this flavorful...

I chewed it thoroughly, savoring the taste.

*"…"* 

*""* 

I noticed the others staring at me and flinched slightly. "Umm... A-are you both okay...?"

D-did I slip up? Were my manners not up to par...?

But I needn't have worried.

"Hugh... Try this one as well! It's just as good!"

"Yes, eat up, my boy! And this one, too!"

"O-okay..."

For some reason, the two of them seemed quite worked up as they eagerly handed me one dish after another. I took each one and cleaned my plate. It was all so delicious I couldn't help but wonder if there was some catch—if perhaps this was my last supper.

Once we finished eating, tea was brought out.

"Now, then... Is there anything you want to tell me, Hugo...?" the archduke said, turning suddenly stern.

Did Melza say something...?

I glanced her way—and her crimson eyes stared back as she gave me a silent nod.

Right... She's already two steps ahead of me...

"...I came here hoping to join House Woodstock with a specific objective in mind."

"Oh? And what, pray tell, does that objective entail?"

"Well..." I decided to come straight out with it. This would only bring me closer to my goal. "...I wish to use House Woodstock's power and authority...to exact revenge on House Grenville and my father."

I tried to gauge the archduke's reaction. I thought he would be surprised...yet he merely stared back wordlessly.

"Hmm...," he said at last. "Can you elaborate on why, exactly, you want revenge? And how you intend to wield the Woodstocks' power to get it?"

"Y-yes..."

I was caught off guard by his response, but I pulled myself together and explained.

I told him how I had lived and died six times already and that I was presently on my seventh life. I told him how, at the end of each of those six lives, I was murdered by my own family—a family that had never once accepted me as one of their own. And finally, I explained that—thanks to Melza—I'd discovered that they had placed a psychic spell on me, brainwashing me to seek their approval...

"...When I died for the sixth time, I swore to myself that I would stop trying to win their favor—and that I would send them all to hell!"

A sharp pain shot through my heart as I put these sentiments into words, forcing me to press my clenched fist up against my chest. The effect was slight,

but it helped alleviate the pain somewhat.

"...I see," the archduke muttered, squeezing his eyes shut. A few moments passed, then...

Thump!

"That two-faced upstart! I'll cut his head from his shoulders!" he bellowed, slamming his fists down so hard that he broke the table in two.

"Grandfather... It's Hugh who must seek vengeance. Our job is to support him."

"Yes, indeed! Hugo, my boy—I, Cyril of Woodstock, will do everything in my power to help you accomplish your goal!"

"Ah..."

I would never have expected such a bold show of support from the archduke. And to think, I had come here to usurp the Woodstocks' authority, to use even the archduke's precious daughter to my own ends...

"You aren't alone, Hugh... You have me and Grandfather... We're your family now..."

"M-Melza..."

Before I knew it, she had come around the table and embraced me. Her body was so warm and gentle; it softened my hard and lonely heart.

"...Ugh!"

"You needn't cry, my boy. Your revenge on House Grenville starts now!"

"Oh... Th-thank you!" With a sniffle, I wiped away my tears with the end of my sleeve.

"Now that we've settled on destroying House Grenville," the archduke said with a grin, "how shall we go about crushing them?"

"Oh, yes... I do have something in mind, actually."

"You do?"

At that point, I proceeded to explain everything I had learned over the course

of my six previous lives.

To begin with, I knew from my first and sixth lives that my father was scheming to seize control of the Southenklein Empire. To that end, he was procuring weapons, hiring mercenaries, and securing the necessary funds to prepare his own private army.

At the same time, he was arranging the assassination of various important figures throughout the realm. I had even been party to his schemes during my first life.

"...Based on all this, I believe he's planning a coup d'état."

"I can't believe it..."

Once I finished, the archduke glanced toward Melza. She nodded at him, and he fell into a thoughtful silence. He was probably hesitant to accept what I'd said, but at his granddaughter's confirmation, he was forced to recognize it as the truth.

"So...what do you recommend we do, Hugh?" Melza asked.

"Well, when it comes to securing funds, procuring weapons, and hiring mercenaries, precise timing is crucial."

"Indeed... And when, exactly, will that upstart marquis show his hand?" the archduke asked, leaning forward.

"Four years from now, around the time of the Imperial Academy's graduation ceremony."

Yes... I recalled Louis divulging this information with a cruel smirk during my second life, as I lay writhing on the floor, succumbing to his poison.

"Ha-ha-ha! It's been so much easier to get things done with you filling in for me at the academy! Thanks to you, we've all but secured the necessary funds, and we can finally sit down at the negotiating table!"

"N-negotiating...table...?"

"I suppose I can tell you, as a parting gift. Father and I are going to seize the whole empire! Then we'll finally be able to set this corrupt world right!"

Even now Louis's ecstatic grin remained etched into my memory.

"We'll simply have to crush all their dirty schemes...," Melza muttered.

"Yes... Once the coup is thwarted, the Grenvilles and their associates will be plunged into the depths of despair." I gave her a firm nod. "But the marquis is a cunning man. If we simply block his path, we'll never pin anything on him."

"I suppose you're right..." The archduke nodded, stroking his chin. "He'll just shift the blame onto some underling...a count or a viscount, perhaps..."

"That's why, between now and that graduation ceremony, I want to gather every piece of information we can get our hands on about his coup, cut off his every avenue for escape, and then cast him straight into hell!"

Yes... When the time is right, I'll end them. I can't wait to see the looks of despair on their faces!

"...Hmm. I get the gist, I think," replied the archduke. "In that case, my boy, we must start collecting as much information about House Grenville as we can."

"Agreed. I've learned a lot during my past six lifetimes, and I'm ready to share it all."

I then described in detail the course of events leading up to my father's planned coup. I told the archduke and Melza how Baron Henry Ascombe, who had amassed enormous wealth from the sapphire mines located throughout his holdings, was providing considerable financial support to House Grenville. Armaments and armor were being purchased at great expense from a weapons merchant named Nathan Harris. And in addition to the knights in my father's employ, one Dominique Bard, leader of the Bard Mercenary Company, was acting as my father's agent and carrying out his dirty work.

"...Those three are the key players in my father's schemes. If we can get to them before he puts his plans into action..."

"Hmm. Leave that bunch to me," the archduke said, nodding easily.

"Ho-ho... Now that we've gotten that out of the way, shall we relax and enjoy our tea?" Melza suggested with a giggle.

"Ha-ha! How very right! After all, Hugo, my boy...we're supposed to be

celebrating! Welcome to House Woodstock!" The archduke laughed and patted me on the head.

"Ha-ha... Ah-ha-ha!"

As I gazed at my newfound family, for the first time in my life, genuine laughter bubbled up from the bottom of my heart.



"Thank you for everything."

After passing through the portal and returning to the archduke's residence in the capital, I offered my gratitude along with a deep, respectful bow.

To be perfectly honest, going back to that cottage was the last thing I wanted to do, but this trip was only meant to be my first face-to-face meeting with Melza. I would have to go back to House Grenville at least once.

"Hugo, my boy—I'll talk things over with the marquis and see that the engagement ceremony is held right away. You'll only have to wait a fortnight—no, a week at most."

"Thank you... But, um... What about Melza?"

"Yes... It seems she's finding it difficult to be apart from you. She's shut herself up in her room."

"I see..."

I would have liked to see her again at least once before I left, but it looked like that wouldn't be possible.

In any event, we would have the rest of our lives to enjoy each other's company once the ceremony was over, so I just needed to be patient.

"I'll take my leave, then."

The archduke waved good-bye, and my carriage set off for the Grenville estate... But someone unexpected was waiting for me inside.

"Um... Why are you in here, Melza?" I asked the figure seated across from me with a strained smile.

"Ho-ho... Because I'm your fiancée, of course." She chuckled and playfully stuck out her tongue.

She pointed out the window, and I turned to see the archduke there, winking and shooting me a mischievous thumbs-up.

Ah-ha-ha... So he's in on it, too.

Melza flashed me a dazzling smile and said, "Please, let me stay with you for a while."



"...This is the Grenville estate," I said as the carriage came to a stop in front of my family's main residence. It was large even by the standards of the imperial capital.

With the help of some minor illusion magic, Melza deftly concealed her telltale fangs. My biggest concern had been that the Grenvilles would discover her true identity, but my future fiancée masked herself with ease. She really was incredible.

"Oh-ho... So that little cottage over there is where you grew up...?"

"Yes."

She must have surmised from our previous conversations that I had never lived in the main residence. Melza didn't give the mansion so much as a second glance, looking only at the small cottage in the distance.

Just then, someone approached.

"Master Hugo! Welcome back... H-huh?!" The only one to come out and greet me was Ellen, and she gawked wide-eyed as Melza took my hand and slowly exited the carriage.

"Ellen... This is Meltreza—my intended fiancée."

"Meltreza of Woodstock," she introduced herself in an expressionless monotone.

Combined with her ethereal beauty, her demeanor came off as somewhat

cold and distant.

"Oh... W-welcome! I'll call Her Ladyship right away!" Ellen stammered, bobbing her head politely and scurrying off.

Now that Archduke Woodstock's prized granddaughter was here, they couldn't afford to show any disrespect.

"Oh-ho... She was rather rude, wasn't she? Making a guest wait at the entrance..."

Melza smiled thinly as the coachman held a parasol over her head to keep her out of the sun.

"Ha-ha..."

I detected a hint of anger flickering in her crimson eyes. She must have seen right through Ellen's false warmth.

We continued to wait for several more minutes, until...

"My deepest apologies. House Grenville welcomes you with open arms..."

My stepmother and Louis appeared at the entrance and bowed deeply—or one of them did, at least.

"...Louis?" His mother nudged him sharply.

"Oh... W-welcome..." My brother, dazed, hurried to lower his head.

That bastard... Could he be besotted with Melza...?

"Meltreza of Woodstock. I don't see Marquis Grenville...," she noted in a low voice.

"U-unfortunately, my husband is presently away...," said my stepmother. She had broken out in a cold sweat.

"...I see. I don't blame you, but is that not a little strange? I thought my grandfather dispatched a messenger to say that Hugh would be returning. Does the marquis usually send only a single maid to greet his son?"

"...I'll give the servants a stern talking-to."

"Hmm... I suppose that will do." Melza breathed a deep sigh. "I hope His

Lordship read the letter delivered to him."

I had only learned about this during the carriage ride, but apparently the archduke had sent a written message in advance notifying my family that we were to be engaged at once and advising them that I would be living with the Woodstocks once the official ceremony was out of the way. On top of that, it explained that Melza would be staying with me at the Grenville estate until then, with us both returning to the Woodstock holdings a week later, after the ceremony.

"I-I'll need to ask my husband about that..."

"...When will His Lordship be returning?"

"I-I've sent a servant to let him know you're here. So I expect he will be back soon..."

Mmm... Melza is clearly calling the shots here. I guess that's only natural, considering that my stepmother is the daughter of a baron—not to mention she's my father's former mistress.

"Hugh?" Melza said, turning to me. "Until then, I'd like to stretch my legs a little. Would you mind showing me around?"

"Of course. Right this way," I said, taking her hand and leading her toward the cottage.

"...N-no, please come this way!" my stepmother gibbered, trying to usher her toward the main residence.

"Does Hugh spend much time in the mansion?" Melza asked nonchalantly. "He mentioned yesterday that he lives in a small cottage..."

"Oh. Um. About that..." My stepmother clammed up, unsure how to answer.

"I'll go back to the cottage, Melza. You should stay in the main residence..."

"That won't do. I want to be close to you, Hugh." She pouted, turning her head with a dismissive *Hmph!* 

At this, my stepmother turned deathly pale. How could she not? No one in their right mind would let Archduke Woodstock's granddaughter stay in the run-down, neglected cottage I'd long called home.

"H-Hugo can stay in the main house, too, of course! He is my husband's eldest son, after all!"

Ha-ha... This from the very woman who whipped my legs every time I dared set foot in it.

"Hmm... What do you think, Hugh?"

"...Sorry, Melza." I shook my head. "I'd better refrain."

"Don't be so selfish and self-indulgent!" said my stepmother, raising her voice. "You *must* come up to the main house!"

My attitude must not have sat well with her, as she ended up scolding me right in front of Melza.

"Excuse me, but what is the meaning of this...?" Melza's icy tone seemed to freeze the very air. "Is that how you address my husband-to-be?"

"Oh..." Only then did my stepmother realize her blunder, and her face contorted in embarrassment.

"...I believe I've understood the reason for Hugh's unease. I'll be staying with him in the cottage, so please inform me as soon as His Lordship returns."

"I-in that case, I'll be your chaperone," Louis said, butting in.

I frowned despite myself... What the hell was he playing at?

Why would she need you to chaperone her when I'm right here?

"Oh-ho... I must respectfully decline. I needn't ask you not to follow me, I hope? Let's be off, Hugh."

"Of course."

My stepmother lowered her head and was visibly quaking, while Louis looked on with a dark glower. Ignoring them, Melza and I headed for the cottage.



"...They really are insufferable, aren't they?" my fiancée-to-be spat as we made our way through the grounds.

"I'm sorry, Melza..."

"...There's no need for *you* to apologize, Hugh! I simply can't believe they've been treating you like that for so long..."

*"…"* 

I had known exactly how all this would go. In fact, I'd been hoping I wouldn't even have to introduce her to them.

"And how shameless can a man get? Making advances toward his own brother's fiancée..."

"I really am sorry..."

Ah... I want to crawl into a hole and never leave.

Melza was indeed a woman of exceptional beauty, but I never imagined Louis would be so brazen.

"Honestly... You're so wonderful and lovely, Hugh, that it's hard to believe you're even related to them." Melza positioned herself in front of me and looked me square in the eye.

"Ha-ha... I don't like to think we share the same blood, either."

"Hugh..." She leaned in and softly brushed my cheek. "...If not your blood, the difference must lie in your soul."

"Thank you..."

Ah... She truly is incredible...

It wasn't long before we reached the cottage.

"M-Master Hugo! I'll show you right in!" Running frantically to catch up, Ellen stormed ahead and opened the door to let us inside.

"...Is Molly not here?" I asked.

"I-I'll call for her, so please make yourselves at home in the drawing room!"

Ha-ha... The drawing room? That drawing room?

Since no one ever came to visit me, the space in question was littered with dust and miscellaneous objects. But I figured if push came to shove, I could

simply show Melza to the only half-decent room in the cottage—my own.

With that, we followed Ellen to the drawing room.

"Hm?! Oh, u-um, please wait a moment..." With a strained smile, she dashed inside.

"...Let's leave her, Melza. I'll show you to my room."

"Yes..." She followed me farther into the building with a stunned look on her face. "So this is where you've spent most of your time?" she asked, taking in the dull surroundings.

"Ah-ha-ha... It's just an empty room, really."

"Not at all. Your scent is here...and your warmth, too." With a gentle smile, she reached down to brush her fingers across my desk.

"I'm really sorry you had to see this place, Melza...," I murmured, and hung my head. She'd already suffered multiple discourtesies at my father's house.

"Please, don't apologize, Hugh." She smiled and placed a finger against my lips. "It was worth coming here just to be with you in the room you've spent your life in."

I took her hand in my own. Until now, no one had ever been so precious to me. I touched my lips against her pale, white hand.

"Ho-ho... You'll make me crave your blood again, doing that..."

"It's yours. As much as you need."

She wrapped her arms around my neck, brought her cherry-colored lips down to my skin, and then—

Knock-knock.

"Excuse me."

—a dour-faced Molly burst into the room, without so much as a perfunctory bob of the head.

Ah... How unfortunate...

"...What?" Melza demanded, indignant both at the interruption and at Molly's

brazen attitude.

Only then realizing there was a guest in the room, Molly hastily performed a deep bow. "Oh, u-um, er... I heard Master Hugo wanted me, so I came as fast as I could..."

"...And you are?" Melza demanded icily.

"Oh, um... I served as Master Hugo's nanny. I'm his chamberlain, Molly," she said, cowering.

"Hmm... It's hard to believe someone who has served Hugh for so long would act like this in front of his fiancée." Melza glared at her. "What on earth is the matter with House Grenville?"

Molly may have been acting humble now, but the rude way she'd barged into my room was hard to miss. Perhaps she'd finished disposing of the evidence of her crimes and no longer felt the need to hold back in front of me. Well, that didn't matter anymore.

Ellen was the next one into the room. When she saw Molly slumping forward in shame and Melza glowering indignantly, she sighed in resignation and murmured, "Oh, no... I was hoping she'd take a little longer..."

"What is it, Ellen?" I asked.

"Uh, y-yes... The drawing room is ready for you, and we've prepared a guest room for Lady Meltreza. I'll lead the way..."

"...Let's go, Hugh," Melza said, extending her hand.

I took it and, ignoring the shrinking Molly, we followed after Ellen.

"Your room is right this way, Lady Meltreza," Ellen announced.

It seemed they'd assigned her the one farthest from mine.

"...Why is it so far from Hugh's room?" she asked pointedly.

"U-um, er... Master Louis instructed me to keep the two of you as far away from each other as possible, lest there be any...um...improprieties..."

That bastard...

"...I'll take the one next to Hugh's, if you don't mind."

"O-of course!" Ellen responded with a forceful nod, as if trying to show she was in full agreement. "B-but we've just received word that His Lordship will be returning shortly, so if you could wait in the drawing room..."

No sooner had Ellen led us back to the room in question than she promptly fled the scene.

## Magic-Wielders and Fools

Knock-knock.

After that, Melza and I chatted for a while in the freshly cleaned drawing room until Ellen returned and timidly knocked on the door.

"P-pardon me. His Lordship has returned, but I'm afraid, um..." She hesitated.

"...What is it?" I prodded her.

"H-His Lordship has asked to meet with Lady Meltreza over dinner...and has requested your presence in his study, Master Hugo."

"I see... You can leave now."

"...Excuse me."

I watched as Ellen beat a hasty retreat.

"Hugh..." Melza looked at me worriedly.

I did my best to force an awkward smile in return. "Ha-ha... No doubt he means to make sure I've successfully infiltrated House Woodstock and curried favor with your grandfather."

I had sold my father on this plan by convincing him I meant to take control of House Woodstock from the inside, so it was only natural that he wished to personally confirm my chances of success.

"I'll be right back," I said as I rose to leave.

"Oh, wait just a moment," Melza called out, before slipping a small piece of paper into my jacket pocket.

"Huh...? What's this?"

"It's inscribed with a protective barrier spell. As long as you have it, any

psychic magic he tries to use on you should fail to take effect."

Of course. My father had already brainwashed me once, so it was always possible he would try to do so again—especially if he had me alone, apart from Melza.

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"...Thank you, Melza."

"Not at all... Take care."

"I will."
```

After Melza saw me off, I left the drawing room and headed back to the main residence. On my way there, however, I ran into a familiar face.

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"...Louis?"
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"Hey, Brother." As if lying in wait, my stepbrother popped out of nowhere in front of the entrance to the main house. "So that was Archduke Woodstock's granddaughter, huh...? She's a real catch, that's for sure. Maybe I should have sold myself to the archduke."

"...She's my fiancée," I growled in warning.

Does he even realize what he's saying? ... Even brainwashed, why in the world had I been chasing after this bastard's approval for so long?

```
"...Father is expecting me," I said. "Good day."
"....."
```

I didn't have time to deal with this scumbag anymore. All I wanted was to get this over with as quickly as possible so I could go back to Melza.

I hurried inside the main building.

"Allow me to show you to His Lordship, Master Hugo," a steward said in greeting before leading me to my father's office.

Knock-knock.

```
"I've brought Master Hugo, Your Lordship."
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"Enter," came a voice from inside.

The steward opened the door and ushered me forward.

"So...were you successful?" Sitting behind his desk, my father—no, Marquis Grenville—cut straight to the point.

"Yes. Fortunately, I managed to gain Lady Meltreza's favor, and it seems I've earned Archduke Woodstock's trust as well."

"...I see. So that's why Lady Meltreza decided to drop by," Marquis Grenville murmured.

I simply nodded wordlessly.

"Hmm... The archduke has indeed suggested making the engagement official as soon as possible. He's also requesting that you move in with them immediately."

*"…"* 

"As per the archduke's request, we'll hold the engagement ceremony at the local chapel in one week. After that, Ellen will accompany you to the Woodstock residence."

"Understood."

Just as I expected, the Marquis has accepted the proposal and wants Ellen to continue monitoring me. No problems there.

"Mm. Then you may leave."

"...Excuse me." With a respectful bow, I turned and left. Once outside, I leaned against the door to catch my breath. "Phew..."

"Good work, Master Hugo!" a beaming Ellen called out, ambushing me.

"What is it now?"

"Nothing. I just had some errands to run in the main residence, and I thought we could return to the cottage together."

Oh... So she's following me...

"Sure. Let's go."

"Of course!" Ellen giddily fell in beside me as we strolled back through the grounds. On the way, she leaned coquettishly against my shoulder and whispered, "Master Hugo...?"

"...What are you doing?"

"Um... It's really great that you and Lady Meltreza are going to be married," she continued pensively, "But...I'll be so lonely..." Now she was stroking my back.

"...Father told me that after we hold the engagement ceremony in a week, he'll be sending you along with me to the Woodstocks' residence. I'm sure you'll hear about it soon enough."

"...R-really?!" she exclaimed, her face brightening as blood rushed to her cheeks.

"Yes. I'll be counting on you, Ellen."

"Of course!" she said cheerfully, a sudden spring in her step.

Ha-ha... If I hadn't learned from my past lives that Ellen was a spy, her acting might have fooled me. She might very well have succeeded in wrapping me around her little finger.

But now it all made sense...

It was you, wasn't it, Ellen? ... You're the one who cast that brainwashing spell on me.



"Now, if you'll excuse me— Huh?!"

We had just reached the cottage's drawing room when Ellen, rising from a bow, frowned and stared fixedly at the door.

"...Is something the matter?" I asked.

"Oh, um!"

Suspicious, I approached the door to the drawing room.

"...I have nothing to say to you. Please leave."

"Come now, don't say that. We'll all be family soon."

...There could be no mistaking those two voices. The first belonged to Melza, and she was clearly in a foul temper. The second was that of my impertinent, good-for-nothing clown of a brother, Louis.

Click.

"...Hugh!"

Without a word, I stepped inside. Melza looked up with a bright smile and joyously called out to me.

"...You've never once set foot in this building, Louis. What brings you here now?" I demanded in a low voice.

"Come on, Hugo. I wanted to get to know Lady Meltreza," he said with a shrug. "She's our family's newest member, after all."

"Oh, is that all? I'm certain Father said she was to meet the family at dinner, but I guess you decided to ignore him. Ellen?"

"Um, y-yes...?"

"Go and tell Father that Louis was troubling Melza while I was away. Do it now."

Louis visibly gulped. "...Are you sure about that, Brother?" he said, trying to threaten me back. "You know he's just going to chew you out instead."

"No matter. Naturally, I'll be telling Archduke Woodstock what happened here, too."

"...Tch."

Sensing that he'd lost the upper hand, Louis clicked his tongue and stormed off.

"...What are you waiting for, Ellen?" I asked. "Go and tell Father."

"B-but—"

"If you don't, I'll inform him myself during dinner."

"...Understood."

That was enough to bring her around, and Ellen reluctantly set off back

toward the main residence.

"...I'm really sorry about that, Melza."

"Ho-ho. You needn't worry. He wouldn't dare lay a hand on the granddaughter of Archduke Woodstock. And even if he was foolish enough to try, he would be no match for a vampire."

I kept my head lowered apologetically, but Melza sidled up next to me and bent down so she could peer into my face, then offered me a warm smile.

"But that man you call Louis... He kept glancing at me—your fiancée—lewd glances, and his mind is full of impure thoughts. Hugh, I want you to take responsibility and comfort me." She leaned down to snuggle into my chest.

"Of course... I'll do everything I can."

"Oh-ho. Just remember that *you* said that, not me. In that case...I'd like to rest my head on your lap."

"On my lap...?"

It was a modest request, but to me, it felt more like a reward.

"Eep!" Melza yelped as I scooped her up and carried her across the room to the sofa.

"You're so delicate and light, Melza."

"If you say so..."

I gently lowered her onto the cushions so she was resting her head on my knees.

"Ho-ho... Your thighs are quite warm, Hugh..."

"I'm glad to hear it," I said, as I gently stroked her luscious black hair.

"By the way...how did it go with Marquis Grenville?"

"Oh, yes..."

I recounted everything that had happened while I was away from her, including a detailed account of my exchange with the marquis.

"...I see," she replied. "So it was that maid..."

"Yes... She reached out to brush my cheek, so it has to be her. And I remember her doing similar things in the past..."

Yes... She was responsible for the residual psychic magic Melza detected on me.

In other words, she could plant the spell on her target with a simple touch.

"...The nerve," Melza muttered icily. "Not only did she try to bewitch you, she dared to touch you—my Hugh!"

...I think I'll leave out the part about her snuggling up against me.

"Now that I think about it, when Louis called out to me on my way to see the marquis, he was probably trying to make sure I'd left you alone..."

"My... He's quite a creep, that one."

Yes... I found him just as revolting as she did, and I was related to him.

And yet, due to their brainwashing, I had spent my past lives doing everything in my power to please him and the others. It made me sick to my stomach.

"...But as you said, Marquis Grenville agreed to hold the engagement ceremony in a week's time. I won't let you suffer anymore, Hugh." Melza clenched her fists in front of her chest.

"I feel the same, Melza. I'll protect you and make sure you're always happy and comfortable."

Louis could try and bother us all he wanted—I would chase him away every time.

I had an objective—a goal I had to see through.

"Melza, don't leave my side, okay? We won't give Louis another chance to come near you."

"Yes... Ho-ho. That sounds wonderful..."

Fixing me with a joyous smile, she took my hand in her own and raised it to her cheek.

## A Dinner Party and a Garden of Memories

"Dinner is ready, Master Hugo, Lady Meltreza."

I was busy chatting with Melza when Ellen came calling on us.

Must I see those people again so soon...? I sighed.

"After tonight, why don't we take the rest of our meals until the engagement ceremony here in the cottage?" Melza said, peering into my face. She then turned and looked across at Ellen.

Ellen briefly frowned, before quickly hiding the expression.

"Let's go, then," I suggested.

"Yes."

I took Melza's hand in my own, and we followed Ellen out into the courtyard.

"Oh... The moon looks beautiful tonight," Melza murmured as she gazed up at the night sky.

"...Once dinner is over, there's a place I'd like to show you," I said.

"By all means. I'm looking forward to it." Melza smiled.

It was nothing grand, but I hoped she would enjoy it.

"This way." Once we were inside the main residence, a steward led us to the dining hall.

*"…"* 

My stepmother, Louis, and Anna were already there, and they watched us enter in stony silence. However, I couldn't help but notice that their expressions were quite different from one another.

My stepmother fixed me with a reproachful glare, while Louis stared unpleasantly at Melza, and Anna looked on with a derisive smirk.

As expected, they didn't waste a moment before committing yet another faux pas.

"Please sit here, Lady Meltreza," a maid said, pulling out the chair directly across from my stepmother's—in other words, the one closest to Marquis Grenville.

"...What is the meaning of this?" Naturally, Melza responded with a sharp glare.

"Oh... U-um, we just want to make sure you're seated according to your station...," the maid stammered, glancing toward my stepmother.

I see... In her own way, my stepmother was trying to be considerate to her guest. But she completely blundered this one.

"Hugh is Marquis Grenville's eldest son and my fiancé—the future Archduke Woodstock. How can it be reasonable for me to be seated before him?" Melza asked, turning her frigid gaze on my stepmother. There was a challenge in her eyes: "Give the wrong answer, and the consequences will be severe."

"...But Lady Meltreza," said my stepmother, "Louis is the heir to House Grenville, and you aren't yet Hugo's fiancée. Under the circumstances, I don't believe he's qualified to sit there."

Wow... That was surprisingly smooth for my scatterbrained stepmother. Usually, the only thing she's good at is throwing fits.

She must have gotten that excuse from someone else. In any event, it wasn't going to work on Melza.

"...Do you intend to disregard my grandfather's stated wish that Hugh and I be betrothed?"

"...N-no, I didn't mean it like that...!"

"That's essentially what you just said. I can see quite clearly that House Grenville has little respect for House Woodstock, which presides over the empire's military forces."

It should have been obvious that this would happen. Realizing the bind she was in, my stepmother turned deathly pale.

Just then, Anna rose to her feet. "Our deepest apologies, Lady Meltreza," she said, putting a hand to her heart and bowing low. "My mother was only trying to show you respect, but she seems to have missed the mark."

Hmm... Come to think of it, that kind of comment is very like Anna.

She loved conducting herself like a genuine lady, always feigning concern for the opinions of those around her. But in reality, she had more disdain for others than anyone else I knew. Her ill will wasn't just directed at me, either—she looked down on her own mother and brother, too.

And right now, her response wasn't going to smooth things over so easily.

"I have no intention of accepting such a superficial apology," Melza shot back. "What right do you, sitting at the lower end of the table, have to speak for House Grenville?"

"Wha—?! ...It seems I overstepped." Anna bit her lip and sat back down.

Such maneuvers would never work on Melza. She could see straight through people's lies and hidden malice. Such a two-faced gesture would only rile her up even more.

At that moment, the master of the house appeared.

"... Just what is going on here?"

Marquis Grenville, the last to arrive, was quick to notice the unusual atmosphere in the dining hall.

"Your Lordship..." The chief steward leaned over to speak in his master's ear and explained the situation in a hushed whisper.

"...I see. Lady Meltreza, I apologize for my wife's discourtesy."

"... Not at all. How would you like Hugh and me to be seated?"

"Hugo may take the place closest to me, with you next to him, of course."

"I'm relieved to hear that," Melza answered with a smile.

With that, we finally took our seats.

"Then let's begin," announced the marquis. "House Grenville welcomes you, Lady Meltreza."

He raised his glass, signaling the start of a rather unenjoyable dinner. As one would expect from a house entertaining a guest of Melza's status, the table was quickly lined with an assortment of sumptuous dishes.

The meal proceeded in silence, until Louis decided to speak up.

"Lady Meltreza, I must say...you look simply splendid with your knife and fork in hand. I can see why Hugo is so taken with you. If you don't mind, I would love to memorialize this sight in a painting."

"Is that so?" Melza responded flatly, casually disregarding his praise.

If even I could effortlessly discern his ulterior motives, they must have been crystal clear to her.

"Hee-hee... Could it be that you're besotted with her, Brother?" Anna asked.

"I'm not completely unprincipled, you know," he replied.

...Damn him, talking out of both sides of his mouth. And right after he tried to take advantage of my absence to barge in on Melza in the drawing room.

"...Louis," warned the marquis, "you are forbidden to go anywhere near the cottage while Hugo and Lady Meltreza are with us. Do you understand?"

"...Yes," Louis answered. He frowned and lowered his head.

It seemed Ellen had followed my instructions.

And so our family dinner—the kind I'd spent lifetimes longing for—ended on a rather tense note.



"...I'm so sorry."

Once dinner was over and Melza and I had returned to the cottage, I apologized to her.

"There's no need, Hugh," Melza replied. "You haven't done anything wrong."

"B-but their behavior was truly intolerable..."

"Well... I suppose it was..." Melza paused, recalling the way things had gotten out of hand the moment we stepped into the dining hall.

My family's actions had been undeniably rude, and it was only natural that Melza took offense.

"Let's try to put it behind us, Hugh. You said there was somewhere you wanted to take me...?" Her eyes sparkled with expectation.

"Right. It's warm out, and there's a nice breeze. Shall we take a stroll to cool off after you've washed up?"

"Of course!"

I picked up the bell for summoning the maids and gave it a light ring.

"You called?" Ellen asked, popping up immediately. It was as though she'd been hiding right outside the door.

"Sorry, but Melza would like to take a bath. Could you get it ready for her?"

"Understood!" she said, offering us a polite bow and darting off.

Well, she's acting strange...

"Oh-ho... I suspect Marquis Grenville said something to her. I could see the fear in her eyes."

"You must be right..."

Hmm... I better make sure not to get any weird feelings around Melza. I don't want her to end up hating me or something.

"Oh-ho... You're not very good at hiding your emotions, Hugh...," Melza said as she leaned forward to peer at my face. Her crimson eyes glistened invitingly.

"Ah-ha-ha... Do you want more blood?"

"...Once a month should suffice... But I am feeling something of a craving...," she murmured, bringing her face close to my neck.

Chomp.

"...Ngh... Mmm..."

She bared her fangs and started drinking my blood. But after making a cute gulping sound, she quickly let go and backed away.

"...Have you had enough?"

"Yes... If I let myself keep going, I might drain you dry...," she confessed, her cheeks turning scarlet.

"Oh. Ah-ha-ha... Yes, that would be a problem...," I said with a wry grin.

Knock-knock.

"The bath is ready for you, Lady Meltreza," Ellen called out as she reentered the room.

"Oh-ho... I won't be long."

"Take your time," I said, and saw her off with a grin.

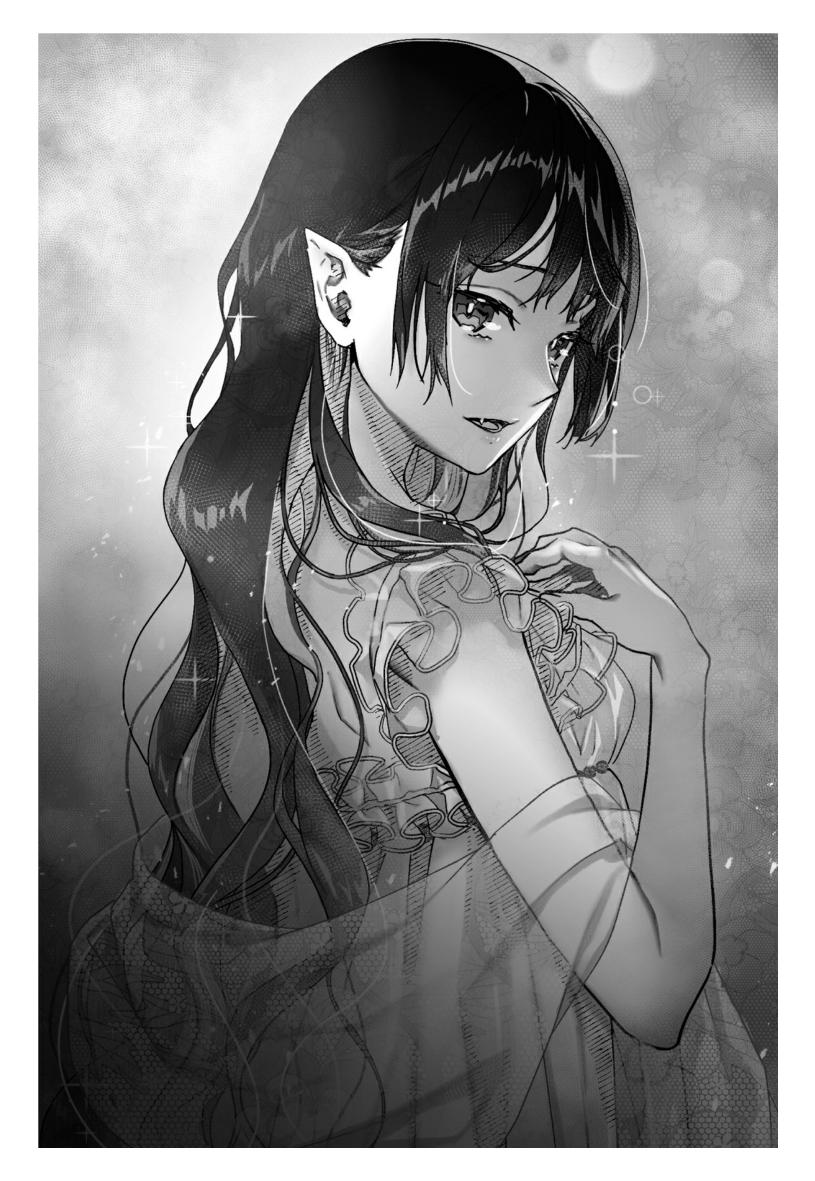


"Whew... Sorry to keep you waiting."

Melza returned an hour later, her face red with embarrassment. Still slightly damp, her lustrous black hair looked even glossier than usual.

"...Hugh? Are you okay?"

"Oh, i-it's nothing..."



It was no good... Fresh out of her bath, she was so captivating, so alluring, that I found myself entertaining indecent thoughts...

"Oh-ho... It's okay, Hugh. You're my fiancée, after all... And I quite like it when you look at me that way, you know..."

"O-oh..."

Ugh... Hearing those words in such a seductive voice, I can't help imagining all sorts of scenarios...

Shaking my head in an attempt to clear away my vulgar thoughts, I rose to my feet and called out to her. "M-Melza! Shall we go?!"

"Ho-ho... Yes, let's." She chuckled and took my hand, and I led her outside.

Soon, we had arrived.

"Is this it...?" she asked.

"Ha-ha... I know it isn't much..." I had taken her to the garden outside the cottage. "...But this is the one place I would always come when I was sad or hurting, in order to find peace and heal my heart."

"I see..."

"Yes... I'm told my mother liked to visit it often, too..."

Had she suffered as I had? Had this garden been a solace for her as it was for me...? I couldn't help but wonder.

"...When you come to live with us, let's make one exactly like it," Melza whispered as she leaned against my shoulder.

"Ha-ha... I might not need it anymore once I'm there. You and the archduke are already like family to me... But thank you."

"S-stop it, Hugh... You always know just what to say to tickle my heart..." She blushed.

In the soft moonlight, her translucent skin seemed to glow an even paler white than usual. Her ethereal beauty was fantastical—like something from another world.

"Melza... I'm so glad I met you..."

"Ho-ho... I feel the same. I feel as though my whole life has been a prelude to our meeting..."

We huddled together, sitting shoulder to shoulder as we watched the waning crescent moon hovering above us in the night sky.

Whoosh.

The wind blew in, fluttering Melza's hair and tickling my ears.

"...We should head back inside," I suggested. "I wouldn't want you to catch a cold."

"Oh... I'm fine," she answered. It seemed she wanted to stay a little longer.

"We have a very important event coming up in only a week's time. Your health must be our priority," I advised her.

"... Very well. But could you bring me here again tomorrow...?"

"...Of course."

But as she reached out to take my hand so we could return, something caught her eye.

"Is that ...?"

"...Louis..."

He was lurking outside the cottage's entrance. We watched him scan his surroundings before sneaking inside.

That bastard... Pulling another of his idiotic stunts despite the Marquis's direct warning...

"...Let's see what he's up to," Melza suggested.

"Agreed..."

We tailed him carefully, making sure he didn't notice us. He wasn't very stealthy, however. With movements like that, he was practically crying out for someone to catch him.

Before long, the inevitable happened.

"...M-Master Louis?!"

Sure enough, one of the cottage's residents spotted him—my chamberlain, Molly.

"...Are you stupid or something?! Be quiet!" he whispered in a panic, throwing one hand over her mouth.

"Ngh?!"

Just what does he think he's playing at...?

"...You listening?" he growled. "You never saw me. Got it?"

Molly nodded.

And yet...I couldn't help but notice that she was smiling. Perhaps she thought this intrusion would be to her advantage later on. Maybe she intended to recruit Louis to help conceal evidence of her crimes.

"All right...," he said. "Get out of here."

"P-pardon me..."

Released from his grip, Molly slunk away, a furtive grin on her face.

"Phew... That was close...," Louis muttered, wiping the sweat from his brow before continuing up the stairs.

We followed him up the steps, all the way to the third floor.

"...He's going to my room...?" Melza murmured, a disgusted look on her face.

Was he seriously trying to sneak into a girl's chambers in the middle of the night...?

He made his way down the corridor and reached for the doorknob of the room farthest from mine, then slipped inside.

Come to think of it, that was the one he had instructed Ellen to set aside for Melza...

He must have realized she wasn't inside, because he quickly stepped back into the corridor and made his way toward my door, instead.

Suddenly, we heard someone speak in a low voice.

"... Master Louis. What in the world are you doing here?"

"...?!"

It was Ellen, my maid.

"...Ellen. Where is Meltreza's room? Why didn't you do as I said? You were supposed to keep her as far from my brother as possible," he said reproachfully, as if blaming her for the fact that Melza wasn't where he expected.

This from a man who clearly intended to force himself on a guest under cover of night.

"Master Louis, I believe His Lordship instructed you to stay away from this cottage, did he not?"

"I'm the one asking questions here! Answer me already!" he shouted.

It seemed he'd given up on sneaking around now that a second person had found him. What exactly did he expect to achieve with all this...?

"...Hugh," Melza said hesitantly, her voice full of pity. "It pains me to say this about your brother...but I think he may be somewhat lacking upstairs..."

I could feel Melza's kindness in the careful euphemism. I suspected anyone else would have been a lot more direct about what exactly my brother was lacking.

Heaving an overly dramatic sigh, Ellen pointed to the room next to mine—right at Melza's door.

"Tch... You could have just said so from the beginning." Louis clicked his tongue in annoyance.

*"…"* 

Ellen shot an odious glare at Louis's turned back, then hurried off.

"...Those two are the worst," I growled under my breath.

"...Indeed." Melza nodded.

We watched as Louis snuck into her room, then positioned ourselves in front of the door.

Crack.

"Huh...?" My mouth flew open in shock.

Melza had grabbed the doorknob and completely crushed it.

"Ho-ho... He can stay there all night and face disgrace tomorrow morning," she muttered in a frighteningly low voice as she stared daggers at the closed door.

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"U-um... Melza...?"
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"Oh... W-well, you know..."

She seemed to notice all at once that I was still standing beside her, and she fluttered her hands as if to hide the pulverized doorknob. I found her anxious expression and panicked gestures incredibly endearing.

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"Pffft...! Ah-ha-ha!"
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"...H-Hugh...?"

"I'm sorry. I was just thinking about how adorable you are."

"Huh?! Oh dear...!"

This must have made her even more self-conscious, because she turned away with a pout. I found this utterly charming, too, of course, and reached out to stroke her glossy black hair.

"Ah..."

"Melza... I'm so glad I could see such a cute side of you. Please, never stop showing it to me."

"I-if you agree to do the same for me...I'll consider it," she said, turning bright red.

I couldn't keep myself from laughing. "Ah-ha-ha... Well, since you can't very well use your room... Would you like to, um...come to mine...?"

"Oh... Ho-ho. Certainly."

I turned away, hoping Melza wouldn't notice how flushed I was. After that, she placed a hand over mine and followed me to my room.

We could both hear violent banging coming from the other side of Melza's door, but we ignored it without so much as a second thought.

Not long after that, we got into bed together.

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"…."
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*"…"* 

Ugh... I'm so nervous...

I was currently sharing a bed with a divine beauty, huddling under the covers right beside her.

"Hugh... Y-you seem nervous..."

"Yeah... D-do you want to hear how much?" I gently brought her face close to my chest.

"My... I can hear your heartbeat. It's so fast..."

"Yeah, It's really racing. I can't help it when I'm around you."

"U-um, would you like to hear mine, too ...?"

"What?!" I cried out in surprise. "I—I can't! How could I possibly press my ear up against your chest?!"

"Oh ...! R-right!"

She must have realized what I meant and flushed all the way up to her ears. She then covered her face with both hands.

"A-anyway, let's just try to get some sleep," I suggested.

"Y-yes, of course..."

We awkwardly covered ourselves with the blanket.

"U-um... Good night, Melza."

"Y-yes... Good night, Hugh."

As we held hands and fought to calm our racing hearts, we somehow managed to drift off into a deep sleep.

## The Marquis's Fury

The next morning, Louis was found locked in Melza's room, and the entire cottage—no, the entire Grenville household—was thrown into an uproar.

But that was only to be expected. To think he'd had the audacity to try sneaking into her room at night. This was Archduke Woodstock's granddaughter we were talking about, and my future fiancée.

If the archduke were to learn of this—or the public at large, for that matter—the damage to House Grenville's reputation might very well destroy it. What's more, Louis would be absolutely finished as a noble.

"...What is the meaning of this?" Marquis Grenville murmured darkly. He was glaring down at Louis as the latter knelt on the floor in abject humiliation.

"Y-you've gotta believe me! ...That's right! Hugo called me over to the cottage, and then he locked me in that room! I told him I couldn't go, seeing as how you'd ordered me to keep away, but he insisted! I—I didn't have a choice...!"

Ha-ha... That idiot's trying to blame me for his own actions.

An excuse like that would have worked before the plan to marry me off to the archduke's daughter, of course. But now... Now, I was destined to become Melza's fiancé, and she was right here, witnessing it all.

My boneheaded brother still hadn't realized that no matter what he said, all it would take was for Melza to relate her version of events to the archduke to bring House Grenville to its knees.

"...Marquis Grenville," said Melza. "Fortunately, I was speaking to Hugh in his room at the time, so nothing came of it. But if I had been in my own room, your other son would surely have assaulted me. How are you going to take

responsibility for this outrage?"

"...I am truly sorry..." Marquis Grenville gritted his teeth and bowed deeply. It was clear he was no longer in control of the situation.

"I don't need an apology," she said, shooting him a cold glare. "What I need is to know how you plan to punish this craven beast."

"...Louis."

"F-Father! Please believe me! I would never—"

"Quiet!" the marquis roared, causing Louis to recoil in alarm. "I'm confining you to the north tower! Take him away!"

"W-wait, please! Father...? Fatheeerrr!" Louis shouted as a pair of knights dragged him kicking and screaming out of the room.

"And you! I have no need for servants who can't even protect our house from intruders! You, Molly, and everyone else working in that cottage, are dismissed from my service!"

"What?! Y-Your Lordship! Please reconsider!"

"Enough! Remove these incompetent fools from my property!"

In remarkably short order, Molly and the other servants were evicted from the cottage.

Ha-ha...Well, this is probably a better fate for Molly than being discovered embezzling the Marquis's money.

"Once again, I, Jacob Grenville, do most sincerely apologize for this affront... You lot—bow your heads!" the marquis barked.

"...I-I'm so sorry!"

"My deepest apologies!"

Everyone—from my stepmother to Anna to the head steward and all of the maids—fell down to their knees and hung their heads.

Melza heaved a sigh. "I will have to ask my grandfather to send some servants from our estate. From this moment until the engagement ceremony, I ask that no one from House Grenville approach Hugh's residence. I also ask that you

refrain from speaking to us or otherwise approaching us, even outside the cottage. Those are my conditions for accepting your apology."

"...Understood." The marquis nodded. "You heard her! Leave—now!"

"O-of course!"

My stepmother, Anna, and the army of servants beat a hasty retreat, scurrying to and fro like spiders.

"...Then I too shall take my leave," the marquis said with a final bow.

"Thank you," Melza replied, dismissing him with a wave of her hand.

And just like that...she and I were left all alone in the cottage.

"Ho-ho... Maybe now we can finally relax," she said.

"Will your grandfather really send over more servants...?"

"Yes. I have a group of them on standby at our secondary residence here in the capital. Once we send a messenger, I believe we can expect them within an hour." She chuckled. Something told me she had anticipated this situation.

"Ah-ha-ha... I wish you had told me what you were planning..."

"I must say, I never thought he would be so stupid. And I knew you would protect me, Hugh. Frankly, I believed I was overthinking things..."

...Well, there's not a whole lot I can say to that.

Not even I had expected that wretched half brother of mine to be so unprincipled...

"Ho-ho... I suppose we will have to wait for the servants to arrive before we can have breakfast... P-perhaps we should relax in your room a little longer...?" She glanced timidly up at me. Naturally, I wasn't about to object.

"Ah-ha-ha... Let's."

"Yes!"

Accepting my hand, she followed me back upstairs.

### **Mutual Affection**

"Ugh... I'm so nervous..."

A week had passed since Louis's attempted nighttime ambush and his subsequent detention, and the day of Melza's and my engagement ceremony had finally arrived.

Since the marquis had forbidden all members of his household from approaching us, Melza and I had been able to spend our time in peace and harmony.

More than anything else, we had the servants dispatched from House Woodstock to thank for our continued comfort. As a result of their efforts, Melza was all smiles, which ensured my own happiness as well.

And so, I found myself sitting alone in a carriage on my way to the chapel where the ceremony was to take place, fretting and praying it would all go off without a hitch.

"It's times like this that I wish she were here. Her smile would really help me calm down..." I sighed and gazed out the window.

I wasn't supposed to see her until we met in the chapel, and I hadn't caught a single glimpse of her since we parted ways that morning. To make matters even more difficult, she'd made a rather intimidating declaration the previous night.

"Oh-ho... I'm looking forward to seeing you in your finery tomorrow, Hugh."

"Ah-ha-ha... And to think, when I first approached her and Archduke Woodstock, I was simply planning to use them to exact my revenge on House Grenville..." I chuckled under my breath.

The fire of anger and hatred still burned within me...yet over the past few

days, my feelings for Melza had grown just as strong, if not stronger. And there was something I'd realized recently...

"...I've never properly told her how I feel..."

I had expressed my happiness on several occasions and told her how glad I was that I had met her. But I hadn't yet put into words the depth of my affection.

Of course, I suspected she was well aware of my true feelings. After all, she could see through malice and falsehood, so it stood to reason she could discern love and warmth as well.

"Still... I'm sure she's waiting to hear it directly from me..."

She was kindhearted and gentle, and of course she knew all about my quest for revenge. For those reasons, she had chosen not to pressure me.

Yet I suspected making her wait like this had left her increasingly uneasy.

And so I made up my mind. Today, I would tell her how I truly felt.



*"…"* 

With bated breath, I waited in front of the altar as the archbishop began the ceremony.

When the doors to the chapel next swung open, the archduke himself would escort Melza up to where I stood...

Creak.

A blinding light flooded in, enveloping Melza in her snow-white dress and the archduke in his well-tailored tuxedo.

Under the watchful gazes of those close to the illustrious Woodstock and Grenville families, the pair slowly made their way down the red carpet and stopped before me.

"...Son-in-law. I leave Mel in your hands."

"Yes... I promise to take good care of her."

Kneeling, I took Melza's hand in my own.

"Hugh..." Melza peeked up at me from behind her veil.

The woman to whom I was about to make my vows was even more radiant and beautiful than the goddess Galene.

"Ahem."

Ah-ha-ha... I was so distracted by Melza's captivating looks that the archbishop had to clear his throat to catch my attention. But faced with a woman this gorgeous, who could blame me?

"Now, then...," the archbishop began. "O Galene, rich in blessings. By your holy providence do this man and woman declare their intention to marry, to love and to support one another, and to be betrothed in your name in the presence of these gathered witnesses..."

The man continued his solemn prayers for a short while, until he reached the crucial line.

"...Hugo Grenville and Meltreza of Woodstock. Do you swear in the presence of the goddess to be engaged and to remain pure and righteous to one another?"

"I do."

"I do."

Melza and I bowed in unison.

"We give thanks, O Galene, for allowing these two to be engaged with this sacred oath. We pray that you will protect their faith and aspirations, bless their companionship and livelihoods, and guide them toward love and mutual understanding. May your abundant blessings be upon them until they are permitted to marry. So we pray in the name of the goddess Galene..."

With that, Melza and I were officially engaged. There could be no arguing about it now—she was my fiancée.

At last, it was time for me to say something, to express the depth of my

feelings in a manner worthy of our commitment.

"Melza... For the longest time, this life of mine was filled with nothing but disappointment and despair..."

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"Hugh...?"
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Bewilderment passed over her face for a moment, but sensing the solemnity of my words, she fell silent and straightened up.

"I approached you, thinking only to leave all that behind me..."

*"…"* 

"But then...you accepted me, despicable though I was. You shone a light on me in the darkness, gave me warmth..."

"Th-that goes for me, too, Hugh...!"

"Ah-ha-ha. Please, let me finish... You saved me, I'm sure of it. And at the same time, you became the most important person in my life. And you always will be."

I took a deep breath, then slowly exhaled. It was time for the most important part of my speech.

"Melza... I love you."

"...!" She gasped audibly, her crimson eyes opening wide. "Hugh! I love you, too! So very much! Thank you for accepting me, for seeking me out! I love your gentle gaze! Your kind voice! And more than anything, I love the tender feelings you've offered me...!"

She was overwhelmed with emotion, and tears trickled down from her crimson eyes as she carefully took my hand.

We pressed our foreheads together as both of us cried tears of joy, identical smiles on our faces.

We basked for a while in the happiness of our mutual affection.



"Ho-ho... Now you've made me cry during our ceremony..."

Melza stuck out her tongue playfully, tears still streaking down her cheeks. Her every gesture and expression were lovely beyond measure.

"Ah-ha-ha... It's my special privilege to make you cry. Tears of joy only, of course."

"How many times do you plan on making me cry before I become an old woman?"

"Hmm... How about this? I swear to make sure your smiles outnumber even your tears of joy."

"Ho-ho... Oh, Hugh."

"Ahem."

Ah-ha-ha... The archbishop cleared his throat again...

"Then the two of you may leave, taking with you the blessings of all those in attendance."

"Thank you, Archbishop," I said sincerely.

"Yes, thank you," Melza added.

We bowed to the clergyman and turned to make our way back down the red carpet.

"Oh-ho... Look how Grandfather is crying..."

"It's only natural. I'm sure your happiness matters more to him than anything else."

I suspected the archduke had worked tirelessly over the years to fill in for her missing parents. That was probably why he was so eager to find a partner who would truly support her.

"...He must be so relieved," Melza remarked.

"Yes... I promise to make you as happy as can be."

"I know you will..." She rested her head against my shoulder.

Meanwhile, I couldn't help but notice the reactions of those in the audience...

Ha-ha, my stepmother isn't even trying to hide her irritation. At least Anna is managing to hold it in.

Naturally, Louis was nowhere to be seen. If he dared show his face in public, House Grenville would never recover from the disgrace. Nevertheless, his confinement would no doubt be lifted once I left to join the archduke's household.

"Master Hugo! Congratulations!"

Ellen was the only one on House Grenville's side of the chapel to offer me words of encouragement. After all, she would be coming with me when I joined the Woodstocks.

One might have expected her to face the same consequences as Molly and her other colleagues, but for whatever reason, she had received no punishment whatsoever. Given her position as a spy and a practitioner of psychic magic, she was probably indispensable to the marquis's plans.

"Ordinarily, both families would come together for a banquet," I said under my breath. "...But luckily, it seems we were able to avoid that little tradition."

"Yes... If the conversation turned to that beastly Louis with my grandfather present, it might have spelled the end for House Grenville. Calling it off was a wise decision."

Typically, a banquet would be held after any noble engagement ceremony as a means of introducing the couple to relatives from both sides. But House Grenville had requested not to hold such a celebration. It was obviously the right call, considering the risk of exposing Louis's attempted nighttime attack on Melza.

As such, dinner tonight would be a modest event including only the members of House Woodstock. But knowing the archduke, I trusted it would still be a lavish affair.

"Well, Hugh. Let us return to our new home."

"Indeed."
Melza smiled delicately as I leaned down to kiss her outstretched hand.

#### **Found**

#### ■ Meltreza of Woodstock's POV

Even in my earliest memories, I always knew I was a monster.

My father was Nicholas of Woodstock, the future archduke, and my mother was Eltreza of Woodstock. I had no memories of either, however. By the time I was old enough to be aware of my surroundings, they had both disappeared, and my grandfather was raising me on his own.

The archduke, my grandfather, was a rough man. It couldn't have been easy bringing me up as he did... He positively showered me with love and affection and raised me to be healthy and happy.

Little by little, my teeth grew longer than other people's, until my canines were unmistakably fangs. As a child, I always had the vague feeling that there was something strange about my teeth when I looked in the mirror, but I didn't learn the reason until I was ten years old.

It was my grandfather who told me the truth—that I was half-vampire, the child of a human father and a vampire mother.

At the same time, he handed me my mother's old diary. According to my grandfather, my mother had entrusted it to him when she set off in search of my father, who had gone missing during an expedition into enemy territory within the Kingdom of Orléans. All of this had occurred shortly after my first birthday.

Skimming through the diary, I found it to be crammed full of information

regarding vampires. In truth, it was hardly a diary at all. I read it from cover to cover, learning everything I could about my mother's people.

It was then that I realized why even the briefest glimpse of blood was enough to make my throat throb—I, too, was a vampire. I craved blood.

I...was a monster, driven to feed on human blood.

Our servants, however, had all been with us since my mother's time, so none of them looked at me strangely despite knowing the truth.

It wasn't until I was twelve that I realized just how much of a monster I really was. I was at a meeting with the third son of a well-known count, a young man my grandfather was considering as a potential husband for me.

Feeling that I ought to share the truth of my identity with someone I may well marry, I told him that I was a mixed-blood vampire and bared my fangs for him to see. His reaction was swift.

"Eeep! Y-you fiend!"

He stared back at me in shock, retreated to the edge of the room, then spun around and darted out the door.

He was terrified. Of me. Because I was a monster.

After that, the third son of a viscount and the second son of a baron both fled my presence in much the same way, their faces twisted with fear.

Even those who came to me with evil designs and plots to use me to their benefit turned tail and ran once they discovered what I was.

My grandfather, not wanting my true identity to be widely known, pulled some strings, and none of those potential suitors were ever seen again within the empire.

But that only increased the unsavory rumors about me and House Woodstock. In the end, there wasn't a single noble family left willing to consider marrying their son to me... And I told myself I was fine with that. That way, no one else would lie to me or come to me with evil intentions.

That way...no one else would hurt me.

Around a year after that first meeting with the count's son, my grandfather, undeterred, once again brought up the topic of marriage. Even though the inevitable outcome should have been readily apparent.

This time, however, there was something different about his demeanor. According to him, this potential partner had already heard the rumors about me and sought my hand regardless. On top of that, my grandfather seemed to have taken a liking to the young man.

"Mel... This will be the last one, I promise," he said gravely. "If it doesn't work out this time, I won't make you go through it all again..."

I understood that he was only thinking of my own well-being—that he wanted someone by my side to protect me when he was no longer around. For that reason, I was unable to refuse his request.

Then, one week later, a young gentleman appeared before me.

"...I'm Hugo Grenville, Marquis Grenville's eldest son."

And that was how I met Hugh, the love of my life.



"...Ho-ho."

"... Melza? Is something the matter?"

I chuckled, reminiscing as I watched Hugh train with my grandfather. Now finished, he peered at me curiously.

What a lovely, lovely man.

There was a world of difference between him and Louis, that reprehensible

brother of his. Hugh was so dashing, and...

"Do you know how happy I am, Hugh?"

"Surely not as happy as I am. You have no idea how much meeting you has meant to me. I'm beyond words."

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"Really?"
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"Yes. I'm so desperately in love with you that even my thirst for revenge, seared into my heart, pales in your presence."

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"My, my..."
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Knowing just how turbulent his life—or *lives*—had been, that meant a great deal indeed. *To think I've come to mean that much to you, Hugh…!* 

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"Wha—?!"

"Hugh... Hugh...!"

"Melza..."
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Overwhelmed with emotion, I leaped toward him, holding him close as he caught me in his arms and stroked my hair.

Oh, Hugh... You're like a beacon in the darkness, lighting my way. I thought I would spend my years in solitude, but you quenched my thirsty heart and gave me nourishment.

Hugh.

Thank you so much for finding me.

# The Passing of a Year

"Ngh?!"

Catching the archduke's blow with the tip of my wooden sword, I easily deflected his practice blade.

"Still green, my boy!"

With his extraordinary strength, the archduke flicked my sword away and lashed out with a horizontal slash to the exposed area under my arm.

"Hmph!"

Ducking low, I bent my body almost parallel with the ground, then smoothly lifted my blade up into the air.

Clack.

"...Ha-ha! You got me."

Seeing the tip of my practice sword hovering mere inches from his white beard, the archduke surrendered.

"Hugh! You've worked up a sweat!"

Melza had been watching from the sidelines. Grinning, she ran over to offer me a handkerchief.

"Ha-ha... Thank you, Melza."

"You've gotten so strong, Hugh."

"Well, well..." The archduke scratched the back of his head and flashed me a wry smile. "I'll admit, even I'm surprised by how much you've improved in a single year."

"It's all thanks to you, Your Grace. I wouldn't have been able to do it without

your dedicated instruction. You have my sincere gratitude." Facing him, I bowed deeply.

A year ago, when I officially joined House Woodstock, I vowed to become stronger than anyone else so that I could protect Melza.

The archduke responded to my fervor with equal resolve, endeavoring to provide me with all the training I needed. His drills were so rigorous, in fact, that the training I'd undergone in my first life in order to become an assassin now felt like child's play.

Every one of his lessons—equal parts severe and compassionate—served to make me stronger, and I was finally seeing results.

"Oh-ho... You should have expected as much, Grandfather. This is *my* Hugh we're talking about." Melza covered her mouth with a folding fan as she chuckled.

Yes... This woman—the most important person in my life and the one I'd sworn to protect—had been supporting me by my side all along. Thanks to her, even the archduke's grueling lessons felt like a comfortable challenge.

It was all because of my newfound family that I had been able to grow so much.

The archduke stroked his whiskers and nodded. "Yes, indeed. You're every bit the son-in-law I hoped you would be."

"What do you mean, Grandfather...? I'm the one who chose him."

Melza fixed the archduke with a cold stare, and he trembled under her gaze.

"In any event," she continued, pulling me by the arm, "today's training bout is over, so it's time for us to try on our uniforms!"

"They're ready, then?" I asked.

"They are. The tailor came by to drop them off a little while ago."

Right on time, I suppose, as we'll be enrolling in the Imperial Academy at the start of next month.

"Hah! Then you should both get changed!" the archduke exclaimed. "Hurry up

and show me how you look!"

"Yes!" we answered in unison as I took Melza's hand and headed back inside.

A moment later, we found Ellen.

"Oh! Master Hugo, Lady Meltreza!" she cried. "Sorry to keep you waiting!"

She was busy hanging up the uniforms to keep them from losing their shape, but she stopped to greet us with a smile.

She had joined me at the Woodstock residence about a year ago, and owing to her quick wits, she seemed to be getting along quite well with the other servants.

Fully aware that she was a spy in Marquis Grenville's employ, our plan was to use her to lull the Grenvilles into a false sense of security. To do this, we would make sure she reported back to her master that my takeover of House Woodstock was proceeding as planned.

"Oh-ho... Then shall we get changed and see how we both look?"

"Naturally!"

And so Melza and I split up to change into our new uniforms. For some reason, however, Ellen refused to leave my side.

"...Sorry, Ellen, but can I ask you to step outside?"

"I've seen you naked plenty of times, Master Hugo. There's no need to feel embarrassed."

...Sounds like she plans to stick around.

I had no idea why she was so determined to watch me change, but since chasing her off seemed like it would be a hassle, I decided to simply let her stay.

"...You've become quite strapping, Master Hugo," she murmured, staring fixedly at the muscles of my upper body.

Well, I have been receiving one-on-one training from Cyril of Woodstock, the empire's strongest warrior, for the past twelve months...

"U-um... M-may I touch them...?" Ellen asked. She was gazing up at me, her breathing noticeably ragged.

"No."

I refused her outright. That said, if it had been Melza asking, I would have been more than willing. Knowing things could get out of hand if this dragged on much longer, I quickly put on my new uniform.

Soon, Melza and I were back together.

"…"

*"…"* 

The second we laid eyes on each other, we were rendered speechless. I couldn't be entirely sure what she was thinking, but for my part, I was utterly mesmerized by her overwhelming beauty. Her usual attire was quite stunning, but the uniform only further emphasized her gorgeous looks.

"Oh, Hugh... You look splendid..." She timidly gazed up at me and breathed a blissful sigh.

"You look amazing, Melza. I mean it... When I think about you at the academy, with all those other men watching you with their filthy gazes... I already want to gouge out their eyes."

"My, my... Ho-ho. I'm worried the other young ladies will start pining after you, too, Hugh..."

All at once, we smiled and linked hands.

"Er... Ahem." The archduke appeared and feigned a loud cough.

"...Yes, Grandfather?"

Whoa... That sure made her angry...

The archduke recoiled under the force of Melza's cold stare, but he quickly regained his composure and turned toward me.

"Hugo, my boy...," he declared, fixing me with a solemn look. "You've worked hard to surpass me on the battlefield this past year, and all to protect my dear granddaughter. Well done."

"Oh... Th-thank you!" I answered, standing up straight.

"Here."

"Hmm?"

The archduke called out to a nearby knight, who handed him a saber.

"This blade came from a far eastern land and was then fitted with a handle and scabbard from the empire. Take it, and use it to defend Melza for as long as you both live."

I knelt to accept the gift in both hands...and felt a weight greater than that of the blade come to rest on my shoulders. This was the weight of the archduke's affection for his precious granddaughter.

"...I, Hugo Grenville, swear to protect and shelter Melza no matter what the future may hold."

"Mm... I'm counting on you, son-in-law."

When the archduke was done speaking, he flashed me a heartfelt smile.

# The Imperial Academy

"Are you sure you'll be okay, Mel? If anything happens, let me know right away."

It was the day we were to officially enter the Imperial Academy, and the archduke, unable to hide his distress, came to see us off.

"Ho-ho... I'll be fine, Grandfather. I have Hugh with me, so there's no need to worry." Melza tried soothing him as she stifled a giggle.

"Mmm. Yes, indeed...," the archduke murmured, though he still seemed somewhat on edge.

Ah-ha-ha... He sure is a sweet old man when it comes to his family.

"Rest assured I'll look out for her, Your Grace," I said. "Besides, today is just the entrance ceremony. You'll be able to watch over us from the audience."

"Mmm. Indeed. But-"

"Come on, Grandfather!" Melza said, finally snapping. "Unlike most students, we'll be commuting every day from our family's residence in the capital. There's no need to fret like this!"

It was just as she said. The sons and daughters of most members of the aristocracy were expected to live in dormitories on the Imperial Academy's grounds until their graduation. Melza and I, however, had been granted a special dispensation permitting us to commute from House Woodstock's secondary residence.

"Ha-ha... Like I said, all we're doing today is attending the entrance ceremony and meeting our class," I assured him.

"I-indeed... I'm counting on you, Hugo. Do you understand?" He sounded like

he might cry at any moment.

"Yes. Melza is safe with me!" I reassured him, raising a hand to my chest.

Thanks to the archduke pulling some strings, Melza and I had even been placed in the same class.

"We'll be off, then," the two of us said together.

"Yes, indeed! I'll see you both at the ceremony!" The archduke waved frantically, as if he might never see us again.

"Grandfather isn't taking this very well, is he?" Melza said with a sigh.

"Ha-ha... It just goes to show how much he cares about you."

"I suppose so, but still..." She glanced at the archduke through the carriage window and sighed again. "I'm glad we'll be able to spend our mornings together as we commute, though."

"Yes, me too." I smiled and squeezed her hand.

Over the course of my past six lifetimes, I had only ever been able to enter the academy as Louis's double. This time, I was attending under my own name, in the company of the love of my life. Nothing could have made me happier.

"By the way," Melza said, changing the subject. "Won't your brother be at the academy, too...?"

"He will..."

We exchanged worried glances, our shoulders drooping in unison.

Since Louis was only six months younger than I was, he and I would be in the same year at school. The mere thought of him looking at Melza with those lecherous eyes of his had my blood boiling.

"...But if push comes to shove, I'll make him disappear."

"Oh-ho... No, Hugh. We're going to exact revenge on all of them properly," Melza chided me with a soft chuckle. "We must bide our time for now. Until then, let's enjoy school life. What do you say, Hugh?"

"Of course. I'm looking forward to spending my days with you at the academy."

"Yes... Me too..."

As the carriage traveled on, we stared deep into each other's eyes, our hands clasped tightly together.



"Oh! There it is!"

It wasn't long before the Imperial Academy came into view outside the carriage window.

Just as one would expect from an institute founded by the former king—Archduke Woodstock's elder brother—it had a regal air about it.

Soon, the carriage came to a stop.

"Shall we disembark?"

"Let's."

I stepped out first, taking Melza's hand to help her down the step.

"Here you go," I said, holding out a parasol to shield her from the sun.

"Oh-ho... Thank you."

With that, we started off toward the school building.

Ha-ha... The other students are all watching us, boys and girls alike.

"...Look at those girls staring at you... It leaves a rotten taste in my mouth," Melza grumbled.

"It's the young men I'm worried about. They're all gazing at you so covetously."

It was true that Melza was utterly dazzling, but there wasn't a hint of discretion in the boys' vulgar looks. Not only that, but students had to be at least fifteen years old to enter the academy in the first place, which meant that more than half of them probably already had fiancées of their own.

"...Don't the nobles in this country have any decency, any common sense?" I wondered out loud.

"That's a good question. It only goes to show how rare your kindhearted sincerity is, Hugh."

"I could say the same about you. You're so beautiful even the goddess herself must be envious, yet you have eyes only for me..."

I really meant it—I had never known such happiness before my seventh life.

"My, my... Ho-ho. How can I resist temptation with you looking at me like that...?"

Blushing, Melza peered up at me, her deep crimson eyes glistening in the morning light.

"Ha-ha... Sorry, but I think we'll have to wait until we're back at the mansion. Will you be able to hold out?"

"Ngh... How cruel..." She pouted ever so slightly and averted her gaze.

Ah, even her gestures are unbelievably cute.

Not long after that, a handsome young man with blond wavy hair and golden eyes approached us wearing a refreshing grin.

"Huh... So you're Lord Woodstock's granddaughter?"

I knew his face from a past life. This was Ernest von Southenklein—the second imperial prince, and from this day forth, our classmate.

# The Second Prince

The Ernest von Southenklein I knew was the very picture of a noble-born prince.

The son of His Majesty the Emperor and his second consort—herself the daughter of the powerful Count Arbuthnot—he was never seen without a mild-mannered smile.

He treated everyone equally regardless of title or rank, and I couldn't remember him ever acting arrogant or domineering. For that reason, he was immensely popular at the academy—and throughout the empire, for that matter.

There had even been a point where the country was in turmoil over whether he should succeed the throne in the first prince's place. In fact, a civil war had nearly broken out. During my first life, Marquis Grenville had sided with the first prince and frequently dispatched me to assassinate his enemies.

Come to think of it, the second prince had actively avoided me—or rather, Louis—while I was at the academy during my second life. Perhaps that, too, was the result of factional alliances.

"...Greetings Prince Ernest, Star of Southenklein."

In any event, there was no point getting into such matters here, so I simply greeted him with a respectful bow.

"Um... And you are?"

"Hugo Grenville, eldest son of Marquis Grenville."

"...I see. I wasn't aware Lord Grenville had another son," he murmured, looking closely at my face.

Unlike Louis, who had long been active in society as the marquis's heir, I had never so much as left House Grenville's estate before entering House Woodstock.

"...Meltreza of Woodstock," Melza added with a curtsy.

"Ha-ha. We're relatives, so there's no need to be so formal. More importantly..."

The second prince reached out to take Melza's pale hand, and—

"Please stop," Melza and I said in unison.

In the blink of an eye, I had reached out to grab the prince's arm, while Melza shook his hand away.

"...What's the meaning of this?" he replied.

He must have taken offense at our response, as his usual smile had been replaced by a frown.

"I beg your pardon," I said, "but Melza is my fiancée. I must ask you not to be so casual with her."

"Indeed," Melza agreed. "I don't approve of anyone except my future husband touching me like that."

We were as polite as could be under the circumstances, but our rejection left no room for argument.

"I see... My apologies. I'll be more careful in the future," the prince said, his expression relaxing. "We'll be classmates for the next three years. I look forward to our time together."

With that, the prince turned on his heel and headed back to a pair of young men waiting in the distance.

Melza sighed in relief. "Phew... That was close."

It sure was... Come to think of it, I remember the prince having a reputation as a womanizer. I'll have to be extra vigilant from now on.

"Thank you for that, Hugh."

"Ah-ha-ha... I was just jealous. I want you all for myself, Melza."

"I'm well aware." She chuckled and leaned gently against my shoulder.

"But those other two boys with Prince Ernest," I said, motioning with my eyes.
"...I don't like the way they're staring at us."

"Me neither..."

If memory served, they were the prince's closest childhood friends—or rather, the leading candidates to serve as his future advisors. The first was Silas MacLagan, the commander of the Imperial Guard's eldest son. The other was Gene Glover, the second son of the minister of finance.

"Oh... I almost forgot," Melza murmured. "You've attended the academy before."

"Yes. I remember all three of them."

For better or worse, it was unlikely my interactions with them would follow the same pattern as before. That said...if they tried to raise a hand against either of us, I would show them no mercy.

"Do you realize you're scowling, Hugh?"

"Oops..."

With an awkward smile, Melza pressed a finger between my brows, prompting me to relax my cheeks.

I'm simply no match for her, am I?

"Our encounter with the prince has delayed us," she pointed out. "We should hurry to the auditorium before the entrance ceremony begins."

"Of course."

I took Melza's hand and we picked up the pace. By the time we arrived at the auditorium, most of the other uniformed young aristocrats were lined up according to their assigned class.

"Where are we supposed to go...?" Melza wondered aloud.

"We're in Class 1-A. It should be that one over there," I said, leading the way to our classmates.

"Hey."

"…"

Prince Ernest and his two cronies, it seemed, had arrived ahead of us.

This was no surprise—Class 1-A was primarily composed of members of the imperial family and the children of high-ranking nobles.

Reluctantly, Melza and I lowered our heads.

"...I look forward to our time together at the academy," I said.

"Yes. Glad to have you." The prince grinned.



"...It is no exaggeration to say that the empire's future prospects rest on your shoulders. I have high hopes for you all."

Once the ceremony got underway, the professors, students, and noble guests all bowed their heads to receive His Majesty the Emperor's august words.

This was my first time hearing His Majesty's voice. *Am I imagining things, or does he sound somehow familiar...?* 

Next came the congratulatory speeches from various honored guests—including, of course, Archduke Woodstock.

Ah-ha-ha... I figured he would be used to this sort of thing after doing it every year, but with his granddaughter here for the first time, he's looking quite nervous. In fact, is it just me, or has most of the latter half of his speech just been about her?

"Ugh... You're embarrassing me, Grandfather..."

Yep, sounds like I was right.

In my head, I could already hear her chewing him out back at the mansion.

After that, a clear voice rang out through the hall. "Next, an address from one of our new students."

The second prince responded, then immediately rose to his feet and approached the podium. Now that I thought about it, he was the natural choice

for this speech.

"Though I am an imperial prince, status is of no importance at the academy. I hope you will all feel free to reach out to me whenever you wish to talk. And please don't hesitate to call me Ernest."

He paused there, giving the audience a moment to react. Some chuckled, but the majority of the students in Class 1-A audibly gulped. They probably realized that his words were empty politeness and that repercussions would surely follow if they actually did as he said.

To be perfectly honest, I didn't particularly like this kind of deceitful performance, intended only to make the speaker seem more likable.

"Oh-ho... You two are worlds apart, Hugh." Melza chuckled.

She was gazing at me fervently, clear proof she thought more highly of me than the prince. I suspected she could sense the ill-intent and deception behind his words.

"Ah-ha-ha... I can offer you only my sincerest feelings in return, Melza."

"Nothing could make me happier."

In the end, we ignored the rest of the prince's speech in favor of holding hands and staring into each other's eyes.

A little while later, I noticed a familiar face in the crowd.

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"...Is that ...?"
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Out of the corner of my eye, I caught sight of the commander of the Imperial Guard, Count Gilbert MacLagan. He was seated behind His Majesty the Emperor and conversing softly with Marquis Grenville.

As far as I could remember, the two of them had no connection whatsoever. On the contrary, in my first life, Marquis Grenville had been in favor of the First Prince taking the throne, making him and Count MacLagan adversaries.

What in the world is going on...?

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"...Hugh? Are you okay?"
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<sup>&</sup>quot;Huh...? N-no, it's nothing..."

Melza looked at me uncertainly. I shook my head and regained my composure, then flashed her a weak smile.

...For some reason, the sight of those two men together unsettled me.



The entrance ceremony ended without issue, and the students were sent to their respective rooms.

"This is our classroom," I explained to Melza. "Just so you know, the seats aren't assigned... In other words, it's first come, first served."

"I see. I'm glad to have you with me, Hugh."

"Ah-ha-ha..." I flashed Melza a wry smile.

Well, I only know about the school thanks to attending the academy as Louis's stand-in...

"...Seeing as his father is a marquis, I was expecting that *shameless beast* to be in our class as well...," Melza murmured.

"Oh yeah..."

*Right.* Under normal circumstances, he should have been in our class... He certainly had been in my previous life. His absence probably meant the archduke had pulled some strings for us.

Ha-ha... He may be a little rough around the edges, but when it comes to Melza, the old man doesn't miss a single detail.

"Oh-ho... Grandfather cares deeply about you, too, Hugh."

"You think so?"

"I do." She smiled.

I tilted my head to one side. If that was the case, I was sure it was only because Melza herself cared so much about me.

"...You could stand to have a little more awareness, Hugh," Melza muttered. "It looks like I've got my work cut out for me..."

"...Did you say something?"

"Ho-ho. No, nothing."

Hmm... She just dodged my question.

Soon, a petite but dignified woman entered the room.

"Please be seated, everyone," she called out.

She had wavy red hair tied up in a ponytail and a face I recognized.

"My name is Monica Lanchester, and I'm your new homeroom teacher," she continued. "Here at the academy, I mostly teach swordsmanship and imperial history."

Right, this is Professor Monica.

Despite her small stature, she had been feared by enemies and allies alike during the final stages of the war with Orléans. Her dynamic and unparalleled fighting style had even earned her the nickname "the Red Reaper." On top of that, she was the only one to praise my self-taught sword skills while I was filling in for Louis at the academy, and—

All at once, a sharp pain tore through my right thigh, causing me to wince and turn my head. Melza was staring at me, her cheeks puffed out in a pout.

"...Please don't look at other women like that, Hugh."

"Understood..."

I hadn't been looking at Professor Monica like *that*... But if it upset Melza, I would have to be more careful.

Afterward, each of the students gave a brief self-introduction, and our first day at the academy came to an end.

"Come on, let's go home, Melza," I said.

"Yes, let's."

Once I was ready to go, I took her hand and stood up from my seat.

"...Hugh?" Her voice suddenly dropped.

"...Yeah, I see him."

Following her gaze, my eyes fell on Louis... Sure enough, he had enrolled at the academy as well.

"Hey, Brother."

He shamelessly strode into the classroom and called out to me like it was nothing.

"...Stay away from Melza and me," I warned him. Despite my unmasked aggression, he didn't seem fazed in the slightest.

"Come on, it's been a whole year. Can't we at least rekindle our friendship? I mean, we're all grown up now."

"You scumbag... How can you say that with a straight face? Have you forgotten what you tried to do to Melza?"

"Hugh... You don't need to engage with people like him. Grandfather is waiting. Let's go," Melza urged, tugging at my sleeve.

She's right... I'm going to send this bastard to hell along with the rest of House Grenville. I don't need to waste my time worrying about him now.

"You're right. Let's go, Melza."

"Ho-ho... Let's."

"Hey, wait!"

Ignoring Louis's attempt to hold us back, we both hurried out of the classroom. As we passed, I couldn't help noticing the prince glancing back and forth between Louis and the two of us.



"That man is such a creep," Melza fumed as we made our way back in the carriage.

We'd had our unlucky encounter right at the end of the day... In fact, I was certain he'd been waiting to ambush us. It was no wonder Melza was upset.

"That bastard... I hope he's not still chasing after you..."

"Hugh... Don't even joke...," Melza said, glaring at me.

"Right. S-sorry..." I flinched as a chill coursed down my spine. "Either way, his presence could make things at the academy difficult. Let's see if we can't use Ellen to get word to Marquis Grenville."

"Good idea..."

If I insinuated to Ellen that my plan to take over House Woodstock might fail if Louis got between me and Melza, I was sure the marquis would move quickly to rein him in.

"...But Ellen herself is a viscount's daughter. Why is she working as a maid in the first place...?" Melza asked.

"Good question..."

When it was decided that Ellen would join me at the Woodstock residence, the archduke had ordered a thorough investigation into her background. This unearthed her status as the daughter of one Viscount Miller.

Curiously, House Miller wasn't a collateral branch of House Grenville, so there was no particular reason for her to serve as a maid...

"...I don't know," I admitted. "The chief steward is still investigating, so let's wait to see what he turns up."

"Yes..."

This hadn't come up during any of my previous lives, so I was truly at a loss. All I knew was that Ellen was 100 percent in House Grenville's camp.

"Anyway, Hugh—do you remember what you promised me this morning?" Melza looked up at me as she changed the subject.

I hadn't forgotten.

"Ha-ha, of course. Once we're home...you can have as much as you want." I grinned and rubbed the back of my neck.

Truth be told, I still found it a little embarrassing when Melza sucked my blood. It wasn't that her fangs hurt or anything like that... But the mere thought of her cherry-colored lips pressing up against my skin, of her breath tickling my

ears...

What's more, Melza had told me that for vampires, blood-sucking was essentially an act of courtship. In short—it was much like exchanging a kiss on the mouth.

"My, my... When you get all bashful like that, Hugh... It makes me quite self-conscious..."

"Ah-ha-ha..."

I could feel my cheeks growing even hotter at the sight of her rosy flush and coy look. In the end, I hid my embarrassment with a wry grin.

### A Match and a Duel

A week had passed since Melza and I entered the Imperial Academy, and I was finally growing accustomed to my new daily life.

I may have spent a great deal of time there as Louis's stand-in, but I still found every new day to be fresh and full of joy. There was one big reason for that, of course.

"Ho-ho. That business administration class sure was interesting, don't you think?"

This time around, I got to take classes with the woman of my dreams. How could I not love every minute? What's more, I got to see Melza displaying all sorts of new emotions and mannerisms I never saw back at the mansion... Each time, I felt like I was discovering a new side of her, and it only made my love blossom even stronger.

"Yes. But our next class...," I murmured, hesitating.

Her expression clouded slightly. Unfortunately, we had to split up for our next lesson. I was taking swordsmanship, while Melza was studying magic.

"...Be careful, Melza. We don't want anyone catching on to your true identity."

"I know... But don't worry. I'll do my best not to stand out..."

Melza's magic was top-notch, as one would expect from a half vampire, so I doubted anyone would be able to see through her illusion spells. All the same, her instructor was highly proficient. She couldn't afford to let her guard down.

"...I wish I had an aptitude for magic. Then I could accompany and protect you..."

"Hugh... Your feelings alone are enough. More importantly, I want you to do your best in your own class." She flashed me an encouraging grin.

"Ha-ha... Your grandfather himself mentored me. I'll be fine."

"Oh-ho. I see, I see."

At last, it was time for us to go our separate ways.

"See you after class, then," she said.

"Be careful, Melza..."

"I will."

With regret in my heart, I saw her off before making my way to the training grounds for my swordsmanship class. I was certainly worried about Melza... But at the same time, I was also looking forward to this lesson.

During my second life, I had received a decent amount of praise from Professor Monica for my swordsmanship. This time around, I would have the chance to show her the skills I had picked up from the archduke. That said, Professor Monica couldn't possibly know the events of my past life, so it would only be for my own satisfaction.

I was late leaving the classroom, so I had the dressing room all to myself as I changed into my training clothes before making my way out onto the grounds.

The other students were already there relaxing, swinging their wooden practice blades, and chatting idly. I spotted Prince Ernest and his two hangers-on among them.

As the son of the Imperial Guard's commander, Silas might have been in his element here, but Gene would probably have been better off in magic class. He had always been more of the brainy type. Not that it was any of my business, of course.

In classes like this, it was important to divide students into groups based on their proficiency and social rank. After all, it wouldn't be fair for the son of a baron or baronet to be pitted against someone of much higher status. And of course, if anyone were to be injured, it could lead to serious consequences.

"Everyone, gather up!" Professor Monica called out. As instructed, the

students lined up in formation. "Today marks our first practical swordsmanship class. We'll start with a bunch of one-on-one practice bouts to gauge everyone's skill level."

At this, the other students started buzzing with excitement. Now, that was unexpected. Was she really planning to pit us against one another right from the get-go?

"All right, then. You and you, face each other. Everyone else, line up behind them. But hold on... The first bout's always the most exciting, so I'll go ahead and pick the participants myself."

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"...?!"
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The professor's comments were enough to send the students into even more of a tizzy. Who did she plan to pick? This was our very first class. There was no way she could know what anyone's proficiency level was...

"Step forward when I call your name. Ernest von Southenklein."

"Here," the prince answered, stepping forward with an invigorating grin.

As one might guess from his confident reply, he was the strongest fighter in Class 1-A, aside from myself, of course. I figured Silas would probably be chosen as his opponent...

"And facing him, Hugo Grenville."

...Huh?!

"Hurry up, Hugo."

"R-right..."

Hearing my name all of a sudden shocked me. Reluctantly, I stepped forward at the professor's urging. There was no way the prince or anyone else could have been aware of my abilities...

"Heh... It seems you and I are fated to keep crossing paths." The prince smiled at me.

"...It does," I answered brusquely.

His two cronies stared at me disapprovingly, no doubt annoyed by my curt

attitude.

"Ready yourselves!" shouted the professor.

At her signal, the prince and I both raised our wooden practice swords.

"Begin!"

"...?!"

The moment we were given permission to start, I closed the distance between myself and the prince and lashed out with my practice blade, cutting the movement short just before the tip could reach his neck.

There was no way any student at the academy could match me—not with the empire's most gifted fighter as my personal mentor.

"Mmm... Hugo wins," Professor Monica announced quietly.

At her words, I withdrew my weapon.

"Hah... Ha-ha... I was utterly outmaneuvered..." The prince's mouth twitched. Evidently, he hadn't expected the contest to be so one-sided.

*"…"* 

His two cronies didn't take his loss quite so well, however. Both of them were glaring daggers at me, like they'd just added me to the top of their hit list.

"Hugo," someone called out suddenly.

"Yes?" I glanced around to find Professor Monica staring farther back into the grounds.



"His Grace told me about your unflagging training. The results, I see, speak for themselves."

"Oh... Y-you knew what I was capable of?"

"Indeed. Archduke Woodstock asked me to look out for you and Meltreza," she said with a grin.

Ah-ha-ha... So he wasn't just worried about Melza, but me too...

"I must say, Hugo—now that I've seen your moves, I would rather like to spar with you myself one of these days." She gazed at me warmly.

"Yes! By all means!" I answered with a deep bow.



"All right. That's it for today's classes," Professor Monica declared.

With that, the students started getting ready to leave.

"It's time to go, Hugh."

"Right."

Hand in hand, Melza and I were just about to exit the classroom, when I heard someone call out from behind my back.

"Hey."

*"…"* 

Melza and I ignored it and continued quickly out the door.

"I told you to wait, damn it!" the voice roared, echoing angrily down the hallway behind us.

I could have disregarded the affront if I were alone, but I couldn't stomach someone taking such a tone with my beloved Melza. I spun around and glowered at the voice's owner.

Sure enough, it was one of the prince's entourage—Silas MacLagan.

"...What do you want?" I growled.

"Hugo Grenville—I challenge you to a duel!"

What the hell is this idiot blabbering about? I don't think I care much for his attitude.

"Melza... If you'll excuse me for a moment..."

"I understand," she said with a quiet nod.

After flashing her a quick smile, I slowly approached Silas.

"So you're game...?!" he demanded, his lips forming a grin.

"Shut your mouth." The next instant, I grabbed him by the collar and pulled his needlessly tall figure down to my eye level. "Your father is only a count. I'm the son of a marquis, and Melza's grandfather is an archduke. You best watch your tongue."

"Ngh...! L-let go of me!"

Silas tried to pull himself free... How could he be so stupid? Unlike him, I hadn't neglected my physique.

"I—I can't move...," he yelped.

"Shut up and apologize to Melza," I demanded in a voice so low it was nearly inaudible.

"...?!"

His eyes practically popped out of their sockets. But help soon arrived.

"Hey, there. Sorry about Silas. He didn't mean any offense." The second prince appeared out of nowhere and patted me on the shoulder. Behind him was Gene, his other crony.

"...Prince Ernest. Let me ask you this—what reason does your friend have for being so rude and disrespectful?"

"Heh... I'm sure he was just impressed with our sparring match earlier. Even during class, he was quite eager to cross swords with you."

*"…"* 

"Speaking of which, would you be willing to entertain his request?"

What...? Now the prince is joining in? Why should I have to waste my time with this idiot?

"I'm sorry, Your Highness, but there's no reason for me to face him. I must respectfully decline."

"Oh yeah?! Too scared, huh?!" Silas barked, getting even more carried away.

"...You may take it that way if you wish. But first, hurry up and apologize to Melza."

"Allow me to express my contrition on his behalf," said the prince, lowering his head. "My sincerest apologies, Lady Meltreza." His tone was so light and frivolous it was hard to tell if he was sincere or just fooling around.

As far as I was concerned, that was no apology. He was basically mocking us. As if to drive home that impression, the prince's two accomplices seemed increasingly resentful that their leader had apologized at all. I was the one who should feel resentful...

"So, Hugo, won't you fight him?"

"...Fine." I sighed.

"...Hugh?!" Melza cried, unable to stand by in silence any longer. "There's no need for you to go along with this farce!"

She was right, of course. I *didn't* have to accept Silas's challenge. But if this scumbag was so determined he was willing to drag the prince into it, I wasn't about to sit back and let him do as he pleased.

"Like I said a minute ago, Your Highness, there's no point in me sparring with him. In fact, all I see are *dis*advantages."

"Hmm..."

"So I have three conditions for this duel," I said, holding as many fingers into the air.

"Oh ...? And what would they be?"

"First, once everything is finished, you must forbid those two from approaching Melza or me again. Second, he has to apologize to Melza properly

for being so rude to her."

"...You impertinent swine! His Highness already apologized!"

"Your Highness! You can't let him get away with speaking to you like that!"

The prince's chums evidently didn't appreciate this second condition, as they shouted over one another in protest.

And right after demonstrating their own lack of common decency for all to see. Talk about hypocritical.

"Hmm... I'm sorry, Hugo, but I don't think my friends will agree to that. How about this—if you beat Silas, I'll make them go along with your requests."

"...Fine," I replied.

"Did you hear that, Silas?" the prince pressed.

"...Yeah, I did," he answered, nodding reluctantly.

"Good. What is your third condition, then, Hugo?"

"I ask that whatever the outcome, no one voice any complaints or grievances afterward."

"Very well. I, Ernest von Southenklein, do solemnly accept. Shall we get right to it, then?"

"That's fine by me."

All I wanted was to go back to the mansion and pass the afternoon in Melza's company. But if this could save us both from being harassed tomorrow and in the days to come, it seemed a worthwhile delay.

"Hugh... Are you sure about this...?" Melza whispered into my ear.

"Yes. We still have three more years of academy life ahead of us, and we can't keep arguing with them all the time. I'm going to nip this in the bud here and now... Besides, they insulted you."

"Oh, there's no need to worry about me. I've been dealing with people like him for almost as long as I can remember..."

"No. I won't allow it on my watch."

I wasn't going to sit back as Melza, the person who mattered most to me in the world, was forced to endure such indignities. No, I wouldn't rest until that bastard got what he deserved.

"Oh-ho... Perhaps this is inappropriate...but I'm so grateful for how much you do for me, Hugh..."

"Ah-ha-ha... It could never compare to how much you do for me, Melza."

"I swear..." She slumped back in embarrassment. I couldn't help but adore her every gesture.

"Let's go, wretch! Do you have a sword?!" Silas roared.

"...I have a saber," I said. "But...you can't mean—"

"You bet I do! This is a duel! What's the point if we don't take it seriously?!" He shouted so loudly that other students passing by in the hall stopped to see what the commotion was about.

I glanced across at the prince, who responded with a nod and a wry smile. In other words, this match was serious business.

"Hugh...," Melza murmured, fixing me with a concerned look. I could see it in her eyes—she didn't doubt that I would win, of course, but she was still worried that I might get hurt.

"It's all right, Melza. I'm not going to let an idiot like him touch me. I'll beat him and come back without so much as a scratch. I promise."

"...I believe in you, Hugh."

With that, we left the classroom and headed to our carriage to pick up my saber. The prince was apparently leading his cronies back to their dormitory to do the same.

"Haaah... I wasn't expecting to have to use the sword your grandfather gave me on some stupid duel..."

I felt like it was a waste using it against the likes of Silas. In truth, I would have been fine using any old sword available at the training ground. This fight, however, was about Melza's honor, so I had to take it seriously. I would give that ass what he deserved, and defeat him so completely that there would be

no room left for debate.

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"Let's go, Melza."
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"Yes."

Hand in hand, we made our way to the training ground.

"You're late!" Silas was already waiting, and he glared at us as we approached. The sword in his hands was a full 50 percent longer than average.

On top of that...judging from the design of the scabbard and hilt, it looked like a pretty high-quality weapon. Not that it was being put to any good use in *his* possession.

"Good on you for coming, Hugo!" said the prince.

"Your Highness... What's the meaning of this?" I demanded, glancing about.

For some reason, every member of our class was present. And it wasn't just them, either—a large crowd of students from other classes had gathered as well. All of them were looking on in anticipation. It was like they were here to see a circus act.

"Heh... It's always good to have a nice crowd of spectators for a duel, wouldn't you say?"

"Hmph! Don't tell me you're afraid of getting your ass kicked in public?!" Silas roared.

Hmm... It seems like Silas isn't the only one who wants to see me go down in public. The prince is clearly in on this. It seems he didn't take his loss in class as graciously as I'd hoped.

Ha-ha... During my second life, I thought he simply disliked Louis, but I see now that the problem runs much deeper.

He had done his best to come across as benevolent and open-minded during his speech at the entrance ceremony, but there could be little doubt at this point that in his heart, he was remarkably petty. Not that it mattered to me, of course.

"...I'm short on time, so let's get this over with," I called out.

"You wretch!" Silas shouted. "How dare you take that attitude with His Highness?!" He seemed ready to grab me.

"Shut up," I murmured.

I wasn't about to drag this out. I was going to show everyone here what was what, once and for all.

"The duel between Silas MacLagan and Hugo Grenville will now commence," the prince announced. "Both of you, assume your stances!"

At his signal, Silas and I drew our swords from their sheaths.

"...H-hey! Where are you going?!"

"Wretch! You're turning tail at the eleventh hour?!"

Without a word, I spun around and left the prince's cronies as they shouted abuse after me. I could hear the throng of students around us buzzing in confused excitement.

I sighed. How annoying.

"Melza... Sorry, but could you keep my scabbard until this is over?" I asked, holding it out to her.

"Oh-ho. Of course," she answered with a soft smile.

With that, I returned to the center of the training ground.

"Hmph!" Silas snorted. "A pathetic sheath like that, you could have just thrown it on the ground somewhere! And what's with that stupid saber? Is this some kind of carnival trick?"

*""* 

My patience with this guy was running razor thin. Not only had he insulted Melza, now he was ridiculing the sword I'd received from the archduke.

At this point, nothing could stop me from making sure he drank his fill of despair.

"If you're ready...begin!" shouted the prince.

"Aaauuugggggh!"

No sooner was the duel underway than Silas charged forward, his weapon raised over his shoulder.

It seemed he planned on using his sword's long reach to take me out in one fell swoop. And regardless of whether he could manage such a feat, it was clear he meant to deliver a killing blow. So this duel is nothing more than an excuse to knock me off, huh?

"Dilieee!" Silas cried, swinging his sword overhead as if to cleave me in two.

Shink.

A dry cutting sound reverberated across the training ground.

"Gaaauuugggggh...?!"

Silas grabbed his left arm and fell to the ground screaming as his face twisted in agony.

He clearly hadn't seen that coming. The assembled students and even the prince himself were rendered utterly speechless. They all stared down in silence at the wailing Silas.

...But this wasn't over yet.

"Hey," I called out.

"Eeek!" Silas grimaced and tried to crawl away.

"What's wrong? The duel isn't over yet. Pick up your sword."

"Ngh! I—I can't! My arm won't move! How am I supposed to—"

"You've still got your right arm, haven't you?" I pointed out in a voice as cold as ice.

"...?!" A look of abject terror fell across Silas's face.

"Here, I'll give you a hand," I muttered, retrieving his fallen longsword and shoving its hilt into his right palm.

"Let's keep going."

Shink.

"Aaauuuggghh!"

This time, I struck his right arm with the tip of my saber.

Silas winced, writhing around and staining the dirt with tears and snotty drool.

"Come on, Silas. Get up before—"

"W-wait! It's over! Y-you win!" the prince interceded. Then he turned and shouted, "Someone, go and get a healer, now!"

"R-right!"

Several students snapped back to their senses and took off from the training ground at a sprint.

At least the prince and his cronies would know to keep their heads down from now on. And this lesson had reached someone else, too.

*"…"* 

Louis was among the crowd of onlookers, his mouth agape.

I wiped my saber clean and headed back to my beloved, who had been watching from the edge of the training ground.

"Hugh! You won," she said with a smile.

"Melza... I dedicate this victory to you," I said, kneeling in front of her and sheathing my sword.

Within moments, we were interrupted.

"Y-y-you! You think you can get away with this?!" demanded the prince's remaining henchman. He was pointing at me across the field in indignation.

Angry though he was, having witnessed Silas's defeat firsthand, he spoke in a wavering voice, and he was trembling with fright.

"...Master Gene. Hugh fought fair and square," Melza fired back. "Are you still going to object in spite of that?"

"O-of course! He just humiliated the son and heir of the Imperial Guard's commander! Silas was meant to become Prince Ernest's—no, the empire's sword and shield! That man has robbed this nation of a vital asset! He needs to be punished!"

Ha-ha... You're saying Silas—the boy crawling on the ground like an animal, whining and blubbering at the top of his lungs—was meant to be the empire's sword and shield? If that's true, this nation is destined to fall the moment it loses the archduke.

But putting aside that dispiriting line of thought...

"Do you hear what your attendant is saying, Your Highness?" I asked the prince.

*"…"* 

The prince bit his lip and shot me a smoldering glare.

"Don't tell me you would stoop to breaking your own word, Your Highness? You promised to honor my three conditions."

"Huh?! O-of course I will honor them."

The whole point of the last condition was to avoid this sort of baseless accusation after the fact. I ask that whatever the outcome, no one voice any complaints or grievances afterward.

"Could you please stop your hanger-on from yapping like a little dog? Or if you would prefer, I can shut him up."

"...Be quiet, Gene," warned the prince.

"B-but Your Highness—"

"I told you to put a sock in it."

"...A-all right..."

Gene looked like he wanted to say more, but the prince, no doubt realizing that his remaining crony would end up suffering the same fate as Silas if he didn't hold his tongue, pressured him to shut his mouth.

A wise decision.

"In that case," I prompted, "I believe the loser owes Melza an apology as per my second condition."

"...C-can't that wait?!" pleaded the prince. "Silas is clearly debilitated right now! Once a healer has seen to him, I'll make sure he offers her a sincere

apology!"

"...What do you think, Melza?" I asked.

"I don't mind waiting," she answered.

"There you go. You're lucky Melza is so kindhearted."

"Ugh...," Silas whimpered. He was still writhing on the ground, so it was hard to tell if the sound was meant as a response or not.

"We'll be leaving now, Your Highness," I said.

"O-okay..."

I took Melza's hand in my own, and we started to leave the training ground, but then I stopped short. "Oh, right," I said, turning to look over my shoulder.

"...?!"

"My first condition. Please make sure those two never bother us again."

"O-of course..."

With that, we took our leave.



"Ho-ho... You're so strong, Hugh." Melza chuckled as we rode home in our carriage.

"Ha-ha. Naturally. I learned from the best. I mean, your grandfather is the strongest warrior in the whole empire. Besides, there's no way I could allow myself to fail with you in the audience."

So long as I was fighting for Melza, I would emerge victorious against any opponent, no matter how powerful they were. I wouldn't even allow them to touch me, since that might cause her to worry.

"You're so kind, as well," she whispered.

"Huh?" I tilted my head in confusion.

"Ho-ho... You broke Master Silas's arms in just the right places so he could make a speedy recovery, didn't you?"

"How did you figure that out...?"

"I've learned a little from my grandfather, too, you know." She playfully stuck out her tongue. It was so adorable, my heart almost skipped a beat. "...What's wrong, Hugh?"

"N-nothing..."

Without realizing it, I had tightened my grip on her hand. Lowering my face, I practically swooned. She was so precious, it was simply unfair!

Before long, the carriage arrived back at the archduke's residence.

## To the Front Line

"Do you have a moment, Hugo, my boy?"

Around a month after my duel with Silas, the archduke approached me after our regular sword practice. His manner was unusually formal.

"Of course. Whatever you need," I replied.

"Then let's go to my study. Oh, yes...and let's keep this between ourselves, all right? No need to tell Mel..."

"S-sure...," I replied vaguely as I followed him.

Melza had been busy since that morning, and she was still holed up in her room.

"So... What did you want to discuss...?" I asked.

"Well, hmm..."

For some reason, the archduke hesitated. Had something happened...?

"You see... In three days' time, I'll be embarking on an expedition to subdue a group of bandits that have been plaguing the town of Sailbridge, near the border with the Kingdom of Orléans..."

"I see..."

"...Hugo, my boy—I'd like you to join me this time."

"Huh?!" I gasped in astonishment.

S-seriously...? He wants me to join him in battle...?

"U-um, is there a reason you're asking this now...?"

"Mmm, yes..."

At this, the archduke outlined his reasoning.

First, he wanted me to gain real-world combat experience so that I would be fully prepared for the day when I succeeded him as the next Archduke Woodstock.

Second, he wanted to give me a chance to impress his soldiers and gain their trust by suppressing the bandits in a brilliant first showing on the battlefield.

"Ha-ha! You were an assassin in a past life, my boy, so I know you won't lag behind. Why, at this point, your skills surpass even my own. I have full confidence in your success."

"Th-thank you..."

As the archduke said, I already had a good deal of combat experience, and on top of that, I had read extensively on tactics at the library during my stint filling in for Louis at the Imperial Academy.

So long as I was able to work well with those on the ground, I would be more than capable of handling this task. And yet—

"...You said it's near the border with Orléans," I pointed out. "That concerns me."

"Oh...?" The archduke raised an eyebrow, his interest piqued. "Why is that?"

"Well. I've only read books on the matter, but I believe Sailbridge is an important strategic point linking our two countries. If there's trouble nearby, we can't rule out the possibility the Kingdom of Orléans is involved."

"Hmm. You're quite sharp." The archduke smiled and nodded. "That's precisely why I'm going in person. And why it would be an ideal opportunity for your dramatic debut, my boy."

"Aha..."

In other words, the archduke has set the stage for me.

"Your Grace... I swear on this saber you gifted to me that I will vanquish those bandits and that the name Hugo Grenville will be known throughout the

empire."

"Ha-ha! I'm looking forward to it!"

With that, the archduke rose to his feet and patted me on the head with his large, calloused hand. The gesture was kind and instilled in me both confidence and warmth. But there still remained one issue.

"Um... What about Melza...?" I asked.

"Yes, that's the problem..."

All at once, a cold air filled the room. Both the archduke and I held our heads in despair.

Even though the mission in question amounted to suppressing a few bandits, so long as another nation was involved, it was technically a war. Under no circumstances could I bring Melza to such a place.

Yet she could see through lies and ill intentions, so if I tried to hide the truth of our mission, I would be instantly exposed... And besides, I didn't want to deceive her. I had resolved to show her only sincerity and love.

"I guess I'll just have to convince her..."

"Indeed..."

Both the archduke and I sighed deeply.



"...Hugh? What's wrong with you and Grandfather?" Melza asked at dinner.

Neither the archduke nor I had been able to conceal our restlessness. We exchanged nervous glances...and he gave me an almost imperceptible nod.

"Melza... There's something I need to talk to you about," I said.

"Oh...?" She must have sensed that she wouldn't like this conversation, and her lips tightened in a pout.

"Let me go first, my son," said the archduke.

"Of course," I replied.

"Hugo and I will be departing on an expedition early next week to eliminate a group of bandits near the border with Orléans."

"...?!" Melza's eyes instantly shot open, and she audibly gasped. "Th-then I'm going, too!" she exclaimed, jumping to her feet.

"No." The archduke shot her down at once.

"Melza," I began, taking over. "There's going to be a battle. I can't take you with me, not when there's a possibility I could be putting you in danger... And I don't want you to have to witness any gruesome developments..."

...In my first life as an assassin, I had watched a great many people die. In war, human life was even more expendable. I had to protect Melza from that.

"Please! ...Please understand, and wait here until your grandfather and I return!" I implored, pressing my hands and forehead down on the table in supplication.

Perhaps there was a better way of getting her to accept my request... But if there was, I couldn't see it. All I could do was lay bare my sincerest feelings and hope she would acquiesce.

"Hugh, you're so...underhanded!"

"...Melza?!"

The next moment, she took off from the dining room, tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Melza...," I murmured, watching as the door swung shut behind her.

What should I do ...?

"Best to let her be for a while, my boy..." The archduke placed a burly hand on my shoulder.

"Your Grace... I'll try talking to her again."

"I understand how you feel, but it might be wiser to wait and see for now..."

This time, I couldn't bring myself to agree. I simply couldn't stand the thought of letting something like this fester between us—not for one second...

"...I need to speak with her," I said firmly.

"...Well, well. You're surprisingly stubborn, my boy..." The archduke grinned wryly.

And so I left the dining room and followed Melza.

"Phew..." Outside her room, I paused to take a deep breath.

...All right.

Knock-knock.

"Melza...? Can I come in...?"

*""* 

I waited for a short while, but there was no response. Taking that as approval, I opened the door and peered inside.

"Melza..."

I found her slumped over her bed in the unlit room, face pressed against the blankets.

"I'll sit here," I murmured, positioning myself next to her.

Where was I supposed to begin? If I said the wrong thing, I would only end up hurting her even more...

*"…"* 

*"…"* 

For a long, drawn-out moment, silence enveloped the room. And then—

"...I do understand," she whispered, breaking the silence. "I know it's selfish of me to want to accompany you. And I know that you and Grandfather are only trying to do what's best for me..." She spoke haltingly, tears spilling onto the bed.

"Melza..."

"But...! I can't stop worrying! What if something happens to you, Hugh...?!"

She sobbed and clung to my legs. All I could do was gently pat her back and

try to console her.



"Ngh..."

I woke up to sunlight peeking in through a gap between the curtains. I got out of bed and went to close them fully—I didn't want Melza's skin to burn.

In the end, I'd decided to spend the previous night with her in the hopes of healing her wounded heart. While I held her in bed, she continued to bawl her eyes out until she fell asleep from exhaustion.

"Melza...," I murmured, gently stroking her black hair. It glistened like polished onyx.

After a few moments, she stirred.

"Ngh... Ah... Hugh...," she muttered, groggily opening her eyes.

"Good morning, Melza," I greeted her with a warm smile.

"Hugh... Hugh..."

"Yes... I'm here."

She reached out and embraced me.

"Melza, I have a proposal."

"A...proposal...?"

"Yes."

She lifted her face and stared back at me with glistening crimson eyes as I explained my plan.

"While I'm in Sailbridge on this expedition, I'll return to you at the end of every day."

"...?!" The moment she heard these words, her eyes shot open. "Y-you can really do that?!"

"I still have to make sure, but Sailbridge is one of the empire's most important strategic points, so it stands to reason there should be a portal for urgent travel back to the capital. If I can use that, I should be able to get back to the mansion in no time."

While she was asleep, I had spent the night thinking of how to set her mind at ease. There had to be some way to reassure her of my safety without taking her directly to the battlefield...

At first, I thought about using a magical tool of some sort to communicate with her on a daily basis. But that, I realized, might only remind her of the distance. Then it dawned on me...since the archduke's mansion was equipped with a portal, all I needed was another one near the expedition site.

"But if I'm the only one going home every day and the soldiers fighting alongside me aren't allowed such a luxury, it could have a bad effect on morale..."

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"Ah... I—I see..."
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"So I was thinking of asking your grandfather's permission first, then checking to see if it's okay with each of the soldiers."

The archduke would no doubt respond with a hearty laugh and readily grant me permission to use the portal. But no matter how good our odds, the soldiers would be entrusting me with their lives, which meant I had to earn their respect.

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"Hugh..."
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"Don't worry. I'll be honest and forthright with them—I'm sure I'll win their support. There's no need for concern. Try to put on a brave face. I can't tell you how happy that would make me." I smiled and caressed her cheek.

"Hugh...!" she cried, embracing me as tightly as she could. Unlike the previous night, she was wearing the brightest of smiles. "Now that everything's decided, we need to go find Grandfather!"

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"Ha-ha... Yes!"
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Finally regaining her energy, Melza rushed to get changed... Huh?!

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"M-Melza?!"
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<sup>&</sup>quot;Hmm...? O-oh...!"

Only when I stopped her from taking off her nightdress did she realize I was watching. She spun around to conceal her chest in embarrassment.

"I-I'll go back to my room!" I said.

"R-right!" she answered, her face bright red.

With that, I scurried back to my own quarters.

*B-but wow...* 

"You really are beautiful, Melza..."

I could feel my cheeks burning as I shook my head in an effort to stop thinking of her gorgeous, pale skin.



## Recognition

"Ha-ha! Of course. How could I object?!"

We found the archduke in the dining room. No sooner had I asked to use the portal than he let out a hearty laugh and gave me his permission.

"If that's all it takes to cheer you up, Mel, then it's a small price to pay!"

"Ngh... I know I'm being selfish, Grandfather. You don't need to rub it in..." Melza pouted. She looked embarrassed.

Ah-ha-ha. She's the most adorable girl in the whole world.

"Are you sure you want to ask every soldier, my boy? I'm sure if you just explained what you're doing, they would accept it without complaint..."

"No, that won't do. I need to earn their recognition and respect."

Yes... I won't be able to forgive myself if I simply rely on the archduke's name to get whatever I want. Besides, there will no doubt be other military expeditions in the future, and I need to get off on the right foot with everyone.

"Well! You're a stubborn one, my boy!"

"Wah!"

"But I rather like that side of you," the archduke said, ruffling my hair with his calloused hand. "Well, then! How about we head off to the barracks once we've finished breakfast?"

"Yes! I'm looking forward to it!"

"I-I'm coming with you!" Melza added, hurriedly raising a hand.

The archduke guffawed. "I don't think I've ever gone to war so happy!"



"Sorry to keep you."

After breakfast, I changed into my military uniform and headed down to the entrance hall, where Melza and the archduke were already waiting for me.

"Oh... You look very dashing in your uniform, Hugh...," Melza said, her face pink.

"Y-you think so...?" I stammered, and looked away in embarrassment.

"I do. Well, let's get going."

"Yes!"

The three of us boarded a carriage and headed north of the Imperial Palace, to the barracks housing the archduke's forces.

There were only around three thousand soldiers deployed within the imperial capital. Most of the empire's troops were stationed in border regions or areas rife with monsters. Of course, keeping your troops close to the front lines was one of the most foundational lessons of military tactics... But that said, all of the three thousand soldiers stationed in the capital were highly skilled warriors under the archduke's direct command. Their military records were said to be spotless, composed of victory after victory.

Professor Monica, the so-called Red Reaper, was among their number.

"We're here!" the archduke exclaimed.

Outside the carriage window, we could see a long, tall fence surrounding an unusually vast plot of land. It was here that the Southenklein Empire's most capable forces were based.

"Oh? I thought you would be more impressed, son..."

"S-sorry... I've actually been here once before, in my first life..."

I couldn't help feeling sorry for the archduke, who was clearly disappointed. The last time I was here, I had been dispatched to assassinate the archduke's right-hand man... But I decided it best not to mention that part.

As the carriage passed through the gate and we entered the barracks grounds, the officers and men lined up in formation and raised their swords in salute. Their well-coordinated movements spoke to their exceptional skill and strength.

"...These men will eventually be under your command, Hugh," Melza said.

"Mmm. But they won't follow you until they've accepted you as their leader, my boy. Keep that in mind."

"Yes..."

I wouldn't have it any other way.

No matter what, I would earn their recognition as the archduke's successor... and as Melza's husband.

Once the carriage came to a stop, we stepped out to greet the soldiers.

"Attention, everyone!" bellowed the archduke. "As you know, we'll be departing from the capital in three days to subdue the bandits plaguing our border with the Kingdom of Orléans. Let's make sure we're ready." The archduke paused there and motioned for me to join him. "This man is my granddaughter, Meltreza's, fiancé...in other words, my heir. Not only will he be joining us, he'll be taking command during the expedition. Look forward to it! ... Now then, Hugo..."

I nodded, then turned to look over the soldiers lined up in formation.

Ha-ha... Their expressions haven't changed, but I can see the skepticism in their eyes.

I understood their doubt. As far as they knew, I was just some young man engaged to the archduke's granddaughter, joining the military to add a little luster to my credentials. They probably suspected I'd try to take all the credit for myself, too.

So, first things first...I had to try to change that perception. If I couldn't, there was no way they would agree to me using the portal to visit Melza. With that goal in mind, I began.

"My name is Hugo Grenville, and I'll be joining this expedition to root out the

bandits plaguing our border. I'm only fifteen, but I'm looking forward to working with you all," I said, bowing. "...Some of you may find it difficult to accept me. You may think I'm here simply because I'm engaged to His Grace's granddaughter... But let me say something right now." I paused there and rested a hand on the hilt of the saber at my waist. Pulling out the blade and raising it high, I declared, "I'll be putting my life on the line by your side, and I'll demonstrate that resolve with my sword. I hereby challenge you all!"

*"...?!"* 

At this, even the seasoned officers let out astonished gasps. Those words were probably the last thing they'd expected to hear.

"Excuse me. May I have a moment?" A tall officer, looking rather intellectual in a pair of glasses, stepped forward.

I recognized his face. He was the archduke's right-hand man—the brains behind his military conquests, and the man I'd assassinated here during my first life.

Sir Oliver Portland, vice commander of the archduke's forces.

"As you may already know, we are the empire's premier force," he said. "If a squad of regular soldiers took up arms against even one of us, they wouldn't stand a chance."

*""* 

"Forgive me for saying this," Sir Portland said with a shake of his head, "but I don't see how you can possibly expect to stand toe to toe with us."

It was as though he was rejecting me before he'd even given me a chance.

"Perhaps you're correct... But that doesn't necessarily mean you're *right*," I answered.

"Oh...?" Sir Portland's eyes glinted behind his glasses.

"Instead of debating the point, maybe it would be faster to test out our skills,"

I suggested.

"...I only warned you for your own good... But very well. Men!" he bellowed, his voice filling the grounds. "Those who wish to challenge Hugo Grenville, step forward!"

At this, the soldiers all stood up straight—and close to two hundred answered the call.

"I hope you don't regret this, Hugo Grenville," Sir Portland said coldly.

"Of course not. I issued the challenge myself," I answered with a fierce grin.

I had more than enough confidence. After all, I had crossed swords with the archduke himself more than two hundred times during my daily training.



"Enough! Hugo Grenville wins!"

"Wheeze... Koff...!"

Again, Sir Portland, the referee, named me the victor. I had finally made it halfway through... But there was still a long way to go.

As was to be expected of the archduke's elite troops, these soldiers were truly formidable. Every last one of them put up an exceptional fight. They couldn't quite measure up to the archduke himself, however.

"...I must admit, I'm impressed," Sir Portland murmured. "I never would have expected to find such strength in a man as young as you..."

"Ah-ha-ha. Thank you."

My next opponent stepped forward.

...?!

"Come, now! It'll be sundown soon if we keep this up! Instead, how about you face me—the empire's strongest fighter?"

To my surprise, it was the archduke himself with a wooden practice blade.

Uh-oh... I've already faced one hundred foes, and here he is bursting with

energy...

"Grandfather! Can't you see Hugh is exhausted?! This isn't fair!" Melza, who had been watching in silence until now, raised her voice in protest.

"It's okay, Melza," I replied. "On the battlefield, the enemy won't go easy on you just because you've already fought a hundred other foes."

"B-but—"

"Indeed, my boy," the archduke declared with a jovial nod. "You may well find yourself in just that sort of situation one day. When it happens, it's up to you to decide whether you're going to whine and go down without a fight or find new vigor in the face of death."

He was right, of course... Besides, he hadn't trained me to run away as soon as things got tough. I had to keep going.

"...I understand," said Melza. Accepting her grandfather's argument, she fixed me with a soft smile. "Hugh... Do your best, okay?"

Yes... With her in the audience, I have to win. Even if my opponent is the archduke himself.

Because I love Melza more than anyone else in the world.

"Begin!"

The second Sir Portland's signal rang out, I crouched low, adopting a defensive posture.

The archduke appeared to be standing casually, but there were no openings in his stance. As always, he was ridiculously strong...

Even so, I couldn't just sit on my hands doing nothing. Making up my mind not to resort to any cheap tricks, I pointed my sword in his direction and poured all my strength into a full-bodied thrust.

"That's the spirit! But you won't break me!" the archduke declared, raising his

own sword up high and bringing it down in one swift stroke.

Perhaps he meant to crush me mid attack from above. But I wasn't going down so easily.

"Aaauuugggggh!"

Stepping forward, I released my left hand from my sword's hilt and extended my right, stretching my body as far as it would go. This way, perhaps I could reach him before he got to me!

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"...Ha-ha... I yield."
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"Gah...!"

The force of the archduke's strike threw me hard into the ground. And yet... the tip of my blade had reached his chest first.

"...We have a winner! Hugo Grenville!"

"...Hugh! Hugh!"

As Sir Portland enthusiastically declared my victory and Melza desperately called out my name, my senses faded to black.



"Ngh..."

Regaining consciousness, I slowly opened my eyes.

"Oh... Hugh..."

Melza peered down at me, her face awash with worry.

She really is a goddess, so gracious and beautiful...

"Melza... How long was I out for?"

"It's only been fifteen minutes. But Hugh..."

"Ah-ha-ha. Don't worry, I'm fine," I declared, moving my body a little to reassure her. "I've been training with your grandfather for more than a year."

"Please... You don't need to act tough for my sake, you know?"

"Oh... R-right."

Of course, she can see straight through my lies...

"B-but I mean it, I am okay. Sure, it hurts a little, but it's nothing I can't take!"

"...I can see you aren't lying, so I suppose I'll leave it at that," she said at last.

"Oh, I am sorry, my boy," said the archduke, scratching his head. "...If I had stepped in sooner, you would have had a better time of it. But I can't have the men thinking I'm going easy on you because you're engaged to my granddaughter."

"Ah-ha-ha. There wouldn't have been any point if you had given me special treatment. But it's clear I've still got a long way to go." I smiled wryly.

... I won the bout against the archduke, but I ended up losing the contest.

I had to become even stronger.

"...Grandfather," said Melza, "I have a feeling Hugh has misunderstood the situation."

"Mmm... Hugo, you seem to have forgotten that we were fighting with wooden practice swords. If we had been properly armed, I wonder what your attack would have done to me...?"

The two of them stared back in veiled amusement. Oh.

"So you're saying I've earned the soldiers' respect...?" I asked.

"...I have no objections," sounded a third voice—Sir Portland, flashing me a wry grin. He then called out to the others, "How about it, everyone? Do you all agree Hugo Grenville is worthy of your loyalty?"

"Of course!" they answered as one, raising their swords above their heads.

"And that's that, my boy." The archduke patted me on the head with a burly hand. "You're now part of our elite forces."

"Reporting for duty!" I said with a grin.



"Ah, to be young! You have my blessing!"

"I appreciate it!"

Having earned the soldiers' confidence, I bowed to each of them in turn and asked their permission to use the portal to visit Melza during our expedition to Sailbridge. Fortunately, they readily agreed to my request now that they had seen my skill firsthand.

W-well, they did tease me about Melza, but...

"Thank you again, everyone!"

"N-not at all! With a beautiful fiancée like that, I reckon I'd feel the same way!"

Yes, Melza had come around with me to ask permission. I would have been fine approaching the soldiers by myself, but she had insisted on joining me.

"This is about the both of us," she'd said. Truth be told, I couldn't have been happier to hear those words.

"Anyway, Oliver sure did a good job stirring you up." The archduke grinned as he stroked his beard.

"...How do you mean?" I asked uncertainly.

"I made it clear to him from the get-go that your skills are on par with my own. There shouldn't have been any need for you to go to such lengths, my boy. He'd already acknowledged you."

"R-really?!"

"Mmm. He orchestrated the whole thing so you could demonstrate your abilities."

"I-I see..."

Thanks to him, the soldiers had accepted me as one of their own. It seemed I owed him.

"Ha-ha! Now all that's left is to give those bandits a good whack!" the archduke declared with a hearty guffaw. "We'll show them what happens when you set up shop inside the empire's borders!"

"Yes!" I answered him with a firm nod.

## **Setting Out**

Three days later, it was finally time for us to set out on our expedition to subdue the bandits plaguing Sailbridge.

"Hugh..." Melza was standing in front of the gates outside the archduke's residence, a worried look on her face.

"I'll be back once we've completed the mission, Melza... Though I'll visit every day, of course, once we reach Sailbridge."

"I know, but I'll still worry...," she said, averting her gaze.

Once we reached Sailbridge, at least, I could come back to see her whenever she needed me. Hopefully that would help ease her anxiety and loneliness...

"Time to go, son," said the archduke.

"Of course!"

"Hugh! Grandfather! Be careful!" Melza shouted. She kept waving and waving, and I turned back to wave at her more times than I can count.

"Ha-ha. We don't usually get such a grand send-off just to fight a few bandits..." The archduke chuckled and stroked his beard.

"...I guess I'm just a lucky man," I said.

Yes... It filled my heart with such joy to know I had a woman who cherished me so deeply. There could be no doubt about it—this seventh life had saved my soul.

"You're a good rider, my boy," the archduke remarked, changing the subject.

"Oh, yes. I used to take care of horses a lot during my fourth life..."

After deciding to hide my skill at swordplay and academics, I went out of my

way to do a wide range of odd jobs for House Grenville. I let Molly boss me around, and eventually it was decided that I was good with animals, so I was assigned to serve as playmate for Anna's pet monster. Needless to say, that didn't end well...

"...I'm sorry to hear that," the archduke murmured.

"It's fine..."

An oppressive atmosphere settled over us as we joined the rest of the forces, who were already prepared to depart. That was when I noticed her.

...Huh?

"Professor Monica?!"

"Yes, Hugo." She grinned. "I've received orders from His Grace to join the expedition. Good luck to us both."

Slung over her shoulder was a massive broadsword longer than she was tall.



"If you don't mind...why did you decide to join this expedition, Professor Monica?" I asked hesitantly.

We had set off for Sailbridge, and the officers—Professor Monica included—were riding alongside us.

"Oh, yes... Well, I owe His Grace a lot, so I was happy to oblige him. But when I heard one of my students would be going, I couldn't refuse."

"Oh... Thank you."



"Heh-heh. The archduke is the one who deserves your gratitude. I've never seen him bow his head and plead on anyone's behalf before. He's desperate to keep you safe, Hugo."

Your Grace... Thank you.

"Yes," I replied. "...I've nothing but gratitude for everything he's done for me."

"Hmm. Then you know what you've got to do."

"Yes."

Indeed... Defeating the bandits and ensuring everyone knew my name was the only way I could hope to repay his kindness.

"Hmm? What are you two whispering about?" The archduke, who was supposed to be leading the army as it moved out, approached Professor Monica and me with a puzzled look.

"Oh, Your Grace... Professor Monica was just fanning my excitement for the mission."

"Ha-ha! I see. Don't get too worked up, though, you hear?"

"Of course!" I answered, and the archduke flashed me a warm grin.

A moment later, a lone soldier came running up to our group.

"A report, Your Grace. According to our advance forces, the bandits were last seen near Sailbridge two weeks ago."

"Oh? And what happened?"

"Nothing, as such. But it seems Viscount Sennett, who governs Sailbridge and the surrounding area, has been in contact with them."

"Oh...?" The archduke's eyes narrowed in suspicion as he listened to the report.

Based on that information, it was only natural to consider that the viscount may be collaborating with the bandits.

"Your Grace," I interjected. "May I ask something...?"

"...What?"

"How did a *viscount* come to rule over such a strategically important location for the empire, right next to the border with the Kingdom of Orléans?"

While the two realms might have agreed to a truce since the last outbreak of hostilities, the Southenklein Empire and the Kingdom of Orléans remained enemies. As such, it would stand to reason that the king would place a higher-ranking noble with greater military prestige in charge of such a region, if not military forces under his direct control.

"Ha-ha. You're a sharp one, my boy. Yes... Viscount Sennett is something of a sacrificial pawn, so to speak."

"A sacrificial pawn?"

"Mmm."

The archduke went on to explain that a third of the nobles stationed near the border, Viscount Sennett included, had defected from the Kingdom of Orléans during the previous war.

For that reason, if another war were to break out, those turncoat nobles would likely be targeted by the enemy first for their treachery.

"But their standing with the empire isn't great, either. They aided us once before, but we can't simply trust those with a history of betraying their liege lord. So during times of war, people like that are treated as expendable pawns. The brunt of the Imperial Army, waiting directly to their rear, can stay out of harm's way while keeping a close eye on them."

"I see..."

His explanation certainly made a good deal of sense. And yet, I wasn't entirely satisfied.

"I'm a little surprised those turncoat nobles have accepted such a situation...

If they changed sides during battle, I would think they might expect a reward more in line with the risk..."

"Hmm. They were permitted to keep their original territories, along with anything they managed to secure from the Kingdom of Orléans."

"Oh... I see."

In other words, the empire had permitted them to keep their original territories intact while at the same time encouraging them to add to their holdings however they saw fit... In that case, it wasn't altogether surprising that they had accepted the risks inherent in remaining so close to the border.

"Though, if Viscount Sennett is involved with these bandits, his defection may well have been a ruse," the archduke noted. "If that's the case, we may be dealing with more than mere bandits..."

"You don't mean ...?!"

"Mmm." The archduke nodded slowly. "They may be in the employ of the Kingdom of Orléans."

Was he suggesting that Viscount Sennett allowed soldiers from the Kingdom of Orléans to infiltrate the empire masquerading as bandits? *But why? To sow chaos?* 

"Well, well! It seems our little bandit hunt has become rather more complicated! But no matter—all the more opportunity for you to demonstrate your worth, my boy!" The archduke laughed heartily and patted me on the back, and Monica chuckled.

"Heh-heh... It seems I picked an interesting mission to tag along on."

This was no laughing matter, as it concerned the security of the whole empire. Nevertheless, the archduke seemed unconcerned and was even prioritizing my personal growth.

In short order, he had become not only my mentor and role model...but a surrogate father.

## Sailbridge

"Hmm... We've finally made it," the archduke murmured.

More than two weeks had passed since our departure from the imperial capital, and we had at last reached Sailbridge. But contrary to my expectations, we steered clear of the town itself.

"We aren't going into town, Your Grace?" I asked.

"No. If we did that, we'd probably give the people living there a right old scare. Until we're done clearing out the bandits, we'll make camp out here."

"Understood."

And so I found myself setting up camp alongside Professor Monica and the soldiers.

"Ah, there you all are."

"Oh... Sir Portland."

"We received a messenger from Viscount Sennett a little while ago," Sir Portland said in a matter-of-fact tone. "He has invited Archduke Woodstock to dinner, along with you and Lady Monica."

"U-understood," I answered with a stiff nod.

Professor Monica received the message as well. "I see."

"Very good." With that, Sir Portland returned to his post.

Professor Monica turned to me. "Heh-heh... I get the feeling you don't really get along with Oliver."

"What? N-no, it isn't like that..." Though it was true I felt nervous speaking with the man.

He'd shown genuine concern for me when I was trying to prove myself to the soldiers, and I understood he was a decent person. It was just...

"Oops, I guess there's no time to dawdle," she said, interrupting my thoughts. "We'd better get ready if we're going to accompany His Grace."

"I suppose you're right."

The two of us made our way to the main camp and changed our attire. Once we'd donned our overcoats and equipped our sabers, we headed off to find the archduke.

"Well, you two sure took your time," he said. "Shall we be off, then?" "Yes."

It seemed all four of us—the archduke, me, Professor Monica, and Sir Portland—would be attending dinner with the viscount. There was no question in my mind that Professor Monica would be able to handle herself if the situation turned sour, and as the army's second-in-command, Sir Portland would probably be fine, too... *In fact, that's probably a huge understatement*.

We rode into town in a horse-drawn carriage, and it wasn't long before we arrived at Viscount Sennett's estate.

"Welcome, Your Grace," the viscount said in greeting.

"Mmm, yes." The archduke responded with a slow nod.

"This way, please."

Viscount Sennett led us into a wide hall, where we came face-to-face with someone unexpected.

"Why, if it isn't His Grace the Archduke...?"

"Well, now. I wasn't expecting to find you here, Lord Grenville."

Indeed, to everyone's surprise, Marquis Grenville and Louis were also in attendance. But why on earth would the two of them be somewhere so remote...?

"I hope my foolish son hasn't been misbehaving, Your Grace," Marquis Grenville said.

"Of course not!" the archduke answered with a hearty laugh as he patted me on the shoulder. "I couldn't be prouder to have such a promising young man joining House Woodstock!"

"I better not hear that you've besmirched Archduke Woodstock's good name, Hugo," the marquis warned. "You understand?"

"Of course... I understand." I bowed deeply, taking care to keep my expression neutral.

"But what an unexpected family reunion," the archduke observed. "...What brings you here, Lord Grenville?"

"As it happens, I'm planning a new business venture in Sailbridge. I brought Louis along as my heir to learn as much as he can."

"Oh... I see, I see." The archduke smiled and stroked his beard. I could tell, however, that the smile didn't reach his eyes. "I assume you'll be staying here awhile, then?"

"Indeed... We've scheduled a full week," Marquis Grenville replied matter-of-factly.

"Now that everyone is here, let's all sit down for dinner," said the viscount. "Our head chef has been hard at work preparing a delicious treat for you both, Archduke Woodstock, Marquis Grenville."

With that, we were led to our seats. An eerie tension filled the air as we began our meal.

"By the way, Your Grace," the marquis began. "Lord Sennett told me earlier that you're here to deal with a little bandit problem."

"Mmm, yes. I thought it would be a good opportunity for my son-in-law to make his battlefield debut."

"Is that so?" Marquis Grenville fixed me with a strange half sneer before taking a bite of his appetizer. Louis was so engrossed in the food that he remained silent.

"Well, Your Grace," said Lord Sennett. "Now that you're here leading the empire's strongest force, I'm sure you'll have no trouble eliminating this bandit

threat in record time. When do you begin?"

"Hmm... What do you think, Oliver?" the archduke asked.

"Well," Sir Portland answered, adjusting his glasses. "First, we intend to survey the damage they've inflicted in the area. After that, we'll scout the bandits' hideout, surround them to prevent their escape, and then we'll exterminate them. My guess is we'll need at least ten days to prepare."

"Ha-ha... You're usually as swift as lightning, Your Grace. I wouldn't have expected you to take such a leisurely pace."

"Well, this will be my son-in-law's first real battle, after all. He has to be well-prepared if he's to perform to the best of his abilities."

"Yes," I answered, bowing slightly. "I'll do everything I can to meet your expectations, Your Grace."

"Glad to hear it," said Lord Sennett. "My people will rest easy now that you're here to protect them."

"Hah! We haven't even started yet," the archduke joked.

In the end, thanks to the archduke's amicable contributions, the dinner went off without a hitch.



"...I feel sick just thinking about those scheming bastards."

"I agree..."

The archduke and I had quickly grown weary of the viscount's endless lies. Our preliminary investigations had already unearthed his relationship with the local bandits. What we still didn't know was whether the plot went as far as the Kingdom of Orléans.

"But I suspect the bandits—or rather, those agents of Orléans—will soon rush to withdraw from the empire," suggested the archduke. "I doubt they'll want to take our thousand-man-strong army head-on."

"But Oliver's lie about the timing of our attack probably has their guard

down," said Professor Monica.

"Mmm. Indeed." The archduke nodded.

"In that case, Your Grace, when do we make our move?" Sir Portland asked. His tone was flat and businesslike.

"Tomorrow night, naturally. Before they can escape."

In about one day's time, I would be facing my first real battle.

"... Just what is that upstart Grenville playing at...?" the archduke wondered aloud. "What business could he possibly have in this backwater?"

I had been asking myself the same question. I couldn't recall him ever conducting business in or around Sailbridge during any of my past lifetimes. Was that really what he was doing here...?

"Well, let's focus on mopping up these bandits first. We'll look into Grenville's plans once we've taken care of the first problem." The archduke smiled and patted me on the shoulder.

"...Of course." I nodded, but I still felt uneasy.

"Now then, the three of you ought to get some rest... Oh, yes. I almost forgot. Oliver, if you would?"

"For you, Master Hugo," Sir Portland said, handing me a written note. "Show it to the portal supervisor in Sailbridge, and you'll be able to use it to return to the capital whenever you want."

"...Thank you!"

"Heh-heh. Say hello to Meltreza for me." Professor Monica grinned.

"The same goes for me!" said the archduke.

"Of course!"

Clutching the note in my hand, I rushed for the building housing the teleportation portal. After I spoke with the local administrator, I was led into a room complete with a large teleportation square surrounded by four magicite crystals.

"We've already set the coordinates for your destination," said the

administrator, "so you can make the jump whenever you're ready."

"Understood. Thank you!"

Unable to wait any longer, I all but leaped through the portal.

"...Hugh! Welcome home!"

"Melza..."

My fiancée beamed and rushed into my arms, and I caught her in a gentle embrace.

### The Fear of Loss

"I never would have imagined..."

That night, Melza and I made our way to the garden. We sat side by side on a bench on the terrace as I recounted the archduke's and my journey and the day's events.

"Me neither... Which is why we'll be moving against the bandits as soon as possible—tomorrow night."

*""* 

On hearing this, Melza slumped forward. She was probably worried about me.

"Melza... We've already taken every precaution," I declared, trying to put her mind at ease. "I know you're probably picturing all sorts of worst-case scenarios, but I promise you, everything is completely under control." I would see this mission through unscathed.

"...Hugh, will you swear that to me...?"

"Of course... I, Hugo Grenville, do solemnly swear it."

I knelt before her, took her hand in mine, and planted the sincerest of kisses against her skin. She leaned over me, catching me in a tight embrace.

"Whoa!"

"Hugh...! Promise me you'll be safe...no matter what...!"

"I will... No matter what."

She was trembling all over... Gently, I wrapped my arms around her and returned her embrace. It was the least I could do to ease her worries—to share my warmth with her.

"...It's probably time I headed back," I said.

"Oh..."

"Melza..." I softly pulled away and rose to my feet. "I'll come back as soon as the bandits are dealt with. I mean it. So please, wait just a little longer."

"I will...!" There were tears in her eyes.

We remained that way for a short while as I gently stroked her hair—soft, glossy, impossibly beautiful.

"O-oh, that's right...," she began. "I nearly forgot something important."

"...What is it?" I asked.

She reached into the basket she'd brought and retrieved a small object.

"...What's that?"

"A little something I made while you were away on your mission..." It was a handcrafted tassel, made in red and indigo blue. "Could you attach it to your saber, Hugh? And please, make sure you come home safely. I want to see you again, just as healthy and lively as you are now... And with your wonderful smile, too."

"Yes... I will...!"

I took the tassel in my hands and cradled it delicately.

"Ho-ho... I made it with the colors of our eyes—yours and mine. So long as you carry it with you, we'll always be together." Melza smiled at me, her tears right on the cusp of overflowing.



"Ha-ha! I take it you've recovered your strength, then, my boy!"

When I arrived back at headquarters the following evening, the archduke gave me a hearty slap on the back.

But though I had been left to my own devices, I had been hard at work all day preparing for the upcoming battle.

"Oh? You don't have one for me?" the archduke asked with a grin as his gaze fell on the tassel newly attached to the hilt of my saber.

"Oh, right..." The old man had a keen eye, and he noticed even the smallest of changes. "Sorry. This was all I received from Melza."

"Oh...? I suppose she now she has eyes only for her suitor, and she's forgotten her dear old grandfather..." The archduke slumped his shoulders.

"Ah-ha-ha... She did say she was eagerly awaiting your safe return, though!"

"She did?! Ha-ha! I knew it...she was just embarrassed!"

It seemed I'd managed to reassure the archduke. He was almost *too* easy to convince, if you asked me.

"So," I began, "...did something happen?"

The archduke turned to me, his expression serious. "Mmm. First of all, shortly after last night's dinner, our scouts witnessed Viscount Sennett's servants dealing directly with the bandits. I assume they were informing the rogues of our attack plan."

"No doubt. In that case, they probably won't be expecting us to strike their encampment tonight."

"Precisely." The archduke flashed me a wry grin.

"You said 'first of all.' Was there something else?"

"Indeed. As a matter of fact, it seems that miscreant Grenville and his son used the portal to head back to the capital this morning."

"He went home?" I asked, caught off guard.

Hadn't Marquis Grenville said he would be staying in Sailbridge a full week for business? And yet here he was, apparently canceling his plans... It was nothing if not suspicious. It was almost like he'd seen the archduke's forces coming and fled.

"...Your Grace. It's possible Grenville is associated in some way with Viscount Sennett—that is, with the bandit problem."

"You think so, too, my son?"

"Yes... I never heard about any dealings with Viscount Sennett during my past six lives, or of any business in Sailbridge. So at the very least, whatever he's up to here isn't public knowledge."

"Hmm..." The archduke sank deep into thought.

"In any case, I'm sure we'll have a firmer grasp of the situation once the bandits are dealt with. I'm assuming we'll be apprehending Viscount Sennett afterward, yes?"

"Naturally. It's clear he's up to his neck in this business."

"Then we'll simply have him tell us what Grenville was doing here."

"Indeed."

With that, the archduke and I nodded to each other in firm agreement. Moments later, Sir Portland arrived with a report.

"The preparations are complete, Your Grace. We're ready to march on your order."

"Hmm. Viscount Sennett hasn't caught on, I hope?"

"No. He must have bought the story you gave him at the dinner. He seems quite confident, and we haven't detected any noticeable movements among the bandits, either. On top of that, the viscount has made no attempt to check in on our forces."

"I see. Then there is little room for doubt." The archduke nodded and stroked his beard. "All right. Then we'll proceed as planned and set out for the bandits' encampment at midnight, taking care not to alert Viscount Sennett."

"Understood." Sir Portland and I nodded in unison.

It was finally time to deal with the bandits. Our scouts had reported their numbers at around three hundred, while our own troops were a thousand strong. With more than a threefold advantage in our favor, it would undoubtedly be a short battle.

"If you'll excuse me, I have some final preparations to see to," Sir Portland said. After a respectful bow, he turned to leave the tent.

"Hugo, my boy, you seem more at ease than I expected..." The archduke seemed both impressed and a little worried by this.

"Ah-ha-ha... Well, I'm used to scenes of carnage, so it's no big deal to me..."
Touched by his concern, I forced a smile.

I had been an assassin during my first life and watched up close as many a soul breathed their last. More than a few of them I killed with my own two hands. Besides, I had walked this earth six whole times before. I no longer feared taking a life. But I had another, different fear.

"...What I'm afraid of now is dying," I admitted.

"Oh?" The archduke leaned forward, his interest piqued.

"Yes... I don't want to die. This seventh life has finally brought me happiness... I have Melza—a family. I don't want to give that up, no matter what."

"Ha-ha, I see...," said the archduke, sounding pleased. "That's reassuring to hear."

# **Banditry Unmasked**

"Have they made any moves?" the archduke asked.

Our forces set out at midnight, just as planned, and successfully encircled the bandits' encampment. The feat was accomplished in the span of an hour without any hint we had been detected. All that remained was for the archduke to give the word, and we would launch a full-scale attack.

"No," the soldier reported. "So far, they don't even seem to know we're here!"

"I see." The archduke gave a satisfied nod.

"Now then," he continued, turning to me. "...This will be your first battle, my son. How would *you* conduct the attack?"

Judging by his expression, I sensed that this was a test and that he was enjoying himself. I had to meet his expectations—especially if I wanted him to recognize me as his successor.

"Right," I said. "The bandits' encampment is situated on flat ground to the front and sides, but there's a mountain abutting the rear."

"Mmm."

"For that reason, I would launch an attack from the front and sides, while sending a separate squad to circle around on horseback and attack from behind the moment they emerge, catching them in a pincer attack."

"Oh... But why go to such trouble? Wouldn't striking from the three main sides be enough?" the archduke asked inquisitively.

"It stands to reason they'll have secured an escape route into the mountains in the event of an emergency. If we take control of the rear with a cavalry unit, we should be able to annihilate the bandits to the very last man."

"I see... What do you have to say to that, Oliver, Monica?"

"...I think that plan is a bit of a stretch," Sir Portland said, shaking his head. It seemed that my suggestion wasn't to his liking. "I'm sure there is a hidden escape route, just as Master Hugo says, but there's no guarantee our horsemen will be able to break past three hundred defenders to loop around to the rear."

He had a point. But with us here, there was a chance.

"I think we *can* guarantee our horsemen will be able to break through. After all, our forces are made up of the strongest warriors in the empire. And, of course, we have the Red Reaper."

"Heh-heh... So you've factored me into this plan of yours?" said Professor Monica.

"Naturally. This is the best solution if we want to eliminate the bandits without sustaining any casualties."

Indeed... The archduke hadn't said anything about barring officers from joining the battle. As such, I thought it only prudent to make full use of the empire's best fighters.

"But this strategy will only stand a chance if Your Grace, Monica, and Master Hugo are all present." Sir Portland shook his head again. "To my way of thinking, that is hardly a strategy."

"Of course, if His Grace and Professor Monica aren't able to participate, I would instead survey the mountains behind the fortress to locate any potential escape routes, then attack from the three main sides," I answered.

I could make out a slight grin forming on Sir Portland's face. It seemed I'd finally found the answer he was looking for.

"I see." He nodded approvingly. "You clearly have a sound grasp of the situation, and you've given thought to maximizing efficiency... In that case, I have no further objections."

...Something told me that his own plan had been remarkably similar to mine and that his opposition had merely been a test.

"Good, then we have a plan!" exclaimed the archduke. "Let's get going. Oliver, I'll leave the three-pronged frontal attack to you. Monica, Hugo—the three of us will attack from the rear and cut off the bandits' escape route!"

"Of course!"

"Understood!"

The three of us responded in unison and saluted the archduke. Before long, the attack began.

"All forces! We're charging the enemy encampment! Destroy every opponent who crosses your path! Don't let any escape!"

"Yes, sir!"

At the archduke's command, the soldiers set off to surround the enemy encampment, charging straight for its perimeter. The walls of the structure looked decently sturdy from outside, but they weren't strong enough to hold back our forces en masse. It wasn't long before the soldiers smashed through the gates and stormed inside.

"Ha-ha! It is I, Cyril of Woodstock, proud soldier of the Southenklein Empire! If you value your lives, get out of my way!" the archduke declared, brandishing his halberd in all directions as he advanced toward the rear of the encampment.

Naturally, Professor Monica and I were right there alongside him, and it wasn't long before we burst through to our destination and came face-to-face with a group of bandits protecting what could only be the group's escape route.

"Come at me!" shouted the archduke.

"Auuugggh!"

The bandits must have realized they were trapped. They came at us all at once, in a desperate attempt to finish us off. But we weren't about to go down so easily.

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"Gyargh!"
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"Oof!"

"Eeep?!"

One after the other, they fell victim to the archduke's halberd, Professor Monica's greatsword, and my saber.

Just then, I spotted someone I hadn't seen before.

"Listen up, you miserable bastards! If we can hoof it outta here by morning, we'll be the ones on top! So take that escape route back like your pathetic lives depend on it!"

Amid the oncoming bandits, I noticed a smallish, bearded figure barking commands at the top of his voice. Judging by his outfit and ill-matching sword, he must have been the bandits' leader... But wait, hold on—

"I-it can't be!" I shouted.

"Hmm? What is it, Hugo?" the archduke exclaimed. Both he and Professor Monica glanced at me in consternation.

I knew that man. I had met him twice—once each during my first and sixth lives.

I first met him when I was officially hired by the Grenville estate as an assassin at eighteen years old. He was the leader of the Bard Mercenary Company, a band of ruffians separate from House Grenville's private knights. He would later become a chief collaborator in Marquis Grenville's coup d'état.

His name was Dominique Bard.

What in the world is he doing here?! No—more importantly, why is he leading a group of bandits?!

Professor Monica called out my name, but I ignored her and plunged into the throng of enemies. There was something I needed to ask that man—something I needed to ask Dominique Bard.

"... That little brat's coming this way! Hurry up and kick his ass, you sorry lot!"

At this newest order, the bandits turned their attention to me and charged.

"Aaauuugggh!" I cried out at the top of my lungs, and struck down everything in my path. I don't have time for these people!

A second later, I'd nearly reached him.

"...Dominique Bard! It's just you and your five remaining henchmen now," I declared.

"H-how the hell do you know my name?!"

So I was right... It was him.

"I'm the one asking the questions here. You're supposed to be the head of the Bard Mercenary Company, so why have you stooped to leading a group of bandits?!"

"Huh...? How's a kid like you know anything about *me*?!" he asked, glaring at me suspiciously.

"Answer me!" I shot back, pointing my saber at his chest.

"Hmph! I ain't got the faintest clue what's going on here. Who the hell do you think you are?!"

"That's no concern of yours. Start talking, or else," I threatened, pressing forward little by little.

Then, all at once, I exhaled and hit the ground running.

Bard's men braced themselves, holding their swords high and low—but I was already behind them before they could react.

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"Gah!"

"Gergh?!"
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"Eugh!"

The first one took a deep slash across his stomach, the second a diagonal slice through his shoulder, while the third took a saber thrust straight to the neck.

"What?! S-stop him, goddamn it!" Bard shouted to his two remaining henchmen before turning to flee.

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"R-right!" they replied in unison.
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...But I wasn't about to let him escape.

"Move!" I howled.

I swiftly cut down the two remaining bandits before they even had time to scream and took off after Bard at full speed. Soon, I'd cornered him.

"That's enough," I called out, holding my saber up to his neck.

"Eeep!"

"Once we're done here, you're going to cough up everything you know," I warned him. "You had better be ready."

"H-heh... You capturing me doesn't mean squat," he wheezed, grinning.

I knew better, but I couldn't help responding. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Don'tcha get it? Your big bad general, Cyril of Woodstock, has a critical weakness."

A weakness? He was talking about the strongest warrior in the entire empire.

"Enough of this nonsense—"

"Ha-ha-ha-ha! By now, that fiend's precious little granddaughter is already in *that man's* hands! Which means he won't be able to lift a damn finger against us!"

*"*...?!"

A shiver ran up my spine.

It couldn't be... They were going after Melza?!

"Damn yooouuu!"

"Ugh!"

"Spit it out! What are you planning to do with her?!"

"Gah... H-heh... Like I said...his little treasure's been kidnapped... And once we start dropping hints, whaddaya think that fiend's gonna do...?"

"Damn it!" I struck Bard as hard as I could with the hilt of my saber.

"Ngh...!" he moaned, and fell to the ground, out cold.

"Hugo! You're being awfully reckless..." Professor Monica rushed to my side. She'd already scattered the remaining bandits and looked relieved to see me all right.

"...Professor Monica, this man...he's the bandits' leader... I'll leave him with you."

"...Where are you going, Hugo?!" she shouted after me.

"Melza... She's in danger!" I said. I ran back to my horse, leaped on, and galloped off as fast as I could.

"Is that...Master Hugo?!" I heard Sir Portland shout, but I ignored him, urging my horse to run as fast as it could. My destination was the portal at Sailbridge.

"Melza... Please, be safe...!"

## **Intruders**

#### ■ Meltreza of Woodstock's POV

"Hugh..."

Unable to sleep, I found myself sitting alone on a bench in the garden, gazing at the moon overhead.

At this very moment, Hugh was no doubt busy subduing the bandits plaguing Sailbridge. The previous night, he had made a promise to me—to come back safely, no matter what.

...So please, come home soon...

I had given him that tassel ornament as a good luck charm, and I hoped it would protect him. He was probably in the midst of battle right now, his saber in hand, complete with its new decoration.

So please... Please...

"O Galene... Please, please lead Hugh home safely...!" I whispered, my hands pressed together in prayer as I uttered the name of the goddess. I had never beseeched her like this before. I entreated her to protect the safety and well-being of my beloved. But soon, a strange feeling came over me.

"...?"

I stopped praying and lifted my head. Just now, I'd sensed malice—ill intentions directed specifically at me...

Glancing around, I tried to identify the source of the hostility.

"They must be over there..." The malevolence I sensed was coming from

behind the mansion—from six individuals in total. "...They have some nerve, taking advantage of Grandfather's and Hugh's absence to break into the Woodstock family mansion."

To make matters worse, it seemed the trespassers were making their way to my room.

They shouldn't be able to navigate the mansion on their first visit—which meant that someone had to be guiding them. But who would possibly...?

The moment the intruders realized I wasn't in my room, they started searching the mansion at random. Before long, however— "...?!"

—one of their group looked out a window and spotted me in the garden. It would likely be only a matter of minutes before all six rushed down after me.

"Ho-ho... What fools," I murmured, my mouth curling into a smirk.

It was downright idiotic of them to set their sights on me, a vampire perfectly capable of defending herself. Yes, they would have the honor of witnessing my true powers.

"...Found her."

Before long, five individuals dressed in black had surrounded me. Then the sixth approached—their leader, I suspected. He wore armor from head to toe and hid his face behind a mask.

"Oh-ho... I assume you're here for me?" I said.

"Come along quietly and you won't get hurt," the leader replied. Evidently, he had no idea that I could see straight through his lies.

"And if I refuse?"

"Then we'll have to take you by force," he said as the others closed in.

Oh-ho... Something tells me they mean to have their way with me.

"Then I respectfully refuse," I declared with a graceful curtsy.

The next moment, they struck.

"...You realize it's most uncivilized to attempt to touch a lady without her permission? Especially one already betrothed."

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"Gah?!"
```

I grabbed the arm of the first man who lunged toward me, spun him around, lifted him effortlessly up into the air—and slammed him forcefully into the ground. I heard a dull *thud* as he made impact, but I had more important things to worry about than his well-being.

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"...Y-you...!"
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The remaining black-clad figures rushed forward as one, but their movements were so sluggish that I began to feel a yawn coming on.

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"Ugh!"
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"Gah!"

Delivering one open-handed strike after the next, I sent each of them rolling across the ground with their heads twisted at unnatural angles.

Oh-ho... I'm rather merciless, aren't I?

"Now, then... It's just me and you," I said with a sneer.

"...You freakish monster..." The leader fixed me with an odious glare from behind his mask.

I hadn't heard the word "monster" since my first meeting with Hugh.

"In that case," the leader murmured, "I'll be the one to slay you." He pulled out a sword a full 50 percent longer than average from the scabbard at his waist. "Heh-heh... It won't matter one whit if I kill you—as long as I make it seem like you're still alive. Accept your fate."

...This man truly was conceited. His arrogant attitude, his obnoxious laugh, his vulgar speech—everything about him was so starkly different from my beloved Hugh.

Hugh would treat me with unparalleled care. He would heal me, embrace me... He would never use a vulgar word like "monster" to address me. Nor would he allow anyone else to do so. He was the most wonderful person in the whole world—he positively radiated kindness.

Hugh... I want to see you... I want to hold you...

That wish, that prayer, swirled around and around inside of me.

I had been scorned as a monster, and my heart was grievously wounded. It was a wound that only his kindness could heal.

"Now...die," the armored man muttered, interrupting my thoughts. But just as he lifted his sword into the air— "...?!"

"You... Just who do you think you're pointing that blade at?"

—an incensed voice rang out behind me.

...Was I hallucinating? Timidly, I turned to look over my shoulder.

And there he was!

"Ah... Ah...!"

"I asked who you think you're pointing that blade at!"

Oh...! There he is! It's him...!

My one and only beloved—

Hugo Grenville.

## The Commander of the Imperial Guard

"I asked who you think you're pointing that blade at!"

After using the portal at Sailbridge to teleport straight to the mansion, I ran out into the garden. If Melza was home, I knew she'd be there.

It wasn't long before I was proved right—I found her just as a man in armor was about to bring his sword down upon her.

"...You... What are you doing here?" the man shouted.

Ignoring him, I ran to my fiancée's side. "Melza! Are you okay?!"

"Yes... I'm fine. You must know such ruffians could never lay a hand on me... H-Hugh?!"

"Thank goodness...!"

Overcome with relief, I embraced her before she could finish speaking.

Thank the heavens she's safe...

"Hugh...!" she exclaimed, returning the embrace. She was like a lost child reuniting with their mother.

"You! Both of you! Face me!"

As Melza and I rejoiced in each other's safety, the armored man grew impatient. He slammed his sword into the ground and shouted at the top of his voice.

What an eyesore.

"I'm busy. Quit being a nuisance," I growled.

Relieved that Melza was safe, I was finally able to regain my composure. Still, having our reunion disrupted had soured my mood, and I made no effort to

hide my displeasure.

"...Heh-heh. I'd heard the rumors, but to think you'd actually developed feelings for that monster. Pathetic."

"...Who are you?"

"Do you take me for a fool? Why would I attack under cover of night only to reveal all my secrets?"

Well, I couldn't exactly argue with him there... But that wasn't the only thing I needed from him.

"...Take back what you said."

"Hmm? Take what back?"

"No one calls Melza a monster. Take it back," I muttered, my voice so low I surprised even myself.

"Heh-heh... Ha-ha-ha-ha! What's wrong with calling a monster a monster?! I thought it was just a rumor, but seeing my men go down right in front of me, I now know it's true!" The man sneered. He was mocking me...and my beloved Melza. "Idiots, both of you! How dare you, a monster, forget your place and develop feelings for a human?! And you're no better—falling for a monster!"

Ah... I could feel my heart freezing over.

Silently, a cold voice whispered in my ear, telling me to erase this worthless waste of space that dared sully the woman I love with his hateful words.

But first, I had to tell this scum what I thought of him.

"...Who exactly is the monster here?"

"What?"

"You broke into someone's home and tried to kidnap a fifteen-year-old girl simply because you can't hold a candle to her grandfather on the battlefield. And when your despicable scheme didn't go your way, you insulted her and degraded her honor... It seems to me that *you're* the monster."

"...How dare you! Shut your mouth!"

I must have hit a nerve. The armored man was now furious.

"I won't stay silent. Melza is the most wonderful and virtuous woman in the world, full of love and compassion. When no one else loved or valued me, she accepted me, embraced me, loved and supported me. You should do some self-reflection before you call her a monster. You're the monster, you stupid, pathetic beast!"

"Enooouuugggghhh!"

Unable to take any more, the armored man raised his blade again and hoisted it over his shoulder.

"Melza... I'll teach this man a lesson. With this—my saber—I'll make sure he understands how amazing a woman Meltreza of Woodstock really is."

"Hugh... Yes... Thank you...!" she exclaimed, large tears falling from her rubyred eyes.

With that, she gently pulled away so as not to interfere with the coming fight.

"Now then..." I began, facing my foe. "I get a sense of déjà vu from you—the way you hold yourself and that longsword of yours... You're not Gilbert, are you?"

"...?!<mark>"</mark>

At this, the man froze up as if he'd turned to stone.

"Ha-ha, I see... Then you must know what a disgrace I made of your son in front of the second prince and all those other students. And you must know I mopped the floor with him, too."

*"…"* 

Sure enough, the man said nothing to confirm my suspicions. He couldn't, however, hide his indignation. His shoulders were heaving in rage, and he was repeatedly stomping his feet on the ground.

"Why don't you come at me, then? Commander of the Imperial Guard."

"Aaauuugggggh!"

The moment I identified him for who he was, the armored man—no, Count Gilbert MacLagan, commander of the Imperial Guard—charged at me with a

deafening roar.

His movements were similar to Silas's in several respects, but in terms of intensity and speed, there was simply no comparison.

"Ngh!"

Twisting around, the commander launched into a powerful full-bodied blow—one meant to crush me beyond recognition. But he wasn't prepared for my skills.

"...?!"

I easily dodged the oncoming attack.

Without question, the commander of the Imperial Guard was one of the strongest individuals in the empire. But unfortunately for him...I wasn't far behind my mentor and future father-in-law, the archduke.

"Take this!"

Swiftly drawing my saber from its sheath, I unleashed a flurry of counter blows.

Clang!

"...That's some tough armor there," I murmured.

"Heh-heh... Naturally. This is the finest armor there is, passed down through my family for generations. It's crafted layer by layer, each honed to perfection. No clumsy saber could ever hope to pierce it!"

Blocking my attack seemed to have given him newfound confidence.

"Ha-ha... You brought out your prized armor for Melza...? No, you were expecting the archduke himself, weren't you? So you're that scared of him."

"How dare you?!" he spat back.

The fact remained, however, that he would only have brought his ancestral armor with him if he wasn't confident he could win in a one-on-one fight with the archduke.

But wait... If he thought he could win just by wearing a suit of armor, a guy this arrogant would simply declare himself the best in the empire right from the get-go. The fact that he hadn't was tantamount to admitting that he didn't think he could win against the archduke, even with his special armor.

"...Whatever. It's time for you to learn once and for all...that I'm the archduke's successor, and exactly what that means."

"You little brat!"

Just as he had before, the commander lifted his sword over his shoulder, readying another charge.

I, in turn, raised my saber in front of my face and put all my weight on my back foot.

Then it was time.

"Aaauuugggh!"

In what felt like a replay of our last exchange, the commander threw himself toward me. This time, however, I had no intention of backing down. No—I would beat him head on, proving myself as the archduke's successor.

*"*...?!"

Kicking off from the ground with my back foot, I leaped as close to the commander as I could, breaking past his guard.

"Whooooaaa!"

With a fierce cry, I swung my saber down. I moved faster than the commander, reaching him long before he could so much as touch me.

Screeech...!

The shrill sound of metal twisting sounded throughout the dark garden. A moment later, it was over.

"...I-impossible... What ...?!"

The commander's armor fell apart, splendidly cleaved in two from his shoulder to his abdomen. Blood gushed from his newly inflicted wound as he

fell forward onto the ground.

"He wasn't lying about that armor being tough..."

I sighed, taking in the sorry sight of the defeated commander. Without his armor, my last blow would undoubtedly have cut his whole body in two. His claim about the armor being a family treasure of unparalleled strength had been no empty boast.

"Hugh!"

Before I knew it, Melza, who had been watching in keen silence, leaped out to catch me in an embrace.

"Melza... Did I get here in time?"

"Yes...! You protected me! You saved me! My pride, my dignity...and my heart...!"

"Thank goodness..." I buried my face in her glossy black hair, savoring its delectable scent. "...If you don't mind, could you drink my blood? As a sign—proof that I was able to protect you? You mean so much to me, Melza... I want you to taste this victory, too, and that includes our success in defeating the bandits."

"Hugh... Um, are you sure...?" She hesitated, peering into my eyes.

"Of course. For me, seeing you happy is the best reward of all."

"Well... Ho-ho. In that case..." With a chuckle, she rested her lips against my neck.

Chomp.

"...Mmm... Mmm..."

After plunging her fangs into my neck and drawing first one mouthful, then a second, she gently withdrew.

"Aaah...!"

As the eastern sky began to brighten, her face lit up with a look of indescribable ecstasy.

I paused to admire Melza's beauty, more radiant than the sunrise.	

## A Knight's Pledge

After capturing the commander of the Imperial Guard and the other intruders and throwing them into the dungeon, Melza and I took the portal back to Sailbridge and set out for the army's main camp.

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"Hugo, my boy!"
"Hugo!"
"Master Hugo!"
```

The archduke, Professor Monica, and Sir Portland rushed over to greet me the moment they saw us.

They must have been worried about me after I rushed out of the bandit's encampment so suddenly.

"You up and fled the battlefield," said the archduke. "You gave us all quite the scare."

"I'm so sorry... The truth is..."

I wasted no time explaining what had happened back at the mansion.

"...Hmm. So that blighted greenhorn tried to make a move on Mel, did he?" The archduke looked like an angry beast ready to pounce.

If Marquis Grenville were here now, the archduke would have strangled him with his bare hands.

"...I wouldn't have thought Count MacLagan the type to set out on a suicide mission," Sir Portland noted.

"Mmm." Professor Monica hummed in agreement.

Truth be told, I felt the same way.

"So now that we've defeated the bandits, what's next?" I asked.

The archduke hummed in thought. "Naturally, we'll apprehend Viscount Sennett, given that he was clearly in league with the rogues, and march him back to the capital. It's a complicated affair, so his interrogation may take some time."

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"Right..."
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It would probably take a while to unravel why Viscount Sennett had decided to throw his lot in with a bunch of bandits and how deeply the commander of the Imperial Guard was involved. Something told me this wouldn't be the end of the matter.

Most importantly, why had the Bard Mercenary Company turned to banditry? Then, of course, there was Grenville's impromptu visit to Sailbridge and his immediate return to the capital... Though I suspected I already knew the answer to that one.

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"Hugh..."
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Glancing up, I saw Melza watching me with a worried look.

"Ah-ha-ha, everything's fine... Anyway, we're done with the bandits, so let's go home!"

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"Yes, let's!"
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"Ha-ha! That's the spirit, my boy!"

"Mmm!"

"Indeed."

The five of us savored our victory and shared a boisterous bout of laughter.



A month after we defeated the bandits, Viscount Sennett, Dominique Bard, and the former commander of the Imperial Guard, Count Gilbert MacLagan,

were still being interrogated.

At the same time, Marquis Grenville's puzzling actions were beginning to make sense. In particular, his conversation with MacLagan at the Imperial Academy's entrance ceremony, his dinner with Viscount Sennett at Sailbridge, and the appearance of Bard, one of his main associates during my first and sixth lives. It seemed his coup d'état, planned for three years down the line, was already in the works.

In fact, it was quite fortunate that we'd been able to annihilate the Bard Mercenary Company masquerading as bandits and capture Dominique Bard. At the very least, we had been able to thwart one of his schemes.

Such were the thoughts swirling through my head, when Melza spoke up.

"... Hugh? What's the matter?"

"Huh...? Oh. Ah-ha-ha. Sorry," I said with a wry grin. "I was just lost in thought. That's all."

"Oh-ho. Don't get too caught up in the details, okay?" Melza said with a slight chuckle.

No doubt she had seen right through me and sensed that I was preoccupied with Grenville and his three co-conspirators.

"... I wish I could spend my time thinking only about you, Melza..."

"Me too..."

Gently, she placed a pale hand atop one of my own on the table.

Knock-knock.

"Master Hugo, Lady Meltreza," Ellen called out as she opened the door and strode into the room. "His Grace wants to see you in his office."

If the archduke was calling for us, it could only mean there had been progress in the interrogations.

"Understood," I said. "We'll be right there. Melza?"

"Yes."

I took her hand and led her out of the room and down the corridor toward

the archduke's study.

"You wanted to see us, Your Grace?" I said when we reached the door.

"Mmm. Sorry to trouble you, my boy. You were right about Dominique Bard—those bandits *did* belong to his mercenary company."

"I thought so," I said with a nod.

"Not only that, his company took a contract from the Kingdom of Orléans during the most recent hostilities. In short, we've concluded that this current ruckus was orchestrated in collusion with Viscount Sennett, still loyal to the Kingdom of Orléans, to stir up chaos within the empire."

"I see... But why was Count MacLagan working with them? What was his objective?"

"There is one element connecting them all..."

"...What?! You don't mean—"

"Indeed, I do. Just as you feared, my boy—it's Grenville. As for MacLagan's motives..."

It seemed that Grenville and MacLagan were old acquaintances, and their friendship dated back to their time at the Imperial Academy. That relationship, however, had supposedly ended when MacLagan was named commander of the Imperial Guard. In all likelihood, they had maintained ties behind the scenes, advancing their plot in secret.

On top of that, it seemed MacLagan had voiced a particular complaint to several of his associates—that because of Archduke Woodstock, he was unable to stake claim to the title of strongest man in the empire.

"...Perhaps that scoundrel Grenville used the man's pride to manipulate him. He must have thought taking Mel hostage and using her to kill me would make him the toughest man in the realm."

"... That's why?! What a profoundly stupid reason!" I growled, gritting my teeth in anger.

"The business with Sennett and Bard was probably intended to separate me from Mel... And that seems to be their sole motive."

"I see..."

It was all connected.

This did, however, confirm one thing—that Grenville's coup d'état was being orchestrated in collusion with the Kingdom of Orléans. The matter with the bandits had been their attempt to eliminate the archduke—the greatest obstacle in their path.

Just thinking about all the ways that man had manipulated me and used me as a pawn in his stupid schemes filled me with indescribable frustration, rage, and bitterness. But just then—

"Hugh!"

"Ah..."

—the woman I loved more than anyone else caught me in a tight embrace, tears streaming down her cheeks.

"I'm here for you! Grandfather is here for you! We love you, Hugh! We won't let him use you! So please...don't be sad anymore... You don't need to suffer...!"

Melza... I'm so blessed to have you. Your presence is always so warm and comforting...

"Yes... You're right," I said. "I have you, and His Grace, too. You both mean the world to me. I'm not the same man I was back then."

That's right. I've finally found it, and I'll never let it go.

Here in my seventh life, I had discovered true happiness.

And so—

"Melza?"

"Yes..."

"I know I've made a vow to you as your fiancé, but I want to make another one as a knight... Would you grant me this wish...?"

"Oh..." She caught her breath.

Yes... I want to swear to her that I will protect her always, that her happiness will be everlasting...

"Your Grace... Would you be our witness?"

"Mmm. Very well. I, Cyril of Woodstock, will watch over your pledge." The archduke gave us both a firm nod.

"Melza...," I said.

"Yes..."

I knelt before her and hung my head as I presented her with the saber the archduke had given me.

"Hugo Grenville," she said, addressing me formally.

"Yes."

"Do you swear to be Meltreza of Woodstock's sword and shield, and to protect me from all dangers...?"

Her stern voice, so different from her usual mellow tones, sent a tremble coursing through my heart and soul.

"Even if the whole world should turn its back on you, I, Hugo Grenville, will fight for you and protect you."

"Do you hereby take the oath of knighthood to become my knight?"

"Yes... Even if it costs me my life, I vow with all my heart and soul to serve you and you alone."

"Very well... Then I grant you a position befitting your honor and valor."

I knelt as she pulled my saber from its scabbard and pressed the edge of the blade softly against my back.

"I, Meltreza of Woodstock, name you, Hugo Grenville, as my personal knight."

The moment her words reached me, I was filled with elation beyond compare.

Now, I was her sole knight, sworn to protect her.

"Hugh...!"

No sooner had she sheathed the saber and handed it back to me than she crouched down and wrapped her arms around me, her tears still flowing.

Oh, Melza...my one true love.

No matter what Grenville and his associates were plotting in the future, no matter who or what stood in our way...I, her knight, would protect her no matter what.

My precious, irreplaceable Melza.



## **Afterword**

Thank you, dear reader, for picking up this copy of *In My Seventh Life, I Met a Monster Princess*.

Greetings. My name is sammbon. Some of you may be familiar with my other online works on *Shousetsuka ni Narou* and *Kakuyomu*.

As it happens, I've been posting my stories online for a little over two years now. Most of them are romantic comedies, and my first attempt at writing a fantasy isekai completely bombed. Since then, I haven't returned to the genre.

I really enjoy reading romance isekai light novels with male protagonists, and it's a little disheartening just how few works like that there are out there. So I figured, In that case, I'll just write one myself! And that's the origin story of the novel in your hands right now. I'm beyond grateful to Fantasia Bunko for the opportunity to publish it. Thank you so much.

Anyway, I poured all my favorite elements into this title—an intensely sweet love story, a male protagonist, and a fantasy isekai setting—so I hope you'll enjoy it over a nice cup of black coffee.

*Phew.* I managed to fill out the afterword. Now it's time for me to express my thanks to everyone who helped bring this book to life.

To my editor S for your prompt responses, courteous remarks, and helpful advice—I greatly appreciate it. I would also like to thank my other editor S (yes,

a different one) for reaching out to me about this work and for your continued support despite your busy schedule—I'm beyond grateful.

Thanks are due also to nama2e for the all the incredibly beautiful illustrations featured in this book. The first time I saw a finished picture of Melza, I literally shook with emotion. You're the best—I mean it.

Next, to all those involved in the publication and release of this book, thank you.

I owe so much to everyone who has helped with and encouraged my creative endeavors over the years. Thank you.

And last but not least, I want to say thanks to you, the readers, for all your support.

I hope to see you again someday soon!

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