

I Transmigrated Then Switched Parents

With the Villain chapter 6

“How could I ever raise my voice at Lady Meiyou? The Grand Duke is returning soon, and I was merely worried that Lady Meiyou might face severe trouble if even the stand-in is ruined.”

“Hmph, you must have earned your medical license by sucking up to someone with that slick tongue of yours.”

Extinguishing the magic-wrought flame, Meiyou clicked her tongue as she looked down at Shushu lying in the bed.

“Because you, you idiot, wouldn’t wake up, you have to meet the Grand Duke without getting proper training. If you’re found out as a fake, I’ll tear you limb from limb and throw you to the pigs.”

“There is no time. I will wash the young master first and take charge of his education.”

As soon as she left, the doctor, Joseph, picked Shushu up and carried him to the bathroom. He scrubbed away the grime and odor from Shushu’s body—accumulated because he hadn’t been properly washed during their carriage transit—using fragrant soap.

Though he longed to soak his body in a tub filled with warm water, such luxury time was not granted.

Shushu was immediately dressed in silk garments and forced to follow Joseph as they toured the castle interior.

“The place we just left is the young master’s bedroom.”

Joseph detailed the castle’s layout meticulously.

With so much information flooding in at once, his head spun.

“A nanny will accompany you whenever you move around from now on, so you don’t have to memorize it all. Just get used to it with your eyes.”

Walking down a long corridor, they arrived before a door made of elephant ivory.

Since it was intricately carved with wolves, he had thought it was merely decorative, but when Joseph pushed on it with his hand, the seams between the carvings parted and it swung open.

Inside the plushly carpeted room, despite there being no one present, a massive pile of firewood burned blazes inside the fireplace.

Feeling the heat for the first time since arriving in the North, the long-sleeved shirt and trousers he wore suddenly felt stifling.

A light sheen of sweat beaded on his forehead.

A massive bed sat right in the center of the room, suggesting it belonged to someone's master bedroom, and a family portrait larger than his own height hung on the wall.

The portrait depicted a woman with pink hair and red eyes wearing an elegant off-the-shoulder dress.

That was likely the Duchess who had died giving birth to Damian.

Beside her sat a black-haired, golden-eyed Duke who looked at his wife as if he thought she was the most adorable thing in the world, and between the couple stood a child with a cold, bloodless expression, as if possessed by a murderer.

That child was undoubtedly Callix.

Callix seemed to have inherited black hair from his father and red eyes from his mother.

Damian, on the other hand, appeared to have inherited golden eyes from his father and pink hair from his mother.

Having been dragged here simply because his hair and eye color happened to match Damian's, Shushu worried whether he would actually pass for a child of the Vesper family.

The Duchess and he shared not a single resemblance.

To call the Duchess his mother was far too...

"Ugly."

Startled by the sudden voice, Shushu turned around.

"Even looking at her again, she's soooooo ugly."

The man nodded, critiquing the appearance of the Duchess in the family portrait.

To think a woman like that was an alpha—it was truly astonishing.

Rumors went around among nobles about strange drugs that supposedly turned people into high-tier genotypes, and it almost made one suspect she had found a real one and eaten it.

Otherwise, it made no sense for a mere commoner with no noble background to be born an alpha.

“Don’t go running your mouth so recklessly.”

Terrified that someone might overhear, Joseph clamped a hand over the man’s mouth.

Shoving that hand away, the man talked back with a dissatisfied expression.

“The Grand Duke hasn’t arrived yet. Honestly, you’ve got no spine.”

“You know how it is. You know how dearly the Grand Duke cherished the Duchess.”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying. What on earth was it about a Gem that made him fall head over heels for such an ugly, plain-looking woman and live like that?”

Not every noble awakened as a mage.

There were grades to their bloodlines, and the servants working within the ducal estate who came from noble families were either low-tier alphas or low-tier omegas.

Therefore, Charlotte—who had never experienced mana overload—could not understand why the Grand Duke doted so terribly on his ugly wife.

People commonly assumed the relationship between a mage and a Gem was simply that of master and slave, but it was nothing like that.

Mages became madmen who constantly begged for love from a Gem with a high matching rate, doing whatever it took to gain their attention.

They were so fiercely obsessed with their Gem that they would believe it if their Gem told them a rock was bread and eat it.

Why else would the Grand Duke keep gazing at his wife even while the family portrait was being painted, forcing the artist to paint her in profile?

The young Duke, who had awakened as a mage from a young age, was just as obsessed with the Duchess.

No matter that he had to leave for the battlefield, the mere fact that he hadn’t paid an ounce of attention to his infant child showed just how immense their affection for the Duchess truly was.

When the Vesper alphas returned, the fake Damian would undoubtedly bear the full brunt of their hatred for having “been born by killing their mother.”

“Why did you come in here? Get away. The young master is in the middle of his lessons.”

“Ah, well, I’m just trying to get a Gem ready before the Grand Duke returns.”

Charlotte clicked her tongue as she looked at the Gem hiding behind the door.

Evidently too embarrassed because there were people inside, the Gem hadn’t entered until now.

“What are you doing? Why aren’t you coming in already?”

He grabbed a low-tier Gem—who couldn’t properly purify mana—by the hair and dragged her into the bedroom.

He had wanted to supply a high-tier Gem, but because they were inherently difficult to find, this was all he had managed to scrape together.

“Yikes!”

Horried at the sight of the naked Gem, Shushu recoiled in shock.

The thought that he would have to live a life like that if his identity as a Gem were ever discovered made his vision go dark.

“Such barbarism. Young master, let’s get out of here.”

Desperate to escape a human beyond redemption, Joseph pushed Shushu by the back and hurried him out of the bedroom.

Would he really be able to survive safely here?

What if the Duke and Callix figured out he was a Gem the moment they laid eyes on him?

Struggling to calm his pounding heart, Shushu followed Joseph back into the study.

Joseph pulled a book from the bookshelf and handed it to him.

It contained sentences so complex they couldn’t even be compared to reading a restaurant menu.

“Don’t tell me you can’t read?”

“.....It’s becosh I’m still little.” (Baby talk)

“How old are you?”

“Sheven.” (Seven)

“Hmph—”

Joseph sighed, looking down at the fake young master.

Because Shushu was the size of a five-year-old Damian, he had assumed the fake young master was much younger.

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Given that he still spoke with clumsy pronunciation despite being seven, his intelligence seemed a bit lacking, too.

Of course, since he came from an inferior beta background, being stupid and physically stunted was only natural.

In any case, if he was treated as a five-year-old, this level of linguistic immaturity could be overlooked, so the fact that he was a fake probably wouldn't be found out.

“In that case, listen to my explanation while looking at the pictures.”

Until the Grand Duke arrived, Joseph conducted lessons for the fake young master regarding the Vesper family.

The Vesper family's founder was Roxanne, the younger sister of Emperor Helios.

Unsure whether his sister was friend or foe, the Emperor granted her the title of Duke and essentially exiled her to the freezing northernmost reaches of the Adamantia Empire.

The twilight period just after the sun sets, when it is neither bright nor dark, is called the “hour between dog and wolf.”

This meant that one could not distinguish whether the silhouette across the sunset hill was a pet dog or a wolf coming to harm you.

Thus, Roxanne—who had been viewed with suspicion by Emperor Helios—was given the surname Vesper, meaning “twilight.”

Even now, should something befall the Emperor and princes in the imperial capital, a member of the Vesper family, being next in line to the throne, could become emperor.

Consequently, the imperial family and the Vesper family maintained a precarious relationship, walking a tightrope high in the air while constantly alternating between coexistence and containment.

“Your father, the Duke’s name, is Maldini Vesper. You won’t have any occasion to say his name, but commit it to memory. Also, the young Duke’s name is Callix, and he is currently fifteen years old. Young master Damian is five, so make sure you don’t slip up and give the wrong age if anyone asks.”

Shushu listened to Joseph brief him on the personal details of the Grand Duke and the young Duke.

Since these were all plot points he had seen in the novel, it was information he already knew.

“Never speak to the two of them first, and don’t try to approach them acting familiar. Just stay quietly, like a ghost, until they leave for the battlefield again. Understood?”

After learning what the family crest looked like, he received brief posture training.

Then they headed to the dining hall. Joseph pointed to the very end of a dining table large enough for ten grown men to lie down on.

“The Grand Duke will sit at the very head. The heir, the young Duke, will sit right beside him. Lady Meiyu, the concubine, will sit somewhere near the middle of the table. You, as the young master with the lowest rank, should sit right here.”

Shushu pulled out a chair as big as his own frame and sat down.

The legs of the chair scraped harshly against the marble floor.

“A noble does not pull out their own chair. Wait until a servant pulls the chair out for you.”

‘What a bunch of ridiculous theatrics.’

Standing back up, Shushu sat down again in the chair Joseph slid into place. Joseph brought out a set of silver cutlery and several plates.

“There is a proper sequence to follow when dining. First, you must wet your palate with an aperitif. Given the young master’s age, fruit juice will be served. You may only begin eating and drinking after the person of highest rank gives the signal.”

The rules of etiquette to observe even just for a single meal stretched on like a string of Vienna sausages.

Use the cutlery starting from the outermost ones; never eat meat with a salad fork; never use the soup spoon for dessert—and so on.

For a Korean accustomed only to spoons and chopsticks, it was asking far too much.

Yet Shushu managed Joseph's crash-course table etiquette surprisingly well.

Had he genuinely been a seven-year-old child, he probably would have flustered and failed to use the multiple forks, spoons, and knives correctly.

Having even learned how to gracefully put down his napkin after finishing a meal, Shushu felt a tiny wave of liberation.

'It's finally over!'

Joseph, having gathered up the utensils used for the lesson, checked his pocket watch.

"It's about time for the Grand Duke to arrive. Let's go out to greet them."

The plan to run away before the Grand Duke and Callix arrived had been brutally crushed.

It was all because he had been knocked out by Meiyu and remained unconscious for days.

Leaving behind the lingering regret that he definitely could have escaped if not for that, he stepped out of the dining hall.

A red carpet was rolled out in front of the main building of the castle.

From the butler down to the administrative officials assisting the Grand Duke, maids, manservants, and attendants—everyone had lined up to welcome Grand Duke Maldini and the young Duke upon their long-awaited return.

Meiyu stood at the very front, extravagantly adorned with all sorts of jewelry.

Shushu was dragged to stand right beside her.

Glancing down at Shushu, she twisted her red lips into a strange, grotesque shape.

Even though her face was pretty, she looked as terrifying as an evil witch in a fairytale.

The soldiers stationed atop the fortress walls struck the bell.

'Clang, clang, clang, clang.'

Hearing the bell, soldiers turned the pulleys to pull open the massive castle gates.

No sooner had the gates opened than two horses galloped through at high speed.

Shushu froze as he watched the alphas approaching with thick cloaks billowing behind them.

The horse that pulled the carriage he and his mother had ridden in was nothing more than a pony compared to the mounts they rode.

Warhorses were significantly larger than ordinary horses.

Their coats gleamed with luster, and with every stride, their large, solid thigh muscles bulged as ruggedly as a stubborn man's brow.

When Callix pulled back on the reins, his horse reared up, lifting its front hooves high.

Shushu thought the horse was so massive it blocked out the sun.

Callix, who handled such a beast with absolute ease, was so huge that it was hard to believe he was a middle schooler.

In a word, he was utterly overwhelmed by him.

Leaping lightly down from his horse, Callix looked down at Shushu.

Underneath his chilling gaze, Shushu shivered as if feeling a sudden chill.

Even though Callix didn't know he was a fake younger brother, the way he looked at him like a complete stranger—or worse than that—made Shushu's hands and feet go cold.

The servants simultaneously bowed at the waist toward Callix, who exuded an extraordinary majesty.

"Glory to the great Vesper!"

Standing there dumbfounded, Shushu was able to bow his waist a beat late only because Meiyu pressed down on his back.

The Duke, who had arrived just after Callix, dismounted his horse.

Using the riding crop in his hand, he hooked Shushu's chin upward to lift his face.

"Is this Damian?"

"Yes, Your Grace."

Putting on a soft voice that would have won her an acting award, she completely transformed.

“Damian, greet your father.”

“.....Hell-lo.” (Baby talk)

His tongue felt stiffer than usual, and the words wouldn’t come out properly.

After staring hard at Shushu for a good long while, the Duke flicked his cloak and strode rapidly down the red carpet into the main building.

Callix, too, moved his combat-booted feet and followed closely in his father’s footsteps.

The moment they passed, the welcoming servants let out a massive sigh of relief, their tense shoulders slumping.

“Haa, as expected, ultra-dominant alphas are just on another level.”

“It feels like I just had an audience with a god.”

“Not like a god. He is a living god. He’s a grand archmage wielding the power of the gods, after all.”

“Quiet. Quiet. While the Grand Duke and the young Duke are staying, let’s serve them impeccably. Everyone, back to your posts.”

The butler clapped his hands to end the servants’ chatter.

As the gathered servants scattered in all directions, Callix—whom Shushu had thought had already left—used his long legs to stride right up to him.

Pulling off his leather gloves, he poked Shushu’s cheek with his bare hand.

‘What is this?’

“Don’t go getting any delusional ideas just because I poked your cheek and thought you were cute.”

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Callix continued to poke the cheek of the younger brother he was seeing for the first time since infancy.

His right cheek, gently rounded with baby fat, glowed with a fresh, pinkish hue.

When poked, the resilient flesh quickly sprang right back to its original shape.

Looking up at him with large, round eyes, his younger brother seemed to wonder why on earth he was acting like this.

Yet Callix himself had no idea why he was doing such a thing, either.

Had his mind completely snapped because of his rampaging mana?

The ferocious mana that had always clawed at his internal organs like a beast's talons was uncharacteristically calm.

Even while wondering why this was happening, he couldn't tear his finger away from the child's cheek, which was as radiant as spring blossoms.

It was a truly insane thought, but the illusion arose that the very moment he pulled his finger away, he might die.

Having had his cheek poked repeatedly for a long while, Damian finally turned his head away and cupped his own cheek with his hands, as if it hurt.

'To think a person's hand could be that small.'

Even though Callix had once been a child himself, he found his young brother strangely fascinating.

"Young Duke, let us escort you inside."

His squire, who served as a human shield on the battlefield, looked perplexed to see Callix lagging behind the Duke and urged him forward.

Callix withdrew his index finger, from which tiny sparks seemed to dance.

"Let's go inside."

He decided to attribute the reason for his inexplicable behavior to the fact that he hadn't slept properly for a month, had fought grueling battles, and had coughed up blood dozens of times due to mana overload.

His physical condition was that poor.

Callix had awakened as a mage at the age of four; the problem was that his power spanned a terrifying nine circles, much like when Emperor Helios had received blessings from multiple gods.

When his mother was alive, he could receive her divine blessing, but she had passed away while giving birth to Damian.

Having lost his beloved Gem, the Duke had lost his reason and tried to kill the infant.

Although Callix had also resented his younger brother, killing him wouldn't bring their mother back, so he had persuaded his father and left for the battlefield.

While that might have been a fortunate turn of events for Damian, it had been a disastrous choice for Callix.

Though there were dozens of Gems for mages at the garrison base, not a single one of them could stop his mana from rampaging.

Figuring that merely holding hands and hugging wouldn't be enough, he had even tried kissing a Gem, only to be overcome with nausea.

No matter how hard he tried, his aversion to Gems wouldn't vanish, and eventually, failing to anticipate that the war with the Solemio Empire would drag on for so long, he had forced himself to use magic excessively.

His body, unable to endure it, had completely broken down, leaving him with no choice but to return to the North.

The reason the Adamantia Empire had gone to war was due to the severe shortage of Gems.

When the imperial family found no Gems domestically, they had dispatched a survey team to search abroad.

They discovered that Gems who had fled the Adamantia Empire had given birth to children abroad, and those children had been born as Gems.

They attempted to bring them back to the mainland, but the Solemio Empire refused.

That being the case, they had no choice but to bring the Gems back by force.

The imperial family had dispatched troops to retrieve the Gems, but in the process, battles broke out with the Solemio Empire's soldiers.

That war had already been dragging on for five years.

Arriving at the dining hall behind his squire, Callix bowed his waist in greeting to the Duke and took his seat beside him. He wondered if his father felt nothing upon seeing that child.

Over and over, the image of pink hair kept floating into his mind, whispering softly to hurry and go fetch him.

Hitting his noisy head hard with his hand fortunately managed to quiet it down.

“Cal, are you still hearing auditory hallucinations?”

“Yes, regrettably.”

“Haa. This is a major problem. Where on earth are we going to find your jewel?”

“I believe that someday I, too, will meet a jewel just like Mother, just as you did, Father.”

“Yes, Sierra will pray for you from the heavens. Cal, you mustn’t lose hope.”

Maldini tightly grasped his son’s hand. He was terrified that Callix might die from mana overload.

Thanks to being born with the robust physique of an ultra-dominant alpha, he thankfully healed his own injured body whenever his mana rampaged, but there was a limit to that, too.

If they didn’t find a Gem with a high matching rate for Callix, he would soon die.

“Charlotte says she’s secured a Gem for now. She’s a lower-tier Gem, but you should put out the immediate fire first.”

“Thank you for your consideration, Your Grace.”

True to great nobility, they finished their meal with flawless etiquette.

In place of the Grand Duke, Callix headed toward the bedroom.

Arriving there, he clicked his tongue at the Gem shivering naked before him.

Even without making physical contact, he had a gut feeling that his matching rate with this wretch wouldn’t align.

“Crawl over here.”

The Gem cowered in fear of Callix, who was younger than her, and trembled violently.

Superimposing the Gem before him with the pink-haired child, Callix felt a wave of dizziness and pressed a hand to his forehead.

In an instant, his vision blurred, plunging him into total darkness.

‘This is extremely dangerous.’

He hurriedly grabbed the lower-tier Gem’s hand.

Just as he expected, because the matching rate was low, blood surged up and spiked in his throat.

“Uwaaaah!”

Terrified out of her wits, the frightened Gem jerked her hand away from his grip.

The mage’s eyes were turning bloodshot.

This was the precursor to an outright rampage.

If things continued this way, she would either be brutally murdered by a mage lacking divine blessing or die caught up in the exploding mana.

The Gem fled, abandoning the mage.

Fortunately, because the act of receiving a divine blessing inherently involved sexual elements, there were no guards stationed nearby.

Driven by the absolute necessity to get as far away as possible, the Gem was crawling away on weakened legs when a pink-haired child eating chocolate chip cookies suddenly appeared before her.

“Hurry and hide!”

Blinking his large eyes, the child turned around and ran away alongside her.

The door flew wide open, and Callix, his pupils completely unfocused, sprinted out.

A mage who had lost consciousness operated purely on instinct.

He snatched up his fleeing Gem and pulled her tightly into a tight embrace.

“Found you, my jewel.”

‘Hiss. Hiss.’

Every time he exhaled ragged breaths, Callix’s body—which had been wounded as if slashed by sharp blades due to the rampaging mana—healed itself.

Shushu dangled his legs in midair, struggling to break free, but Callix’s arms wrapped around him as relentlessly as wild vines, leaving him completely unable to move.

The Gem prepared by the ducal estate had already fled far away.

Convinced that his identity as a fake younger brother had finally been discovered, Shushu burst into tears.

“Sob. Hnngh. Hic.”

Callix licked away the tears streaming down Shushu’s rosy cheeks with his tongue, like a hound comforting its master.

Startled, Shushu widened his eyes, which shone like amber.

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After holding Shushu tightly like that for a long while, Callix collapsed right on the spot.

Fortunately, because he fell backward, Shushu didn’t get hurt at all.

“Hey! Stop it! Let me go.”

The muscular, chain-hardened arms refused to release him.

Struggling and fussing, Shushu barely managed to wriggle his way out of Callix’s embrace.

What if Callix regained his senses and came looking for him to drag him to the guillotine just like in the original novel?

He was so terrified, and he missed his mother terribly.

He had to run away immediately.

Fortunately, since not a single person in the castle paid him any mind, it seemed he would be able to leave easily.

Shushu wandered around the bedroom looking for anything of value, but finding nothing, he simply left the bedroom empty-handed.

Though he occasionally crossed paths with passing attendants in the corridor, they walked right past him with indifferent eyes.

Having seen which direction the castle gates lay while welcoming the Grand Duke and Callix, Shushu headed straight for that spot.

“Eh? Pink hair?”

“Aren’t you young master Damian? Where are you going?”

“Jush a lil’ shroll.” (Just a little stroll)

“Get inside. It’s dangerous out here alone.”

“Hey, someone take the young master back to his room.”

The guards watching the gates called out to another colleague.

Shushu stamped his feet in anxiety, knowing he had to escape before Callix woke up.

Just in case, he pulled a bribe out of his trouser pocket.

The guard gazed blankly down at the chocolate chip cookie.

“What is this?”

“A bribe.”

“Even so, it’s a no.”

Thinking of his own child back home, the guard irreverently patted the young master’s pink hair.

Despite supposedly bearing the ruthless bloodline of the Vespers, Damian had hair as lovely as cotton candy and delicate, well-defined features—a remarkably cute child.

When such a child wanted to go play outside and held out a chocolate chip cookie as a bribe, the guard simply couldn’t resist patting his head.

Struggling and kicking as he protested that he didn’t want to go back, Shushu was ultimately hoisted onto the guard’s back and carried back to his bedroom.

‘Sob, am I going to die now?’

Pulling the blanket up over the very top of his head, he cried himself to sleep.

After some time passed, waking up, Shushu kicked off the stifling blanket, deeply self-reprimanding for how he could possibly fall asleep during such a moment of crisis.

Judging by how pitch-black it was outside the window, dawn must have already arrived.

‘Why is it strangely quiet?’

Right, in the original novel, Damian's stand-in was only killed after turning twenty.

Therefore, what happened today was nothing.

The original novel was written the way it was for a reason, wasn't it?

"Phew, I survived death. I can live for another 13 years."

With his lifespan extended from seven years old to twenty, Shushu headed into the bathroom to wash his face, which was swollen and puffy from crying.

Drawing warm water in the bathtub and soaking in a half-bath made him feel like he was finally alive.

Being a noble certainly had its perks.

To live a life where warm water simply poured out just by turning a tap! Commoners had to trek all the way to the well just to fetch water.

Yet it made his heart ache to think that while he was living such a luxurious life, his mother was still struggling in a cramped room.

'When will I be able to escape on my own strength? I can change my destiny, right?'

Fortunately, the guards had just written him off as young and let it slide this time, but next time they would definitely report to a superior that the second young master had tried to run away.

And once Meiyu found out about that, she would never let him off.

The mere thought of her sent a cold shiver down his spine, causing his shoulders to shudder violently.

Climbing out of the bathtub, having no other clothes to change into, Shushu put back on the outfit he had worn earlier.

With water dripping steadily from his wet hair, he stepped out of the bedroom.

Confirming there were no servants in the corridor, Shushu walked on tiptoe and scurried forward swiftly.

Since no one had bothered to prepare his meals, he had to forage for himself.

Arriving in the dark kitchen, Shushu was dismayed to find that, unlike earlier, no prepared food was sitting out on the prep counters.

The chefs must have cleaned everything thoroughly as they left for the night.

He rummaged through wooden stacks piled in a corner of the kitchen.

There were dirt-caked potatoes and carrots, looking as though they had just been dug up from the fields, and eggs resting upon straw.

Figuring the carrots would at least be edible, he grabbed one.

Clutching a carrot the size of his own forearm, Shushu scurried straight back to his bedroom.

Sitting in the bathroom, he washed the carrot clean and gnawed away at the tough vegetable with his front teeth like a rabbit.

“I’m so hungry.”

He missed his mother.

“Sob.”

‘He who has not eaten a tear-soaked carrot cannot discourse on life.’

Coining a grand aphorism as though he were a great philosopher, Shushu felt a wave of dizziness wash over him and collapsed onto the bed.

Perhaps because he had been starving for so long, he didn’t even have the energy left to eat.

He figured he needed to rest a little.

Clutching the carrot tightly to his chest lest someone steal it, he closed his eyes.

In his dream, his mother had baked a mountain of bread and handed it to him, telling him to eat.

[My baby, aren’t you hungry?]

Tears welled up and rolled down the corners of the sleeping Shushu’s eyes.

Regaining consciousness in the corridor, Callix felt in peak condition thanks to getting a solid night’s sleep for the first time in forever.

His entire body should have been shredded to ribbons by the rampaging mana and soaked in blood, but for some reason, though a few specks of blood stained his clothes, his garments were otherwise spotless.

It had been a very long time since he felt this refreshed and pleasant.

“Could it possibly be thanks to that Gem?”

He remembered up to the point where he grabbed the naked Gem’s hand in the Duke’s bedroom. After that, his memories had completely blanked out.

He had returned to the Duke’s bedroom to look for the Gem, but no presence of anyone else could be felt.

Moreover, the bedsheets were ironed crisp and flat by a servant, showing no signs of having been used. Yet how could this be?

“As though she were my name.”

‘Could my name have manifested?’

Hurriedly entering the bathroom, Callix stripped off his clothes.

He reflected his body in the mirror and inspected it thoroughly, but no one’s name appeared like a tattoo.

Still, he wasn’t disappointed.

He didn’t doubt for a second that that Gem would turn out to be his name.

Nobody knew when or how a name would manifest.

Therefore, all he had to do was wait for “that Gem’s” name to appear.

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Just by holding hands, that Gem had stabilized his rampaging mana. She was his jewel.

Dressing once more, the moment Callix stepped out of the bedroom, he walked down the corridor at a near-sprint.

He issued an order to a passing servant to bring yesterday’s Gem back to him.

Arriving in his office, he waited for Charlotte while reading through the stack of invitations piled on his desk.

Because he felt like he would soon meet his jewel, the contents of the invitations failed to register properly in his mind.

Thus, twirling a fountain pen between his fingers, he stared fixedly toward the door.

Without even realizing it, he held his breath and kept an anxious watch on the office door.

The moment a knock sounded, Callix instinctively leaped up from his chair, only to force himself back down out of a firm resolve to maintain his dignity.

“Young Duke, it is Charlotte.”

“Come in.”

A young man stood behind a bowing Charlotte.

Callix strode right up to the Gem and clasped her hands together.

Yet, as if yesterday’s experience had all been a dream, not a single sensation stirred.

“By any chance, were there any other Gems besides this one?”

“No, I was only able to secure this one. I am terribly sorry.”

It was a lie. Yesterday, Callix had undoubtedly met his Gem.

“There were definitely other Gems. I warn you, if you are hiding him, I will not let you off—tell me the truth.”

Terrified to see the young Duke draw the sword at his waist, Charlotte dropped straight to his knees.

“It’s the truth! Young Duke, why would I ever lie to you? If you’re angry because I only managed to secure this one, I will definitely find another Gem for you.”

Given how profusely he was sweating as he begged, Charlotte didn’t seem to be lying.

The Gem moistened her dry lips, looking as though she had something she wanted to say. Noticing that shift, Callix widened his eyes.

“You... you saw it yesterday, didn’t you? My Gem. Where is he?”

“By any chance... do you not remember what happened yesterday?”

“That’s right. So if you don’t want to die, talk.”

Callix leveled the edge of his blade right against the Gem’s throat.

Terrified, the Gem shook in her boots yet stubbornly kept her mouth shut.

“If you give me a travel pass, I will tell you who that Gem is. Otherwise, I can never tell you. Without my help, Young Duke, you will undoubtedly never be able to figure out if he is your Gem or not.”

“You insolent wretch! How dare you threaten the Young Duke?! Hurry up and tell him who it is!”

Kneeling on the floor, Charlotte raised his voice with veins bulging furiously at his neck.

Callix stared hard at the Gem for a long moment.

The Gem’s Adam’s apple bobbed up and down nervously under the extreme tension.

Withdrawing his sword, he accepted the bargain.

“First, swear by the name of Vesper.”

“I swear by the name of Vesper to grant you a travel pass.”

Believing that she could finally escape the hellish Adamantia Empire and live like a human being, the strength drained from the Gem’s legs, causing her to collapse right onto the spot.

Remembering the harrowing hardships she had suffered until now, she wept softly, then pulled herself together and snapped her head up.

“It was a pink-haired child. It’s a rare hair color, so you shouldn’t have any trouble finding him.”

His younger brother was his Gem.

The moment he learned that fact, Callix severed Charlotte’s neck.

Blood fountained high into the air from the cleanly severed neck.

Screaming in terror, the Gem dropped to her knees, pressed her palms together, and begged frantically for her life.

Pulling a handkerchief from his jacket, he wiped the blood splattered across his face and tossed the soiled handkerchief onto the floor.

An individual so wealthy that even items costing the equivalent of a commoner family's monthly living expenses could be used once and casually discarded.

The Gem felt sheer terror toward the noble boy living in a world she could never even begin to imagine.

"Spare me, please, please spare me, Young Duke. Didn't you make a promise with me?"

"Ah, that's right. I did say I would give you a travel pass."

Flipping over a document filled with writing on his desk, he swiftly and elegantly scribbled words onto the blank reverse side.

Hope blossomed in the Gem's eyes as she saw it.

Callix tossed the paper down to the Gem.

"Farewell."

He could not afford to keep alive anyone who knew a secret that absolutely must not be known by a single soul.

Severing even the Gem's neck, he issued an order to the guards stationed outside his office.

"I have executed a criminal guilty of high treason. See to the disposal of the body."

"Yes, Young Duke."

Having witnessed the corpse, the guards went about their business with the same casual calm as maids coming to change bedsheets.

Watching to ensure they carried out their work properly, Callix turned on his heel.

'Damian. It looks like we're going to be extremely affectionate brothers from now on.'

Radiant with the joy of finally having found his jewel, the mage's red eyes gleamed with madness.

The older brother's footsteps heading toward his younger brother were brimming with fluttering excitement.

Shushu woke up to a loud, rumbling growl from his stomach.

He was so starved he couldn't even lift a single finger.

Desperate to survive somehow, he shoved the carrot he was holding into his mouth and chewed.

"Ugh."

This wasn't enough to pull him out of his hypoglycemic state.

As his consciousness flickered in and out, sweet water flowed into his mouth, and he eagerly gulped it down.

Somehow, Callix had laid him across his own lap and was feeding him sugar water with a spoon.

"Damian, are you alright?"

Shushu blinked his large eyes, utterly unable to make sense of the current situation.

When a handsome alpha smiled with his eyes gently curved, the world felt as though it were brightening up.

The person who had treated him like a pebble rolling on the side of the road during their first meeting was suddenly acting affectionate—he must be plotting something.

Naturally, he's figured out I'm a Gem, right?

Yet why was his reaction different from the original novel?

Could it be because the timing of discovering he was a Gem had changed?

Right now, that was the only thing different from the original story.

That tiny change—being found out as his Gem long before his name manifested—seemed to have triggered a massive shift, much like a butterfly flapping its wings over the ocean and creating a storm.

What on earth was this guy planning by coming to find him?

Surely he didn't intend to treat the person he believed to be his younger brother as his Gem, did he?

That would be completely insane.

It was a disgrace to the family, a monstrous taboo worthy of being stripped of his heirship and chased out by the Duke.

In any case, right now he had to play the part of a clueless five-year-old Damian.

“Big bro?”

“That’s right, I’m your older brother. My little brother, did you sleep well?”

Seeing him smile with that gorgeous face at the end of every sentence made him look utterly shady.

Yet even though his brain warned him that he needed to be on guard, whenever he looked at Callix, he found himself getting dizzy and spacing out.

Being handsome was truly dangerous.

“Damian, you almost had a terrible mishap. This won’t do at all. We need a nanny to look after you.”

“No. I like bein’ alone.” (Baby talk)

“What kind of nonsense is that? How is a five-year-old supposed to manage entirely on their own? You need someone to serve you meals on time, dress you, and wash you.”

Firmly declaring this, Callix scooped Shushu up into his arms.

His eye level suddenly shot up as if he were riding a theme park ride soaring into the sky.

Terrified of falling, Shushu wrapped both arms around Callix’s neck.