# The Academy's Prodigy Wants to Defeat the Genius - 10

“…It doesn’t seem like just my imagination. That girl is more perceptive than she looks. She might not have noticed us directly, but she could’ve sensed our presence.”

“Aren’t you being overly cautious?”

The woman questioned the man’s words.

It could have been a coincidence—after all, they were under an invisibility spell.

“There’s a saying that you can never be too careful. Besides, that girl is a Cascata. It’s better to be wary.”

“Well, does it really matter?”

The woman shrugged.

She didn’t quite understand why the man was so concerned.

Being cautious was fine, and since they were operating in the heart of the Empire’s stronghold, it made sense to be careful, but was this level of caution truly necessary?

“In any case, our target isn’t that Cascata girl. There was no mention of her from our superior. All we need to do is deal with the target. Since they’re staying in the dormitory, we’ll have to act within the Academy grounds.”

“…Hmm.”

As the man hesitated, the woman let out a small scoff.

This was overthinking—at least, that’s what she believed.

“You’re hesitant to act within the Academy because of that Cascata girl, aren’t you?”

“…She’s related to our superior, and the Council has strictly forbidden the use of magic beyond invisibility within the Academy. Don’t even think about it.”

“It’s not just some reckless thought. We just need to lure the target outside the Academy. Leave it to me—I’ll handle it.”

Without waiting for his response, the woman leaped from the bell tower.

The man simply watched her leave, offering no objections.

‘I still couldn’t get any closer to Carla today. I just want things to go back to how they used to be…’

Ivan walked back to the dormitory, lost in thought after parting ways with Carla.

Ten years ago, they had been so close. He still couldn’t quite grasp why Carla—Carlo, back then—hated him so much. But at the very least, he had figured out her goal, so that in itself was some kind of progress.

‘At some point, we’ll have a real fight. But if I deliberately lose, she’ll be furious, and if I win fair and square, she’ll get mad that that’s all I’ve got.’

Ivan felt a little bad, but he was certain he wouldn’t lose to Carla.

After all, magic wasn’t just about how much mana you had.

Mana was finite. What mattered was how well you used it, how efficiently you deployed it. In that regard, Ivan was confident he surpassed Carla by a considerable margin.

‘Besides, if I lose, it would disappoint her…’

That wouldn’t do either.

But staying on bad terms with Carla like this wasn’t an option either.

‘What should I do? Should I lose on purpose without making it obvious? But even that might be tricky…’

At that moment, he heard what sounded like a scream in the distance.

Snapped out of his thoughts, Ivan turned sharply toward the sound. Thick, black smoke was billowing up into the air.

“A fire?!”

Without hesitation, Ivan sprinted toward the source.

To make matters worse, the smoke was coming from the direction of his dormitory. By the time he arrived, other students had already evacuated and were standing outside, anxiously watching.

“Regina, what’s going on?”

He rushed over to the silver-haired girl, who turned to him with a startled expression before grabbing his hand.

“Ivan! Thank goodness—you weren’t inside!”

“Huh? Yeah, I was just on my way back. Why?”

“Your room—it caught fire! I was looking everywhere for you!”

“Ivan!”

Emil and even Liam ran up to him.

Their faces, initially tense with worry, eased with relief upon seeing him safe. But Ivan simply looked up at the smoke pouring out of his room’s window, letting out a deep sigh.

“Ivan.”

A voice from behind made him turn around.

It was the dormitory warden.

With her usual sharp features, she pressed her fingers against her temple and spoke in a concerned tone.

“Good thing the fire started while you were outside. Apparently, the cleaning staff knocked over a lantern in your room.”

“Oh… I see.”

“Fortunately, it happened before everyone returned for the day. It could have been much worse.”

“Yeah, I suppose…”

“The cleaner will be coming to apologize soon.”

Ivan could tell from her hesitancy what she was getting at.

It wasn’t as if the fire had been started on purpose.

Besides, there was nothing particularly valuable in his room, so there wasn’t much damage to be upset over.

“It’s fine. As long as no one got hurt, that’s all that matters. It wasn’t intentional.”

“…I appreciate your understanding.”

With that, the warden left to handle the situation, and Ivan watched her go before glancing back up at the window of his scorched room.

“Hey, is there a fire? It looks like it’s coming from the East Dormitory.”

For some reason, he was being called on a lot today.

Turning around, he found himself face-to-face with a black-haired girl watching him with a curious expression.

“Wait, is that Emil’s room? No, wait, is it yours?”

“No, it’s mine.”

“Oh… I see, that’s unfortunate. Your room caught fire, huh?”

“Do you know Emil?”

The girl nodded.

“I’m Ivan. Ivan Contadino, we saw each other earlier, right?”

“Yes, I’m Kiara.”

“Nice to meet you, Kiara. Well, as long as no one got hurt—hmm?”

While speaking to Kiara, Ivan suddenly turned his head.

There had been something—some presence nearby.

Something, or rather, someone had been right there beside him—

Yet when he looked, there was nothing.

"Good... I'm satisfied. I like this a lot."

Standing beneath the cold, cascading water, Carla clenched both fists with a smile of contentment.

The endless surge of mana coursing through her body—

A force that harmonized perfectly with her lightning magic, so much so that it could only be described as flawless.

Even after class had ended, Carla had remained in the training grounds, repeating her drills over and over.

Despite its immense power and destructive capability, lightning magic was not widely practiced.

The reason was simple—it was incredibly difficult to control due to its unruly and overwhelming nature.

The Cascata family had been mastering lightning magic for generations, which gave them an advantage over other magicians, yet even so, lightning often escaped their control.

The only way to tame it was relentless training.

That was the only path to growth in lightning magic,

And in that regard, Carla had never allowed herself even a moment of laziness.

Even now, after finishing her training, she stepped into the showers attached to the training grounds, cooling herself down before changing and stepping outside.

It was about time to head home.

Carla made her way toward the carriage station, where her transport would be waiting.

'What should I do with this hair?'

There were countless inconveniences.

Even after showering, her hair took ages to dry.

Walking in the night air like this left her feeling chilled.

And then there was the sensation of her chest bouncing with each step—

A feeling she had yet to fully adjust to.

Perhaps because of that, even her shoulders felt a little stiff.

'Still, my mana has grown stronger,

So I suppose these little things are a small price to pay.

Hmm?'

Carla narrowed her eyes as a familiar figure came into view.

At the carriage station, there was a carriage bearing the Cascata family’s crest.

Behind it, another carriage was parked—one bearing the academy’s insignia.

And boarding that carriage was—

'Ivan.'

Why was that guy getting into an academy carriage?

Curiosity flashed through her mind for a brief moment, but Carla quickly dismissed it.

What did it matter?

A mere commoner like him—

He was probably summoned by someone important.

With that, she walked past the academy’s carriage and boarded the one belonging to the Cascata family.

As she passed by, her gaze met Ivan’s.

He seemed about to say something,

But Carla ignored him entirely.

"Lady, shall we depart?"

"Yeah, let’s go."

Carla leaned back into the cushioned seat, closed her eyes, and felt the carriage begin to move.

She had intended to take a short nap—

But that didn’t last long.

How much time had passed?

Carla’s eyes snapped open.

"Hey."

"Yes, my lady?"

"Our carriage… that academy carriage is following us, isn’t it?"

The coachman hesitated, glancing back several times before answering cautiously.

"It does appear that way. Perhaps it’s headed to the Cascata estate?"

"You’ve got to be kidding me..."

Grinding her teeth, Carla roughly yanked the carriage window open and leaned out.

"Hey! Ivan! Stop following me!"

A flustered voice called back from the academy’s carriage.

"I-It's not that we're following you! Young Lord Ivan’s dormitory caught fire, so—! We are not following! We are heading outside the academy!"

'A fire?'

A strange thought crossed Carla’s mind.

Had he been hurt?

If he was injured, she wouldn’t be able to have a proper match with him—

But she had just seen him earlier, and he had looked perfectly fine, so that was unlikely.

"Hmph."

The realization of what she had just thought—

That she had worried about Ivan—

Made her scoff at herself in irritation.

She was just about to close the window when—

BOOM!

An explosion erupted near the wheels of Ivan’s carriage.

The side of the carriage blew apart.

The horses broke free from their harnesses and collapsed and the entire vehicle overturned.

Carla saw everything.

Every moment burned into her retinas.

Slow.

So agonizingly slow.

"Stop! Stop the carriage!"

At Carla’s sharp command, the coachman immediately pulled the reins, bringing the carriage to a halt.

Without hesitation, she jumped down.

The coachman had disappeared without a trace and not far away, two horses were sprawled on the ground, struggling to get back up.

"Ivan! Ivaaaaan!"

Carla was about to rush toward the overturned carriage, but then she froze.

Standing in front of the wreckage were two figures.

At a single glance, she could tell.

They were not here with good intentions.

No one with good intentions would blow up a carriage like that.

One was a man with only one eye.

The other was a woman whose crimson eyes glowed with an eerie sheen.

Even if Carla tried to see them in a positive light,

It was impossible.

"...You two."

She recognized them.

The two figures she had seen atop the bell tower at midday.

Her lips curled into a grimace and she slowly clenched her fists.

"So, it really wasn’t just my imagination. You were the ones loitering around the bell tower."

The one-eyed man let out an amused hum, rubbing his chin as he studied her.

"Ahh... So you really did notice us back then? Impressive. As expected of a Cascata."

"...You know I’m a Cascata, and yet you still did this? Right in front of me?"

"Does it matter? It’s not like we harmed a Cascata. No reason for you to care about a commoner like this one."

She made no move.

But that would change.

Because Carla knew, if anyone was going to take Ivan down,

It had to be her.

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Hesitation always leads to loss.

Carla grabbed the back of the man's head and, without a moment's hesitation, slammed his face into the ground.

Boom!

With a loud crash, the man's face collided with the ground, but Carla didn't stop there. She repeatedly slammed his face down three or four more times.

Bang, bang, bang...

The resounding noise echoed as she finally lifted his bloodied face.

"One down."

The man's eyes rolled back, his front teeth completely shattered, and his face covered in blood. Tossing him aside, she turned to glare at the red-eyed woman.

"You, you..."

Before the woman could say anything, she jerked her head back.

Just barely, by a hair’s breadth, Carla's kick whooshed past the woman’s face, leaving only a gust of wind.

The woman lost her grip on Ivan’s collar and staggered back a few steps before quickly forming a hand seal again.

"Too slow, pathetic."

Carla's voice, almost a whisper, accompanied a kick that landed deep—deep into the woman’s abdomen.

"Kugh!" The woman coughed up spit and rolled across the ground, collapsing in a heap.

"Utterly ridiculous."

Carla spat on the ground and approached the woman.

The woman lay sprawled, her tongue sticking out slightly. Carla grabbed her by the ankle and dragged her back to where the man lay. Clicking her tongue as she looked down at Ivan, who was still unconscious, she muttered, "Idiot."

She shoved Ivan to the side and turned both attackers face-down, staring down at them in thought.

There was nothing more she could do here. It would be best to load them onto Cascata's carriage and take them back to the academy.

‘They need to be restrained…’

The best way was to make sure they couldn't move their limbs.

With that thought, Carla lifted her foot and methodically stomped on the man's wrists and ankles, breaking them one by one.

A sickening crack echoed as bones snapped. The man groaned in pain but remained unconscious. Carla then turned to the woman to do the same.

And then—

Lying face down, the woman turned her head fully backward to grin at her.

"If you want to take me, you’d better hurry. You’d best find me quickly."

As she spoke, her red eyes burned an even deeper crimson.

Sensing danger, Carla instinctively leaped back.

At the same moment, a massive explosion erupted.

"A suicide attack?"

The man who had been lying beside her was now a gruesome mess, his body thrown apart by the explosion. Only scattered debris bore witness to the blast.

"What the hell are these people..."

Carla clicked her tongue and turned back to Ivan.

He was just regaining consciousness, shaking his head as he pushed himself up. Carla looked down at him with a look of utter disdain.

"...What the... What happened? Carla? Why are you here?"

Seeing his clueless expression only irritated her more.

An ambush targeting the carriage.

And yet, Ivan, completely oblivious, was asking what had happened. It made Carla’s blood boil.

"You idiot. Just because you're strong, does that mean you have to be this stupid? Look around you, it’s an ambush. Are you seriously asking me what happened? Dumbass."

Ivan looked up at Carla, bewildered.

The surroundings were a disaster. The explosion had turned the area into a wreck.

An attack on the academy’s carriage—what the hell…

"To think you almost died here, you idiot. You’re utterly pathetic."

Her words were sharper and colder than usual, her choice of phrasing harsh.

Listening to her scolding, Ivan realized she wasn't just berating him as usual. She was genuinely furious.

"Uh… sorry."

After all, from his perspective, Carla had just saved his life.

He had been inside the carriage when the sudden explosion knocked him out. If things had gone just slightly differently…

"Idiot. You claim to be strong, yet you can’t even handle this? What’s the point of learning magic if you can’t even react? Did you study magic thinking it would give you extra lives? If not, then why the hell are you even learning it?"

"……"

Ivan had no response. He could only listen to her scolding in silence.

If he at least tried to argue, it might have been better, but he just stood there, speechless. Even Carla couldn’t continue berating him further. After all, he had been a victim in this attack, too.

"...It’s a long story. Anyway, enough explanations. And… wait."

Carla’s eyes widened as she saw someone limping toward them.

The carriage driver—whom she had assumed had been completely obliterated by the explosion—was returning.

"So he survived after all."

"Ah, y-yes... Thanks to you, miss."

"You’re injured, but at least you’re alive. That’s better than being dead. The carriage is ruined, though… Ivan, do you know any magic to fix it?"

"I don’t even know if such a spell exists."

"Useless, waste of circuits."

Carla paused to think.

Someone needed to report this ambush to the academy, and the coachman could handle that. They hadn't traveled far from the academy yet, so he should be able to make it back.

That meant she’d have to take Ivan in the same carriage with her.

And that idea… she did not like.

Her near one-sided inferiority complex toward Ivan made her loathe the idea of sharing a carriage with him.

"…Fine, take this guy and report the ambush to the academy. They’ll handle the aftermath. One of the attackers has broken limbs, so he won’t resist. Ivan, where were you heading?"

"Home, my dorm room caught fire."

"…Fire?"

Something felt off.

—It would be absurd for the great Cascata to care about a mere commoner. Just pretend you didn’t see anything.

Someone had targeted Ivan.

Could the fire in his dorm be connected?

But he was just a commoner.

Sure, maybe he had a little more talent—just a bit more than Carla herself—but still, just a commoner.

"Just go back to the academy."

The coachman, realizing he’d have to walk back to the academy with an injured leg while dragging a full-grown man, looked devastated.

But Carla didn’t care about such things. She was a noble. She gave orders and expected results.

"Ivan… I’d rather not have you in my carriage. Can’t you just fly there with Wind Magic?"

That was… a bit too blunt.

Ivan hesitated before answering.

"I probably could, but I’d run out of mana… It might affect tomorrow’s classes."

"Worrying about salt drying in the ocean, ridiculous."

She turned and strode toward Cascata’s carriage.

Without hesitation, she opened the door and climbed in. A moment later, she poked her head out and shouted,

"Are you coming or not?! If not, I’m leaving without you!"

"S-Sorry! I’m coming now!"

The carriage was unnecessarily large for just one person.

Ivan looked around the interior of the carriage, lost in thought.

Carla, seemingly accustomed to it, rested her chin on her hand and gazed out the window without any reaction, whereas Ivan, feeling restless, fidgeted and glanced around anxiously.

Still, it had been a while since the two of them were alone together.

Taking this opportunity, Ivan mustered the courage to speak to Carla.

"...Thanks for earlier, Carla."

But Carla didn’t respond.

Not only did she remain silent, but she didn’t even glance in his direction.

‘Is it still too soon to go back to how things used to be?’

Carla had saved him from what could have been a disastrous situation, so he had hoped the tension between them had eased somewhat.

"Uh, how was class today?"

At the mention of class, Carla rolled her eyes to look at Ivan.

Her lips parted slightly as if to say something, but instead, she closed her eyes and let out a quiet sigh.

"...It was my first class today. It finally ended, and after everything that happened, don't make me waste my energy thinking about that."

"R-right? Sorry."

Still, the fact that Carla had saved him meant she didn’t completely hate him.

That was, at least, somewhat reassuring.

As Ivan mulled over this thought, the carriage arrived at a fork in the road.

To the left was a path leading to a small village within the Cascata territory, and to the right was the direction of the mansion.

As the carriage came to a stop, Carla spoke to Ivan.

"Get off here, I'll come whenever I feel like it tomorrow morning. If you're not in front of your house by then, I'll leave you behind."

"Oh, got it."

Ivan stepped out of the carriage and waved at Carla with a smile.

Carla, watching him, didn’t smile back, but to Ivan, it seemed like she at least acknowledged his farewell with her gaze.

Then, the carriage quietly took the right path and disappeared into the distance.

Late at night.

Carla lay in bed, still wearing the pajamas she had worn as a man.

It wasn’t that she couldn’t sleep, but the ambush earlier had been more than enough to dredge up old, terrible memories.

Lying there with her eyes closed, she sought sleep.

Soon, sleep pulled her into its depths, slowly and surely.

# The Academy's Prodigy Wants to Defeat the Genius - 12

The carriage was on fire.

Before Carla’s eyes, the carriage burned.

‘This is…’

It was a sight far too familiar to her.

A memory from childhood, one that had driven a deep wedge between her and her father.

Instinctively, Carla looked down at her body.

She saw a child’s frame, no older than six. This wasn’t Carla—this was Carlo, her past self.

Masked assailants, each wearing white gloves marked with a six-pointed star, attacked the carriage.

"No, no… Fabio, not Fabio!"

Her mother screamed in anguish.

She clutched the infant Fabio, desperately trying to shield him from the attackers. But Carla knew what would happen next—she had seen it all before. She clenched her teeth, staring at her mother and the baby in her arms.

Magic spells surged toward her mother, striking her.

At the same time, a bolt of lightning crashed down upon the assailants—

‘…If only Father had arrived just a little sooner. Would things have been different?’

Her mother had died in that attack.

As the heir, Carlo had been prioritized for protection. He could do nothing but watch, shielded by the maids who gave their lives for him. When his father finally arrived, obliterating the attackers with overwhelming power, it was too late to save her.

Fabio had survived, wrapped safely in his swaddle, but their mother—

At the moment her life faded, she had stared straight into Carlo’s eyes.

"Hah!"

Carla bolted upright, drenched in sweat.

Darkness filled the room, broken only by the faint moonlight seeping through the curtains.

"Mother…"

She wiped the cold sweat from her face and let out a long, heavy sigh.

"…A dream."

Yes, it had been since then.

Since losing the most gentle, kind-hearted mother in the world, Carla—no, Carlo—had sworn to become strong.

Stronger than anyone, so that no one could ever harm those she held dear.

Stronger than her so-called father, who carried the title of Cascata but was weak at heart.

—I won because you let me, didn’t you?

That voice. That face.

The moment she recalled them, Carla seized a pillow and hurled it against the wall with all her might.

Stronger? No matter how strong she became, he was always in front of her!

"Damn it!"

Shouting profanities wouldn’t change the fact that she had lost to Ivan.

Breathing heavily, she struggled to calm her pounding heart.

She had a reason to grow stronger.

To protect those she cherished, to never lose them again.

Yet she was stuck.

Because of him—because of her childhood friend, Ivan Contadino.

Because of that bastard…

—Knock, knock.

"Who is it?"

"It’s Basilov, my lady. I heard a loud noise…"

"…It’s nothing. Go back."

Carla steadied her breath, climbed out of bed, and retrieved the pillow.

The night was long. She needed sleep.

Tomorrow, the sun would rise again, she would return to the academy and training would continue.

Managing stamina was a duty of a skilled mage. Silently, she lay back down and closed her eyes.

‘Ah… That carriage…’

Early in the morning, Regina was taking her usual walk around the academy grounds when she spotted a familiar carriage.

Bearing the insignia of Cascata, it was clear who was inside.

Smiling, she prepared to greet her friend—

But then the carriage door opened, and Ivan stepped out.

She froze in place.

And when Carla followed right after him, Regina instinctively ducked behind a nearby wall, peeking at them from a distance.

‘Why… Why are Carla and Ivan in the same carriage?’

She didn’t actually need to hide.

Regina knew that.

Yet she remained in place, unable to step forward.

What had happened between those two?

Why had they arrived together?

"Are you okay after yesterday?"

Carla’s voice.

Yesterday? What happened yesterday?

Regina had no idea.

"Yeah, I’m fine. Really."

Why did Ivan sound flustered?

What could have happened to make him react that way?

Regina thought of the worst possibility she could imagine, but then Carla scoffed and turned away, walking ahead.

‘That… doesn’t seem likely, then.’

Carla initiating a conversation with Ivan was rare.

And she had expressed concern. That was even more surprising.

Had they suddenly become close overnight?

It seemed like a good thing, but—

‘No, no way… That can’t be it…’

Instead of relief, unease grew inside her.

‘No, no… If they get along, that’s good, isn’t it?’

Above all, Carla was the daughter of a high-ranking noble.

Besides, Ivan was a commoner…

She firmly believed that the kind of situation Regina was worried about would never happen.

As Carla entered the lecture hall, she frowned as she looked up at Liam, who was blocking her way.

"What is it? Why are you standing in my way?"

He was so big that standing in front of her like this made it feel as if she were surrounded by mountains.

"A summons."

"A summons for what?"

"Instructor Albina."

“…Then you could have just said that. Why block my way? If you were smaller, maybe I'd understand.”

Liam’s inner grievance—I was just standing here—was completely ignored by Carla, who slung her bag over her shoulder carelessly and headed toward Albina’s office.

"I heard that your contribution was significant in yesterday’s attack incident."

Albina offered her praise.

Carla herself, however, seemed indifferent.

"Rather than significant, I handled it all by myself. No one else was involved."

Since that wasn’t exactly incorrect, Albina gave an awkward laugh.

"That’s true… Anyway, thanks to you, we managed to capture one of the attackers alive. He was pretty badly injured, but once his treatment is complete, we’ll begin interrogation. However, it looks like some kind of silence magic has been cast on him, so it won’t be easy."

"Is that so? But I’m sure the academy will figure something out. Those guys also seem connected to the fire that broke out in Ivan’s room."

"Yes, we’re keeping that possibility in mind."

"So, what’s the reason you called me? It’s not just to praise me, is it?"

"Right, of course not… Oh, and don’t worry about Ivan. The academy has decided to protect him."

At those words, Carla frowned.

What a pointless thing to say.

"Why would I care? He’s just a commoner. Why would I be concerned about someone like him?"

"I… I see. Well, in any case… you did well. It would be great if you continued using your magic for the right reasons. And… hmm."

Albina lowered her voice.

"We’ve managed to smooth over the issue with Lucas from the Western Division. Try to keep your temper in check. If you cause trouble again, it could turn into a bigger—"

"As long as no one provokes me, I won’t do anything. If that’s all, I’ll be going now."

Carla spun around without hesitation.

Watching her leave, Albina sighed, wondering how to deal with that temper of hers. Then, as if suddenly remembering something, she quickly called out.

"Could you deliver an announcement for me?"

"What is it?"

Carla’s irritation was obvious, and Albina hesitated for a moment. But since she had to stop by the faculty office anyway, she didn’t really have another option.

"Originally, we were supposed to go outside today for the detailed leveling test. But given what happened yesterday, leaving the academy grounds is a bit risky. So, we’ve arranged with the academy to conduct the test within the premises instead, could you inform the others?"

"Fine."

Without waiting to hear more, Carla turned on her heel and walked out.

Watching her retreating figure, Albina let out a sigh.

She really was a difficult child to deal with. Ivan, having gotten on her bad side, would surely have a rough time ahead.

"This place exists too, huh?"

Just as Liam said, the students of the Eastern Division had been moved to a clearing near the back mountain behind the lecture hall.

"Apologies for the sudden change of location. There were unavoidable circumstances, so I hope you all understand."

"There are plenty of open areas aside from the forest, why here?"

Liam asked curiously, and Albina responded with a slightly awkward smile.

"There were… reasons. You’ll need to move freely without restrictions, and you can’t exactly do that in a park or a plaza. Anyway, we’ll be conducting the test here from now on. I’ll give a quick explanation before we begin—"

A cold wind swept through the clearing.

Half-listening to Albina’s explanation, Carla couldn’t shake off a bad feeling.

Strangely, very strangely… an eerie, damp atmosphere filled the air in this clearing.

# The Academy's Prodigy Wants to Defeat the Genius - 13

"There are two main paths for the mages of our empire. Of course, these are just the broad categories. If we were to include all the side paths, there would be too many to count, so I'll just explain the major ones first—"

The empire held the largest territory on the continent, but there were still several nations capable of rivaling it, or at least holding the potential to do so. On the surface, these nations maintained friendly relations, but many of them could turn into enemy states at a moment’s notice. Given the precarious nature of international politics, it was clear that the empire needed an even stronger military force.

On battlefields large and small, the largest and most crucial force was the infantry.

To ensure that the infantry could advance safely and engage in close combat, they required covering fire—magic bombardments—or defensive shields for protection. Those responsible for these direct combat or support roles were known as "support mages."

"Support mages are those who either did not attend the academy or failed to enter. They serve a mandatory two-year term, after which they are free to live their lives."

Then there were the "battlefield mages," typically assigned one or two per unit. Unlike the widespread use of magic bombardments, they specialized in large-scale firepower projection, destruction, enemy annihilation, and crowd control. In essence, they were officer-class mages.

"Since you've entered the academy, you are all considered candidates for battlefield mages. You will have a mandatory six-year service period, after which you will be placed into the reserve forces. However, not all of you will be immediately deployed as battlefield mages. Some will be assigned to the Imperial Mage Research Institute for magical studies. Today's test is meant to determine whether you're more suited for warfare or research. So, in other words—"

Albina grinned sharply.

"You’d better give it everything you’ve got."

She scanned the students with a smile full of expectation.

However, the students simply stared blankly at her, showing no particular reaction.

“…Guys? Don’t speeches like this usually fire you up?"

Only after Albina's prompting did Ivan let out a forced "Ooh, ooh—" in a weak attempt at enthusiasm.

Not wanting to be left out, Regina and Emil followed suit with similarly half-hearted "Ooh—" sounds.

Honestly, it would have been better if they hadn't responded at all.

Albina shook her head in disappointment.

"It’s obvious you’re just trying to humor me, which makes it even more awkward. Anyway, that’s the end of the explanation. Any questions?"

She glanced toward Carla, standing at the very back.

Carla, with her usual violet eyes, was looking past Albina, then to her sides—her gaze roaming idly. It was clear she hadn't been listening at all.

“…Since there are no questions, let's begin."

Albina formed a sigil with her fingers and traced a small magic circle in the air.

"Magic, liquid form. [Summon]."

With her incantation, a deep green slime emerged from the void.

It was a large, amorphous creature, about the size of a grown man. Its shifting, undulating form was unpleasant to look at, making Regina recoil in disgust.

"Ew, gross."

"This thing will be today's target. Since I summoned it, you can unleash your full firepower on it. Of course, no matter how much you attack, you won’t be able to destroy it completely. Just imagine you’re facing an enemy mage in a one-on-one battle and do your best. Now then… going in alphabetical order seems fair. Emil, step forward."

"M-me?"

"Yes, come on."

Emil hesitantly stepped forward.

At Albina’s gesture, the slime squelched its way to the center of the clearing, and Emil positioned himself about ten paces away from it.

"I've already set up a protective barrier, so go all out."

"Y-yes…"

Emil crossed his wrists, intertwining his fingers into a casting sigil.

Magic circles unfurled in rapid succession around him. Carla recognized the pattern—it was the same visionary magic that fool Lucas had used. However, unlike Lucas’s, Emil’s magic felt… impure. It was unrefined, tainted with impurities.

'…Am I the only one noticing this?'

Carla looked around.

Neither the other students nor even Albina seemed to sense anything off about Emil’s magic. That in itself felt strange to her.

"[Mana Burst]!"

With Emil’s shout, hundreds of mana bullets split into multiple trajectories, bombarding the slime with slight time delays.

A deafening explosion rang out, sending dust clouds into the air. Through the haze, the slime was seen torn to shreds, but rather than being destroyed, its fragments wriggled and merged back together.

"Alright, well done. I have a good idea of your abilities. A barrage of this magnitude would be useful not only in direct combat but also in large-scale engagements. Good job."

Flushed with excitement, Emil returned to his spot.

Next up was Ivan.

Carla, who had been watching with little interest until now, sharpened her focus. She scrutinized Ivan carefully.

Then, the moment Ivan extended his hand toward the slime—

Carla felt her heart turn ice-cold.

Ten years ago. It was ten years ago—

The moment Carla had been certain of her victory, the moment when, through the swirling dust, Ivan had emerged—

The atmosphere was exactly the same.

This wasn’t the usual smiling, carefree Ivan.

The expression on his face was cold and emotionless, as if he were merely wearing Ivan’s skin while something else lurked inside.

Seeing that expression, Carla instinctively looked down at her own hands.

She was trembling.

Her body was shaking uncontrollably.

The fear she had felt toward Ivan in that moment, after ten years, was now here again.

Carla clenched her hands together, gritting her teeth.

She was trying to suppress the tremors in her hands, but she knew better than anyone that it was pointless.

Ivan slowly raised his index finger and pointed it at the slime.

With his finger aimed at the writhing creature, he began his incantation in a quiet voice.

"Magic, [Compression]."

Whoooosh…

The air around them rushed in at once, surging toward Ivan.

Between his index finger and thumb, the gathered air compressed under immense pressure, forming into a small, dense sphere.

"Ugh…"

Even Liam let out a small groan from the sheer pressure radiating outward.

Carla barely managed to maintain her posture, but if she loosened her tension even a little, she felt like a pained gasp would escape her lips.

‘He's insane…’

Just how far did this guy’s talent extend?

Grinding her teeth, Carla fixed her gaze on Ivan’s magic.

She did not dare to blink, staring intently, determined not to miss a single detail.

"Magic, [Airflow]."

Spat…

There was barely a sound.

The highly compressed air turned into a blade, slipping through the cracks Ivan had created.

With each crack that formed, more blades of wind materialized.

Silent, swift, yet utterly destructive.

The blades of wind sliced the slime into countless shreds.

Without a single loud noise—only eerie, precise devastation.

“…Hah."

Even Albina was momentarily speechless.

Not only had the slime been shredded, but the pressurized air, carrying the force of the wind blades, had cut straight through the trees standing behind the clearing, toppling them in a cascade of splintered wood.

"Well done, Ivan. If this were meant for direct combat, I can’t even imagine the kind of wide-range attack this magic could be used for on an actual battlefield. Hmm, there are similar forms of magic that exist, but—yes, combining Compression and Airflow like that is remarkable. Both are basic-level wind-type spells, but by combining them, you’ve created an advanced-level magic. That's impressive."

Ivan only laughed awkwardly.

"As expected of Ivan! That was amazing!"

Regina welcomed him back with enthusiastic cheers.

Carla, meanwhile, continued to silently watch him.

‘This time will be different. When you see me, you won’t be able to help but be surprised.’

Next was Carla’s turn.

But there was a delay.

Ivan had shredded the slime into such fine pieces that it took a long time for it to regenerate.

Even after it had barely managed to recover, some of its fragments were too small to reassemble on their own, so Albina had to reinforce them manually.

"Alright, next up—Carla."

Carla looked at the writhing slime before her and steeled herself.

If Ivan had shown something like that, she had to display something even greater.

She had the power to do so now, and she was going to unleash it without holding back.

Stepping forward, Carla took a deep breath and summoned her mana.

The waves of magic coursed through her body.

‘With this power, I can do it…’

"[Awakening]."

For a moment, a violet glow surged through her entire body, creating the illusion that she was radiating light.

The purple lightning magic burst forth, enveloping her, her heart pounding violently in sync with the surging energy flowing through her veins.

Her hair stood on end, lifted by the storm of magic, as crackling arcs of violet electricity sparked through the air.

"[Charge]."

The lightning magic coiling around her transformed into pure current, intensifying its brightness.

Even the excess energy crackled out from her hair, sending purple sparks dancing into the surrounding air.

‘One strike. I have to end it in a single blow. That’s my only way to win.’

The heat in the air spiked as the charged electricity saturated the atmosphere.

The ground beneath her glowed faintly with violet heat, small flames flickering to life.

Boom!

With a thunderous impact, Carla’s foot pressed deep into the ground, leaving a crater.

Then, in the blink of an eye, she vanished.

The next moment, she reappeared right in front of the slime, her fist driving forward with pinpoint precision.

It struck directly at the center of the creature’s core.

KWA-KWAAAAANG!

# The Academy's Prodigy Wants to Defeat the Genius - 14

The intense lightning scorched the ground, sending up thick clouds of smoke.

The dust storm that had billowed skyward gradually settled, revealing nothing left standing—literally nothing. Even the scattered rocks embedded in the ground had been reduced to fine sand.

Carla panted heavily as she took in the scene.

Her entire body felt as if all its strength had been drained, as if she had been running for hours with a backpack full of sand. But the sight before her filled her with deep satisfaction.

‘This… this shouldn’t be possible.’

Albina, eyes wide in shock, probed for any traces of magic.

Even if it was classified as a lower-level summon, she had once risen to the rank of company commander in the mage corps through her summoning magic.

Yet the slime she had summoned—was gone.

She couldn’t sense even a fragment of it.

It hadn’t just been destroyed; it had been completely erased, forcibly annihilated without leaving a trace.

Albina's visible bewilderment only deepened Carla’s satisfaction.

Here was undeniable proof—evidence so absolute that no one could refute it.

Right before their eyes, she had done what even Ivan had failed to do: completely obliterate the slime.

“C-Carla… you’ve become several times stronger since the entrance exam…”

Albina stammered as she began her assessment.

Carla didn’t think she needed any evaluation at this point, but she was curious to hear what Albina had to say after having lavished praise on Ivan.

"Of course, it took quite some time to prepare… You likely won't have that kind of luxury in an actual battle. But if you manage to land a hit… even a heavily armored mage infantry unit would disappear in an instant."

It was true—assuming the opponent was human, this devastating strike was nearly perfected.

Though it required a long preparation time now, with enough mastery, it could be executed in a seamless flow. If she could refine her control over its power, this strike would be unparalleled in close combat.

"Excellent, Carla. Absolutely excellent. Now then, next… Liam, you’re up."

“…Having to go right after that monster is way too much pressure.”

As Albina summoned another slime, Liam grumbled while stepping forward.

He drew a wide, curved blade, a type rarely seen in the empire. As he formed a sigil over the blade, flames ignited along its edge. With his fire-wreathed sword aimed at the slime, he readied himself.

“There are only three slimes, so go easy on it, alright?”

“As if I even have the option to go all out, Instructor.”

Liam’s flames surged higher, and with a powerful swing, he sliced through the slime cleanly.

The bisected creature flopped onto the ground with a wet squelch, its halves burning.

The flames continued to burn for a while, but as they subsided, the slime began to reform, its halves merging back together.

"That was well done too, Liam. Puko—ah, I mean Liam, you remind me of your father in his prime."

"Heh."

Liam gave a slight smirk at Albina’s compliment, but scoffed lightly.

"I appreciate the encouragement, but it doesn’t really mean much after that monster went before me."

He was clearly referring to Carla.

After all, once someone had demonstrated the ability to completely erase a slime, anything else felt unimpressive. That burden now fell onto Regina, who, for the first time, looked genuinely nervous—her usual cheerful, rosy expression replaced by tension.

‘It feels like they’ve reached a level I can’t catch up to… Both Ivan and Carla…’

She reached out with a hand that trembled slightly.

Focusing her mind, she gathered as much magic as she could, extending her fingers as she softly chanted.

"Frost magic, [Absolute Zero]."

The moment her fingers pointed at the slime, its movements visibly slowed, its surface taking on a faint blue hue.

As the frost deepened in color, its movements became sluggish, eventually coming to a complete stop with a brittle crack—the sound of it freezing solid.

‘I couldn’t destroy it, but at least…’

This should be enough.

With the slime frozen to this extent, a few solid strikes with a hammer would be enough to shatter it completely.

"Regina, that’s an interesting spell you’ve learned. Just like storm magic has Tempest, frost magic has Absolute Zero. But despite its significance, it's a difficult spell to use, and frost mages are rare to begin with. Your range is still limited, but with the right circuit refinement and techniques, you can extend its area of effect considerably."

"Yes, I’ll keep working on it, Instructor."

But still… following in Carla and Ivan’s footsteps seemed impossible.

Regina’s emotions were complicated.

‘If I keep working at it, will I ever be able to reach their level?’

"Alright, let’s move on. Now we’ll be shifting into large-scale magic training. Hmm… Normally, we wouldn’t be doing this this early, but—Well, sometimes exceptions can be made.”

Albina muttered, justifying her decision to herself.

After all, the academy’s goal was to nurture strong mages, and if the students were already at this level, it made sense to adjust the curriculum accordingly.

As Albina continued her explanation, Carla kept her gaze fixed on Ivan.

"Uh… what?"

When Ivan met her intense stare, Carla spoke firmly.

"This time, I’ll beat you, Ivan."

"Wh-what?"

"I'm telling you, I'll face you with everything I have this time. If you're just going to prepare half-heartedly, don't even bother."

Seeing Carla’s burning determination, Ivan hesitated, unsure how to respond.

Finding his hesitation annoying, Carla simply let out a sharp hmph and turned away.

“…Alright.”

After a moment of deliberation, Ivan finally managed to reply.

At that, Carla’s rigid expression softened slightly, and she gave a small, satisfied nod.

Two types of magic tests followed.

One was long-range area magic designed to strike an extended battle line, and the other was wide-range magic intended to counteract the dispersion of troops, should the formation be split to avoid the initial attack.

The results were similar for both. Liam managed to respond to some extent with his swordfire magic, but he still showed weaknesses in large-scale engagements. Emil, relying solely on his mana bursts, faced predictable limitations.

Carla, on the other hand, was completely unable to respond in either case due to her circuits lacking dual wings, making mana emission impossible.

Albina found Carla’s situation puzzling.

It would be difficult for her to succeed as a battlefield mage—without dual wings in her circuits, she couldn’t project firepower in large-scale battles, and her defensive capabilities were lacking for assault tactics. On top of that, lightning magic’s inherently flashy nature was also a disadvantage.

There had to be another reason she was pushing herself to become stronger. But asking her directly felt unwise. Carla’s personality aside, there was also the weight of her family name.

"Alright, we’ve gathered all the data we need, so future lessons will be based on this. That concludes the morning session. In the afternoon, we’ll move on to theory. Class dismissed. Enjoy your lunch, and don’t be late for the afternoon lesson."

"Understood—"

Ivan, Regina, and Emil responded loudly, while the five students began preparing to leave the clearing. That was when something strange became apparent.

"…Does fog usually roll in this thick?"

Even without Liam’s comment, Albina was already scanning the surroundings with unease.

There were no lakes or rivers nearby, yet a dense fog had settled over the area. It didn’t feel right. Especially this thick—enough to obscure vision—it was impossible to ignore the ominous atmosphere.

"Stay close to me and take one of these."

Albina extended her hand, and small doll-like figures materialized in the air.

She handed them to each of the students, her voice tense.

"I’m giving these to you just in case, keep them with you at all times, understood?"

From high atop a towering tree, someone was watching.

A woman held a crystal orb in her palm, gazing down at the scene below. Reflected within the orb was a pair of red eyes.

"So, I just go ahead and do it now?"

The woman holding the orb spoke softly to the figure within.

She kept her voice low, cautious not to be overheard by those below. A response soon came from within the orb.

— Hold on. Are you trying to mess things up again by acting on your own?

"I got word from Mercurio that there’s no time to waste. That one-eyed freak could be dealt with any moment now, so we need to move quickly. I’m handling it."

— Sigh… Just wait a bit longer. Mercurio said he’d take care of things when the lunch bell rings, so be patient. We still have time.

"And you think that’s reliable? I’m supposed to just sit back and watch? I can handle this. We already got approval from the council, didn’t we?"

— There’s no way the council approved this. Just wait.

"Forget it, I’ll handle it. I won’t make the same stupid mistakes Mercurio did. More importantly, who authorized this in the first place?"

Silence filled the orb.

She was about to press for an answer when, finally, a response came.

— …The authorization came from a court mage in the imperial palace. Is that good enough for you?

# The Academy's Prodigy Wants to Defeat the Genius - 15

The dominant power of the continent—though not yet absolute—the empire was undoubtedly on the rise.

At the heart of this empire lay its capital, and at the very core of that capital stood the imperial palace, the most noble, revered, and exalted place, where purity and dignity should reign supreme.

The emperor, the master of this palace, conducted affairs of state from his office.

Despite his white hair, his appearance was far from that of a frail old man. His physique, sculpted like that of a seasoned warrior, exuded vitality rather than decline. He was reviewing documents, meticulously handling the empire’s affairs, when—

Knock, knock.

"Your Majesty, Sir Cascata has arrived."

"Ah, he’s here. Let him in."

Setting aside the papers, the emperor welcomed his guest with a broad smile.

A middle-aged man with neatly combed black hair and striking violet eyes entered the office in his formal uniform. The emperor stood from his desk and gestured toward the sofa.

"I've been expecting you. Please, take a seat, Sir Cascata."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

The man, addressed as Sir Cascata, sat down, and the emperor took his place on the upper seat of the sofa.

"It’s nothing urgent, just some news I thought we should discuss."

"Is it good news, Your Majesty?"

Sir Cascata’s eyes, naturally warm and affable, crinkled with a smile as he spoke.

The emperor laced his fingers together, resting them on his knee as he replied.

"It’s nothing major… but I received a report that your namesake son has entered the academy. And as the runner-up, no less. Truly befitting of the name Cascata. Your house remains one of the greatest pillars of this empire." (TL: Purposely using male name here.)

Carlo della Cascata—his nephew’s name.

Sir Cascata had already heard the news. Most reports that reached the emperor’s desk were vetted by him first, unless they were of particularly low priority.

"With the name of Cascata behind him, it is only natural."

"Is that so? Even so, it’s quite an impressive feat at his age. Wasn't he born around two years after you were appointed as a court mage?"

"That’s correct, Your Majesty. It is an honor that you remember."

"Of course, of course… I still recall—"

That loud cry, those sharp, determined eyes.

The emperor had thought the boy was destined for greatness from the moment he laid eyes on him.

"To think that infant has already grown so much. It’s quite astonishing, wouldn’t you say? Unlike my crown prince, who seems to be just waiting for my demise, your nephew is proving himself to be a fine young man, bringing honor to his house."

"I am deeply grateful for Your Majesty’s kind words."

"Yes, yes… But, of course, I didn’t call you here just for congratulations."

"Oh?"

Sir Cascata regarded the emperor with a hint of curiosity.

Would there be another matter? Even as he maintained his composed expression, his sharp mind was already working, analyzing the emperor’s intent.

To serve as a vassal meant to be able to discern one’s sovereign’s will at a moment’s notice.

"It has been quite some time since your last leave, hasn’t it? From what I hear, this year’s academy entrants are quite promising military assets. I thought it would be a good opportunity for you to visit—consider it a break as well. I would have gone myself, but I simply haven’t had the time lately."

"You must be busy, indeed. Then I shall visit in Your Majesty’s stead and convey your recognition."

"That would be appreciated, Sir Cascata. You should also take the opportunity to visit your homeland and see your nephew, as well as Lord Cascata. You and Enrico were as close as brothers, weren’t you?"

"With Your Majesty so occupied, how could I take leisure? I will go to the academy, but I believe a letter to my family will suffice."

"As expected, you are the only one who truly considers my position. I have great trust in you. Ah, and—"

Knock, knock.

The emperor was interrupted before he could finish.

At his command, a chamberlain entered, whispering something in his ear.

"Sir Cascata, I leave the matter of the academy visit entirely in your hands. Handle it well. I must attend to another matter now, so I shall take my leave first. I trust you."

"Understood, Your Majesty. I will see to it."

Sir Cascata exited the office and walked down the hallway.

‘What had the emperor been about to say?’

The thought crossed his mind, but he quickly dismissed it.

It wasn’t wise to dwell on such things. He could hardly press the emperor to reveal his unspoken words. Forgetting about it was the most prudent choice.

Turning a corner, he glanced around.

Confirming that no one was nearby, he stepped into a secluded space beneath a stairwell and carefully moved his fingers, casting a soundproofing spell.

From his pocket, he retrieved a small crystal orb, no larger than a fist.

The orb then expanded until it was slightly larger than his face.

"What is it?"

— ---, ------. ----. ------, ----------.

The murmuring from the orb was incomprehensible, like ventriloquism, garbled beyond recognition.

But Sir Cascata understood perfectly.

"I see. Proceed as planned."

— \*---. ---…---. ------, ---.

"I understand, but do not lay a hand on my nephew. I’m referring to Carlo, the one who shares my name."

"I said no."

The red-eyed woman stared into the crystal orb and spoke firmly.

"That little Cascata brat needs to be put in their place. It won’t feel right until I land a proper hit."

— Stop talking nonsense. Do not do anything reckless.

"Oh? The signal seems a bit off. Is the mana being interfered with? Hello? Hello? Ah—"

— Venere, Venere!

With a flick of her fingers, the crystal orb, once the size of her face, rapidly shrank until it was smaller than a fist.

Tucking it into her robes, Venere leaned against a tree and gazed up at the sky.

"If you’re going to do it, hurry up, Mercurio."

Mercurio—the one-eyed man.

He was currently confined in the academy’s research facility for criminals.

The aftermath of an explosion had left him toothless, and due to an unfortunate accident, both his wrists and ankles were broken, rendering him shackled and completely incapacitated.

He could do nothing—at least, not by himself.

Yet, from his solitary confinement cell, an odd scraping noise began to echo.

The guard on duty, unnerved by the sound, hurried to check on him, only to find Mercurio grinding his gag against his bare gums.

"What the hell are you doing? Do you really think you can bite through that with your gums? Stop that nonsense and stay still!"

Despite the guard’s shouting, Mercurio continued without pause.

The thick cloth of the gag was quickly soaked with blood. The pain had to be excruciating, but he didn’t show the slightest hesitation.

Then, the bell marking noon rang across the academy.

With that sound, the gag finally tore.

The guard, startled, reached to unlock the cell, intending to restrain Mercurio again and replace the gag—but before he could—

"Aaah! Aaaaaah! AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHH—!"

Mercurio unleashed a deafening scream.

The latent mana he had carefully dispersed throughout his body—keeping it faint enough to avoid detection—was now being drawn together and released all at once in a thunderous, mana-infused roar.

The sheer force of the soundwave made the guard clutch his ears in agony. He collapsed, eyes rolling back, his body convulsing violently.

Meanwhile, Albina was leading the students carefully through the fog, guiding them back toward the academy.

Suddenly, she stopped and looked around.

Her senses, sharpened by experience, detected something unsettling—a distant, eerie scream.

And, in eerie synchrony with it, a strange and unfamiliar magical frequency spread through the air.

‘Something’s wrong. Something is very wrong!’

Realizing that the situation was quickly spiraling out of control, Albina urged the students to move faster.

She instructed them to hold hands, ensuring that no one got separated. Even as she spoke, her mind raced.

‘Could this be an attempt to nullify mana detection?’

A chilling possibility struck her, and she shook her head violently.

No, that couldn’t be. The academy’s mana detection system was too sophisticated—

"You’re quite sharp, Instructor."

A voice rang out suddenly.

Startled, Albina turned around.

The five students who had been following her—were gone.

In their place stood five identical figures, each with the same face—a woman with stark white hair and crimson eyes.

"Hmm, I wonder if this is enough," Venere mused with a smirk.

Then, all at once, the five duplicates exploded.

"Tch—!"

The explosion had been sudden, but Albina was a seasoned battlefield mage, a veteran of countless battles.

In that brief instant, she summoned a slime coat, shielding herself from the blast.

As the dust settled, she took in her surroundings with a grim expression.

‘This is bad…’

She recognized the clearing where they had conducted the earlier test.

More concerningly, the presence of the detection devices she had distributed to the students was now faint—almost imperceptible.

‘If everyone has been scattered into a subspace…’

This was a disaster. To manipulate space magic to this degree, the enemy was no ordinary threat.

Space magic was not only rare but also incredibly difficult to use, even for those with the right magical circuits.

Only mages at the level of a battalion commander or higher could wield it effectively—this enemy was no small-time criminal.

Realizing the gravity of the situation, Albina didn’t hesitate.

Instead of using her fingers, she drew an elaborate magic circle with her entire arm.

Above her head, a massive summoning sigil appeared.

From within, a colossal dragon emerged.

A dimensional dragon—capable of tearing through space and traversing between dimensions.

It had no real combat power, but its ability to break through dimensions made it an invaluable summon.

KUWOOOOOOHHH…

The dimensional dragon raised its head and let out a thunderous roar.

# The Academy's Prodigy Wants to Defeat the Genius - 16

"Stop for a moment."

As the dense fog enveloped them, Carla abruptly halted. Her sudden words made Ivan, who was leading ahead, pause and turn toward her.

"Carla, what’s wrong?"

"You, who are you?"

Carla glared at Ivan.

Her gaze was so intense that Ivan involuntarily shuddered.

"What are you talking about? I’m Ivan, Ivan Contadino... Why are you asking that all of a sudden?"

"Hah, so you’re saying you’re Ivan?"

Carla smirked.

The lingering, almost sticky amusement in her expression faded instantly as she became serious again.

"You have a different magical signature from Ivan. Do you think I wouldn’t notice? I’ve known his mana wave for years, it would be best if you were honest with me now. Or do I have to force the truth out of you?"

"Carla, I don’t understand what you’re trying to say. But shouldn’t we be focusing on getting out of here first?"

Carla folded her arms, fixing her piercing gaze on Ivan.

Ivan met her eyes but couldn’t stop the slight twitch at the corner of his lips.

"You really think I wouldn’t notice, Ivan? We’ve been together since we were kids. Do you think I wouldn’t recognize his magic? I know it better than anyone—!"

In an instant, Carla’s foot shot toward Ivan’s face.

Had Ivan not reacted, he might have found himself sprawled on the ground. But instead, he simply tilted his head back, dodging the kick with an effortless grin.

"How unfortunate, I must have imitated this guy’s mana signature poorly."

Ivan chuckled strangely.

As he spoke, the others beside him also opened their mouths at the same time, repeating his words in unison.

"I must have imitated it poorly, it was too easy to get caught."

Then, Ivan’s face, along with those of the entire group, began to melt and drip away.

Carla frowned as she watched their distorted appearances morph.

In the spot where they had stood now stood a woman with striking red eyes and flowing white hair.

"You… look familiar."

“Awakening. “

As Carla chanted the incantation, waves of magical energy surged around her.

The deep violet mana coursed through her body, sending sparks of electricity crackling and snapping across her skin. Every nerve in her body felt heightened, senses sharpened to their peak.

"I know you too… and I hate you for it."

With those words, the red-eyed woman lunged at Carla.

Seeing not just her eyes but her entire body glowing crimson, Carla instinctively retreated and as expected, an explosion erupted right where she had stood.

"Your pattern is always the same and you call yourself a mage? How foolish."

"Hah?"

"You lack real power. If I had taken that hit head-on, at best, I’d have suffered minor burns."

"Are you done talking, you idiot from Cascata?"

"If you think I need more time, I can certainly oblige."

Before Carla’s mocking tone had even fully settled, silhouettes began emerging from the mist.

One, two, three… then dozens, then hundreds.

And all of them looked identical.

The same woman who had just attacked Carla—the white-haired, red-eyed woman.

"…How utterly ridiculous. So, when things don’t go your way, you resort to sheer numbers?"

As Carla clenched her fists and scanned the shadows closing in, a small mechanical bird slipped out from her cloak. Fluttering its tiny wings, the bird perched on Carla’s shoulder and spoke.

“Carla, are you alright?”

"I’m fine. For now."

“I’ll get to you as soon as I can. Try to avoid direct combat and prioritize staying unharmed…”

At that moment.

Carla swatted away the first mana projectile flying toward her, but a second one grazed past her shoulder.

More importantly, the spell struck Albina’s summoned creature, shattering it instantly into nothingness.

"Tch."

Clenching her fist tighter, Carla slowly raised her arm.

Her stance widened to shoulder width, her feet planted firmly to anchor her body.

Sparks of electricity crackled from her knuckles, veins pulsing with concentrated energy, channeling her magic into a single devastating strike.

Carla’s fist shattered the woman’s face.

Her elbow followed, driving deep into her opponent’s stomach with an impact strong enough to pierce through.

Her kick sent another woman’s head flying and yet, no blood splattered.

Despite looking human, they were nothing more than dolls.

Perhaps that made it easier for Carla to unleash her full power without hesitation.

Carla, unable to release her mana externally, had instead honed her body into a weapon through lightning magic.

‘Maybe this is actually better.’

As she shattered and tore through the clones one by one, Carla thought to herself.

While a male body would have had superior raw strength and endurance, her current form possessed superior agility and flexibility.

Both had their strengths and weaknesses.

But for someone wielding lightning magic, which thrived on speed, her current body was an ideal match.

"Other people might struggle with this—"

Thud.

"That commoner brat—"

Whack!

"You wretched bi—"

Crack!

"I’ll kill you!"

Crash!

With each clone she destroyed, a spiteful curse was hurled.

'Commoner? They must mean Ivan… But why?'

Curiosity nagged at Carla, but she showed no outward reaction.

If she let it slip that she was interested, the opponent would only try to use it against her.

They weren’t particularly strong, but something about them felt unpleasant.

"Well, I appreciate a good punching bag. Let’s see what gives out first—your ability to keep making clones or my mana reserves. Sounds fun, doesn’t it?"

No matter how many appeared, Carla was tearing them apart faster than they could be created.

Wiping away the sweat trickling down her forehead after eliminating yet another clone, Carla saw a red-eyed woman emerge before her.

"Carla della Cascata."

"If you're going to call someone by name, it’s only polite to introduce yourself too. Didn’t you learn any manners? Looks like you didn’t."

"…Venere, you’re different from the others."

"What a coincidence, I hear that a lot."

"Hah, you’ve got a real knack for getting under people’s skin. If you had lived a little longer, you might have become a great archmage. None of this would’ve happened if you’d just left that commoner alone. Meddling where you shouldn’t have…"

At that moment, Carla’s fist slammed into Venere’s face.

Boom!

With a resounding crash, Venere’s head burst apart as her body collapsed to the ground.

But the sudden chill creeping up Carla’s spine made her instinctively retreat—

"Did you really think clones were all I had? That’s disappointing."

Venere was suddenly right in front of her, leaning in with an unsettling grin.

Her hand gripped Carla’s left wrist and from that touch, a strange heat began seeping through her arm, creeping upward.

"Corruption."

With that unfamiliar incantation, a dark smoke wrapped around Carla’s left arm.

Feeling the burning heat spread, Carla retaliated, smashing her fist into Venere’s face—sending her upper jaw flying off.

Yet even with only her lower jaw remaining, Venere continued murmuring something unintelligible.

Disgusted, Carla clenched her fist and drove it deep into Venere’s stomach.

Fwoom.

A gaping hole was blasted through Venere’s abdomen, flames erupting from within.

A wretched stench filled the air as her body was consumed by fire, but from within the mist, laughter echoed again.

"Did you really think that was my real body?"

"……"

Carla kept silent, looking down at her left arm.

Dark energy flickered like flames, slowly creeping up to her elbow.

She could feel it seeping into her magical circuits, corrupting them, breaking them apart.

"My magic is far worse than that. You dared to lay a hand on me, so I’ll make sure you die in agony."

With those final words, Venere’s presence completely vanished.

Pain had started creeping into Carla’s left arm and she felt a growing unease.

‘I let my guard down.’

She shouldn’t have been so relaxed.

A foolish mistake.

"Does it hurt?"

A voice whispered from behind.

The moment Carla heard it, she swung her fist.

But instead of channeling lightning through it, the dark energy clinging to her arm suppressed her magic, leaving only her bare knuckles to strike Venere.

"Still got some fight in you?"

Venere sneered, raising a dagger in her hand and driving it down toward Carla’s fist.

Crack!

A sharp pain shot through Carla’s hand, like a jolt of electricity piercing her bones.

Gritting her teeth against the pain, she instead reached out with her other hand, seizing Venere’s face.

"[Current]!"

Lightning surged, enveloping Venere in a searing storm of electricity—until her figure flickered and vanished.

‘This is bad… She called it Corruption. This must be a curse.’

This wasn’t just any magic. It felt far more advanced, capable of dismantling magical circuits themselves.

Her arm burned as if it were being devoured by fire. Dropping to one knee, Carla clenched her teeth, forcing her breaths to steady, glaring up at Venere.

"…Are you, by any chance, a heretic who worships the Three Evil Gods?"

"I could be, or I couldn’t be. Who knows? You seem eager to learn more about me, but I’m afraid I can’t tell you anything beyond my name."

Venere.

Now that she thought about it, Venere was the name of the second-brightest star in the night sky.

But someone who wielded such curses couldn’t possibly be associated with something so celestial.

This had to be the power of an evil god.

"…Even if I die here, I’ll make sure to curse you to the end."

"Oh my, how terrifying."

Venere’s crimson eyes gleamed as she approached Carla.

Confident in her victory, she advanced slowly, a massive, blood-red greatsword materializing in her hands.

"I’ve already prepared for that, Cascata girl. Right now, I’m going to enjoy myself. The future? What happens later? None of that matters."

Carla glared at Venere, her eyes bloodshot with fury.

The greatsword, pulsing with dark energy, rose high above Venere’s head—

Then came swinging down toward Carla, who stared up at it with unwavering defiance.

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However, Venere had forgotten one crucial fact at that moment.

Had she remembered that it was Carla who had crushed Mercurio in an instant, she should have also recalled that Carla had been unaffected by the suppression magic he had cast and had displayed her full strength regardless.

Carla was a mage who did not release her magic externally—in other words, a martial artist.

Carla narrowed her eyes.

From the moment Venere approached and raised her greatsword high above her head to the moment she brought it down,

Carla had been waiting for the perfect instant when Venere would be completely off guard and just as Venere swung her greatsword down—

Carla, who had been kneeling, pushed off the ground with all her strength and charged straight at Venere.

Thwack!

“Kyaagh?!”

Venere staggered back, clutching her face.

The greatsword in her hand dissolved into smoke as its source of magic disappeared and bright red blood gushed between the fingers covering her face.

“You… you filthy—”

Her two front teeth had been knocked out and had flown off somewhere.

With her left hand, which emitted dark smoke, Carla grabbed Venere’s collar, raising her right fist crackling with lightning before delivering another punch to Venere’s face.

Smack! Thud! Wham!

Each time, Venere lurched violently, on the verge of collapsing backward.

If not for Carla gripping her collar, she would have surely fallen already.

Carla then hooked her leg behind Venere’s and shoved her down. As Venere fell backward, Carla fell with her.

Landing atop Venere’s abdomen, Carla unleashed a relentless barrage of punches against her face, as if she intended to crush it completely.

Blood splattered with every strike.

As the sickening sounds of impact echoed and Venere’s movements gradually slowed, Carla finally ceased, gasping for breath.

‘I need to escape from here first. But I have no way to contact the instructor… What do I do?’

Blood dripped from her clenched fist.

Carla slowly stood up, taking a step back from Venere and steadying her breath—

“…Damn bitch, your punches hurt like hell.”

Venere was getting up.

Her face was so covered in blood that it was hard to find an unscathed spot. Her teeth were missing in places, her lips were torn and mangled, yet she still moved her mouth.

“So, you thought it was over just because I took a few hits? Damn, I didn’t expect it to hurt this much.”

Venere wiped a hand across her bloody face.

When her palm passed over her skin, it came away coated in fresh blood.

She spat on the ground, a broken tooth fragment mixed in with the saliva.

“You thought you won?”

“……”

“You should just end this now, Cascata’s brat. I’ve entertained you long enough.”

Carla’s instincts screamed that she had to buy more time.

Regrettably, frustratingly, painfully, no matter what she did, she couldn’t defeat Venere in her current state.

Carla cautiously circulated her magic, making sure not to make it obvious.

‘My circuits are heavily contaminated. My left arm can barely channel magic.’

Magical circuits were like roadmaps, guiding the flow of magic.

They were the pathways laid down to direct the current of magic precisely as intended.

However, due to the unknown magic of this corrosion, a significant portion of Carla’s circuits had been contaminated, rendering her left arm almost completely devoid of magic.

“…I mean, I’m going to die at your hands anyway, aren’t I?”

“Hmm, yeah, pretty much?”

As Venere rolled her shoulders and cracked her neck loudly, Carla spoke.

She was determined to buy time—at least until Instructor Albina arrived.

“Venere… that’s the second brightest star in the celestial sphere, right?”

“That’s right. Though I don’t know why I’m second.”

Carla was now certain.

Venere wasn’t acting alone.

There had to be an organization behind her, one large enough to be orchestrating this and their target was undoubtedly Ivan’s life.

“So you’re after Ivan’s life?”

“Ivan? Oh, that commoner? Yeah, he has to die.”

“What’s the reason?”

Venere smirked at Carla’s question.

Her lips curled into a sneer, and her eyes twisted with amusement, exuding pure mockery.

“That’s a secret.”

“Hah—ridiculous.”

This was the most crucial information, but as expected, she wasn’t going to reveal it easily.

“Of course it’s a secret, you think I’d just tell you? More importantly, do you think things are going the way you planned?”

She figured it out.

Carla inwardly cursed but refused to let it show.

Feigning ignorance was the only option.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. Are you sleep-talking?”

“Stalling for time. You’re waiting for your instructor to come rescue you, aren’t you?”

“…How would Instructor Albina even get here? Didn’t you guys distort the dimension?”

“Instructor Albina… a master of summoning magic. Even if it takes time, I know she’ll find a way to track you down.”

Her plan had already been exposed.

Carla racked her brain again.

She couldn’t afford to admit defeat.

She couldn’t afford to give up.

“Alright, that’s enough. But killing you outright would be a waste, so for now…”

“What—”

Just as Carla was about to retort, Venere raised a finger and pointed it at her.

“[Explode].”

—Puff…

A dull explosion rang out.

A sickening, wet splatter followed.

Carla’s gaze shifted to her left arm.

The arm that should have been there—was gone.

From the severed end, dark, corrupted blood gushed out violently.



When pain reaches an extreme level, the mind turns blank and the muscles contract so violently that even screaming becomes impossible.

Carla was experiencing it firsthand.

Her left arm hadn’t just been severed—it had exploded, leaving nothing behind.

Blood gushed from where her arm should have been and no matter how hard she tried to gather her thoughts, the searing pain made it nearly impossible.

"How does it feel? Doesn’t your body feel a little lighter?"

Venere’s voice reached her ears.

"You better stop the bleeding fast, or you’ll die. Not that it makes much difference, since you’re going to die anyway."

Carla bit her lip and gathered magic into her right hand.

She concentrated it into the small, uncontaminated portion of her circuits, generating an electric current before pressing it firmly against her ravaged shoulder—gripping it tight.

"—!"

A scream nearly tore through her lips.

But if she left it alone, she would truly die. Carla clenched her teeth and endured.

Curled up on the ground and trembling, she suddenly felt Venere approaching.

"How do you feel now?"

"...Like I absolutely, definitely have to kill you."

"Ha, you sure have a mouth on you."

Venere kicked Carla.

There was a thudding sound and then Venere’s face contorted as she shouted, "Hey, let go! Let go, damn it!"

Carla didn’t respond.

The hand that had been pressing against her wound was now gripping Venere’s ankle, refusing to release it.

"You crazy bitch."

Venere raised her hand high.

A crimson glow flickered in her palm, soon forming into a short spear. Gripping it, she leaned down, ready to drive it into Carla, who was clinging to her leg—

"Aaaaahhhhhhh!"

With all the strength she had left, Carla yanked Venere’s leg while using the momentum to propel herself upward.

Venere yelped, losing her balance and in that moment, Carla lunged at her once again.

"You lunatic—!"

"The lunatic here… is you!"

Her left arm was gone from the shoulder down.

Her body was covered in wounds and due to the contamination of her magic circuits, the only place she could properly channel magic was a portion of her right arm.

Her vision blurred from blood loss, exhaustion and chills wracked her body.

Venere was down and Carla had pinned her. This was her last chance.

"Why are you going this far, you crazy woman?!"

Carla laughed.

She wasn’t sure if it looked like a proper laugh.

But she laughed nonetheless.

"Because a mage… must kill evil."

"Hah."

Even as Venere sneered, Carla summoned every last drop of her remaining magic into her right hand.

This was her final move.

"[High Voltage]!"

Dark purple lightning crackled along her fingertips.

As she brought it down—

Boom!

Venere blocked it with her hand.

The magic she had gathered to her limit dissipated in an instant.

"Enough already. Just die, will you?!"

Venere shoved Carla aside and stood up with an exasperated expression.

Drained of magic, Carla crumpled to the ground, while Venere rose to her feet.

Through her blurred vision, Carla saw Venere summoning her crimson greatsword once more, swinging it lazily in the air.

‘This time, it really felt like the end was near.’

Ah, she couldn’t move.

Her body refused to move properly…

But she couldn’t let go now.

If something had been taken from her, she had to take something back in return.

That was the way of Cascata.

But from somewhere in the distance—

“Carla! Carla! Carlaaa!”

Ivan’s voice reached her ears.

Ironically, that voice made her body relax slightly.

‘Why am I hearing Ivan’s voice? Isn’t it supposed to be Instructor Albina? Why… Ivan?

Stay away.

Even if you’re stronger than me, this woman is even stronger than that.

You won’t be any help if you come here.

Why is it you of all people?’

She had to stand.

As a Cascata, she had to stand.

If she had lost an arm, she needed to take at least a leg in return.

She had to stand—

“Ivan! Ivan… Damn it, Carla! Carla!”

From afar, Albina’s voice joined in as well.

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For a fighter, especially a martial artist like Carla, balance was an absolutely crucial factor.

Carla was realizing that all too painfully now.

She simply couldn’t stand.

Even when she tried to push herself up with her still-functioning right arm, her strength wouldn’t hold, and her body tilted to the left, nearly collapsing to the ground. In the end, all she could do was kneel, barely keeping herself upright.

Through her dimmed vision, she saw Venere being hurled away by a fierce gust of wind.

The ragged breath that escaped her lungs turned into a hollow laugh and dispersed into the air.

‘…How… How can that bastard be so strong?’

Was it because he could release his magic externally?

She had attacked Venere multiple times, pushing her into a defensive stance, yet now she was being tossed away like a toy by the raging winds.

"Carla, are you alright!? My god, you…"

Hearing Albina’s voice beside her, Carla turned slightly.

Albina was deathly pale, staring at Carla’s shoulder stump in a mix of horror and helplessness.

"…I cauterized the wound…"

"That’s not the issue! Your arm!"

Once again, Venere was sent soaring by the gusts and Ivan, treating her like nothing more than a plaything, kicked her away.

Venere crashed into the ground, sending up a massive cloud of dust.

Staggering to her feet with a furious scream, Venere had her back turned to Carla.

Carla’s eyes then locked onto Ivan—

And at that moment, her face stiffened in shock.

That face… That expression…

It was the same as the one etched into her memory.

The very same look Ivan had worn ten years ago, when he back then, had utterly crushed Carla—when she had still been known as Carlo.

It wasn’t twisted in malice, nor was it burning with fury.

With no expression at all, he simply stood there, exuding an overwhelming pressure that seemed to suffocate everything before him.

"Goddamn it, already!"

Venere stretched out her palm to the side.

A vortex of magic erupted, distorting the empty space until—

Rip!

A gaping, oval-shaped extradimensional portal tore open.

"You’re not escaping."

Ivan extended his hand as well.

His magic roared far stronger than the energy surging around the portal, transforming into crushing magical pressure that began to bear down on the extra dimensional rift.

"Th-This is impossible… You can’t just break a dimensional gate!"

Venere barely had time to finish her sentence before—

Shatter!

A sound like breaking glass rang out, and the extradimensional portal shattered into nothingness.

"It… it broke…"

"You did this to Carla and thought you could run?"

Ivan strode toward Venere.

Standing right in front of her, he raised his index finger and waved it in front of her face.

"That won’t do, you took Carla’s arm—so you’ll pay with your life."

"Wh-Wh-Wh… What…"

The color drained from Venere’s face.

Not just a little—she went utterly pale, like a corpse.

Carla, too, felt the same chill.

That voice, that tone—

Everything about him was exactly like ten years ago.

"Carla’s arm is worth more than your life."

Ivan’s voice was alien.

From behind Venere, Carla watched his face closely.

Her remaining right hand trembled, cold sweat trickling down her face.

Yes, that face.

That voice.

It wasn’t just the same as ten years ago—it was an even greater terror, pressing down on her.

It crushed her.

It crushed her—

Ivan’s palm pressed down on Venere’s head.

"So just die."

"Wh-What—Aaaagh?!"

Flames erupted from Venere’s body.

The fire engulfed her clothing in an instant and the surging wind only fed the flames, making them rage ever higher.

"Carla suffered more than you. You should endure a little."

Ivan declared her death sentence with a chilling calm.

As his voice rang out, the wind beneath Venere swirled, amplifying the inferno that consumed her.

The crackling of burning flesh merged with her horrifying screams, creating a symphony of agony.

"Pathetic… So utterly pathetic."

Ivan murmured as if bored, releasing his grip from Venere’s head.

By then, her body had already burned to a charred husk, but the moment Ivan let go, the blackened corpse shot up into the air.

"They’re the type to scheme until the very end."

Ivan extended his fingers toward the corpse.

With his index and middle fingers aligned, droplets of water began to form at their tips.

"Let’s make sure it’s finished."

Hundreds of water droplets gathered, spinning violently with a shrill, eerie sound.

As they all turned toward Venere’s remains, Ivan flicked his hand—

And the droplets shot forth like arrows, all at once.

Like a hailstorm of magic bullets, they rained upon Venere’s corpse, tearing it to shreds.

Carla watched everything.

She watched until Venere’s remains were completely obliterated, leaving not even a trace.

That sight and Ivan himself, were the very embodiment of terror.

There was no regard for the dead, no trace of the Ivan she had known.

This cold, ruthless Ivan terrified Carla to her core.



"Carla, I killed her for you. Do you like it? Should I do more?"

Ivan’s gaze turned to Carla.

That piercing gaze, as if stabbing straight into her core—

That gaze, carrying a smirk, as if relishing it—

Carla, who had been barely holding onto her consciousness, finally let go.

—You lowly commoner, did you really think you could defeat a Cascata just because you had some talent?!

Carlo shouted boldly, forming seals with both hands.

Though lightning magic was not exclusive to the Cascata family, it was widely known that the Cascata’s lightning magic was the strongest.

—Lightning can pierce even the wind!

Declaring so with confidence, Carlo conjured two crackling spheres of lightning in his palms and shouted again.

Before him stood a boy who already looked too exhausted to continue—

Ivan.

—It’s not over yet… Carlo!

Ivan roared back, stirring a vortex of mana.

In terms of sheer magical power, Carlo had the overwhelming advantage—

At least, it seemed that way.

Ivan’s clothes were already torn in multiple places, exposing his skin, while Carlo remained nearly unscathed.

—Heh, for a mere commoner, you’ve got some guts! Then I, the great Carlo, will finish this!

The lightning spheres in his palms crackled, spinning ominously.

Pointing them at Ivan, Carlo shouted:

—This is the end, Ivan! I will remember you!

With a piercing sound, the first lightning sphere shot forward, striking the ground near Ivan’s feet and erupting in a massive explosion.

Dust billowed, shrouding Ivan from sight, and then another sphere landed nearby, triggering another explosion.

—How does it feel, commoner?!

Yet from within the dust cloud, there was no response.

—Are you in too much pain to even speak? Answer me, commoner!

Carlo shouted again, but still, no reply came.

—…Commoner?

—Ivan…

Suddenly feeling uneasy, Carlo hesitantly stepped forward, reaching toward the dust cloud.

And the moment he reached out—

Slash!

—Ack!

A thin line of blood appeared on Carlo’s finger, a single drop forming before trickling down.

—Th-This… Wind…

Only then did he realize.

This wasn’t mere dust—it was a concentrated vortex of wind, rising from below.

—Th-This…

Carlo immediately pulled back and gathered his mana.

He still had plenty left, but if Ivan was capable of summoning such a raging storm—

Then Carlo had to be on guard.

—Heh, heh heh… Heh heh heh…

Laughter echoed from within the wind.

It was Ivan’s voice, but there was something… off.

—You played around too much, Carlo.

—Wh-What did you just say?!

That voice—

Cold, flat, devoid of emotion.

It was unmistakably Ivan’s, yet it didn’t feel like Ivan at all.

A creeping fear slithered into Carlo’s chest as he shouted once more, trying to maintain his bravado.

—What nonsense are you spouting, you damn commoner?!

And then, Carlo saw it.

Deep within the storm, a pair of glowing red eyes.

Through the swirling winds, those crimson eyes pierced into him, searing themselves into his mind.

The moment he met those eyes, Carlo felt his magic shatter.

A terror unlike anything before consumed him.

—Ah… Ah… Ahhh…

—It seems I can’t indulge your little games any longer, Carlo.

—I-Ivan?!

—It’s time to end this.

And with those words, an overwhelming tempest of mana surged toward Carlo.

"Hah!"

Gasping, Carla jolted awake, coughing violently.

The first thing she saw was a pure white ceiling.

"Ugh… Ugh…"

Realizing that it had been a dream, she instinctively raised her left hand to wipe the sweat from her forehead.

She lifted it—

But felt nothing.

Carla’s gaze shifted to her left arm.

The white hospital gown she had been changed into—

Its left sleeve was empty from the shoulder down.

"Ah… Ah… Ah."

Her pupils trembled violently.

In her beautiful violet irises, she saw the empty sleeve swaying limply.

"Ah… Ah, ah… Ah… Aaaaaah! Aaaaaaaaahhhhhhh!"

A scream, half sob, half wail, erupted from Carla’s lips.

# The Academy's Prodigy Wants to Defeat the Genius - 19

No matter how much she reached out, her left arm was gone.

As if proving that it wasn’t a dream, now that the adrenaline from battle had completely faded, the crushing reality of it all came crashing down on Carla.

"Ah… My arm, my arm… My arm is gone!"

She let out a choked, agonized wail, clutching at the empty space where her left arm used to be.

She had seen it explode.

She had even cauterized the wound herself and yet, seeing it now with her own eyes, facing the undeniable truth—

She, who had chosen the path of a martial mage because she could not release magic externally, she who had dedicated her entire body to that path—

Had lost her left arm.

It meant she was no longer a proper mage.

It meant that the vow she had made—to never allow another tragedy like the carriage attack in her childhood to happen again—was now beyond her reach.

"Ah… Ah… Aaaah! Aaaaaah!"

As Carla clawed at her empty sleeve, screaming in despair, someone suddenly pulled her into an embrace.

"Carla, calm down! Carla, breathe!"

A familiar voice.

A voice she knew well.

When she turned her head, the face before her was Ivan’s.

—Carla, I killed her for you. Do you like it?

The Ivan who had spoken those words with a smirk.

The Ivan who had killed as easily as swatting a fly, who had torn a corpse to shreds without hesitation.

That same Ivan was now holding her and telling her to calm down.

"I-Iva… Ivan…"

Carla swallowed hard, forcing herself to suppress the trembling in her chest.

The Ivan before her now was the Ivan she knew—

But the fear lingering in her heart still gripped her tightly.

"It’s okay, Carla. Breathe. You’re in the hospital."

Ivan held her hand as he spoke.

There was no longer anything unnatural in his voice.

It was the same as always—gentle and reassuring.

"…Let go, I’m fine."

Her racing heartbeat, though still unsteady, began to slow.

Her ragged breaths gradually evened out.

Carla shook off Ivan’s hand and looked around the hospital room.

Four members of the squad.

Four people besides herself and a man she had never seen before—

Not Albina, but someone else.

"…Who are you?"

"To address your instructor so casually upon the first meeting… A noble really is a noble, huh?"

"Instructor? What about Instructor Albina?"

The man rubbed his chin, then let out a quiet chuckle.

His beard was unkempt, uneven in length, making him look disheveled. His drooping eyes gave him an air of exhaustion, listlessness, and complete lack of enthusiasm.

With a slouched posture, he scratched his chin before speaking to Carla.

"Anyway. Now that you’re awake, I’ll fill you in. Carla della Cascata—you’ve been unconscious for two days."

"Two days…"

"Yeah, two days. You were brought here in critical condition and two and a half days have passed since then. How are you feeling?"

"Feeling…"

The man gestured toward Ivan several times with his chin.

"That guy spoon-fed you diligently. Thanks to your left arm, healing magic and recovery spells didn’t work at all. If you had gone without food for two days, things would’ve gotten even worse."

At those words, Carla glanced at Ivan.

Ivan, as if telling him to shut up, made an X sign with his fingers over his lips. But when their eyes met, he coughed awkwardly and averted his gaze.

"My name is Acting Instructor Lorenzo. I’m here as a replacement for Instructor Albina, who is currently under disciplinary review."

"Disciplinary review?"

"Of course," Lorenzo said matter-of-factly.

A student had been injured during an academy lesson.

Not just any injury—she had lost an arm and that student was Carla della Cascata, the eldest daughter of the Cascata family, the Empire’s first pillar.

"There’s no way this gets brushed under the rug. The Cascata family hasn’t made any official statements yet, but whether complaints are being exchanged behind the scenes, I wouldn’t know. Either way, the academy needs to conduct an investigation and reach a conclusion. After all, the eldest daughter of Cascata losing an arm means she’s damaged goods."

"Damaged goods?! Instructor, how could you say that!"

Ivan snapped, rising to his feet.

But Lorenzo merely glanced at him indifferently.

"It’s the truth, isn’t a noble daughter’s fate ultimately determined by political marriage? She’s lost her value as a commodity. So, the academy has to take responsibility. Albina is under disciplinary review as part of that process and if things go badly, the entire security division—and even the headmaster—might be forced to step down."

It was an outrageous statement.

Lorenzo’s words were an outright insult to nobility.

While it was true that many noble daughters were subjected to arranged marriages, stating it so bluntly and even referring to them as commodities, was beyond unacceptable.

Yet none of the noble-born students in the room objected. Liam and Emil were noble sons, so it wasn’t their concern. Regina, as a lower noble, didn’t have the standing to refute him and Carla—

She simply hadn’t yet processed the fact that this was a direct insult to her.

"…Tch."

Carla clicked her tongue and held her silence.

She had never cared about arranged marriages.

She hadn’t considered it, and she knew her current family head, Enrico, likely hadn’t either.

More than anything—

Her arm, that was the real issue.

She couldn’t deny the academy bore some responsibility, but in the end, it had happened because she wasn’t strong enough.

If she hadn’t let her wrist be caught so easily, she wouldn’t have succumbed to the corruption magic, and if that had been the case—Venere…

"Anyway, Carla. The academy’s response will be determined once the investigation concludes. What’s urgent right now is your arm."

"Yes."

"Healing magic and recovery spells didn’t work. It was as if there was a massive barrier blocking them, bouncing the effects away and on top of the cauterization you did yourself, there were traces of contamination. …Did you happen to encounter an Apostle of the Three Dark Gods?"

"What?!"

This time, it wasn’t just Carla—

Ivan and the other squad members all turned to stare at Lorenzo in shock.

The Three Dark Gods were practically a forbidden topic.

Legends spoke of them bringing ruin to the ancient empire that had existed before the current one, ultimately leading to its downfall.

While opinions about their true nature varied, one widely accepted belief remained: if the Three Dark Gods returned, so would the world’s destruction.

"Relax, I was joking. Calling it an Apostle of the Three Dark Gods would be a bit much, don’t you think?"

Lorenzo chuckled, "Anyway, for now, I’m your acting instructor, responsible for protecting the five of you. Let’s get along."

"…You don’t seem any more reliable than Instructor Albina."

"Heh, is that so?"

Lorenzo scratched his head.

His hair, greasy and unkempt, looked like it hadn’t been washed in days. Carla wrinkled her nose in distaste.

"I suppose I’ll have to prove myself. Here, watch closely. Ivan, help me out."

"Ugh… fine."

Ivan reluctantly held out his palm.

An intricate pentagram magic circle was drawn on his skin. Lorenzo pointed to it and said, "This is my magic circle. Pay close attention."

Once he was sure Carla was watching, Lorenzo lifted a pen high into the air.

Then, without hesitation, he slammed it down onto Ivan’s palm.

Before the pen could pierce Ivan’s skin—

Blood spurted from Lorenzo’s own hand.

"It’s the magic of pain transfer. If a person with this magic circle sustains magical damage, that damage is transferred to me. In other words, if you had this spell cast on you, Carla, I would have lost my arm instead of you."

"That’s… impressive."

Carla couldn’t help but be genuinely impressed.

She unknowingly voiced her honest thoughts.

The world of magic was vast and profound—

There were still many things she didn’t know.

"Oh? Your tone switched to polite speech. Looks like you’re starting to acknowledge me. I may not look it, but I’m quite competent."

Lorenzo smirked, crossing his arms. "And, more importantly, I have news for you. This one’s up to you, Carla."

"What is it?"

"In two months, there’s a midterm exam. You’ve heard about the curriculum, right?"

Of course she had.

Two semesters per year, with a midterm and a final each semester.

For first- and second-year students, grading was absolute.

For third- and fourth-year students, it became competitive.

"Normally, if you can’t properly use magic by midterms, you get expelled. Your admission gets revoked."

Carla’s expression hardened.

Not being able to use magic—

If she could release magic externally, some deficits wouldn’t be an issue.

But magic control was crucial.

"Carla, in your case, you can’t project magic. You’re a martial mage."

That meant—

For someone like Carla, being one-armed became a massive limitation.

Could an amputee fight properly?

"But since your injury happened due to an incident at the academy, an exception is being made. The choice is yours: if you want, you can be exempt from the midterm. Whether you’ll be exempt from the finals is uncertain, but if the culprit is caught and the case is resolved by then, you probably will be. In any case, the decision is up to you."

"I don’t care about any of that."

Lorenzo raised an eyebrow, "Oh?"

He had expected Carla to take the exemption.

Her response was unexpected.

"I don’t care about the exams or anything else, what matters is my arm. Whether I’m expelled or not doesn’t matter—getting my arm back and reclaiming my magic is what’s most important."

"As I thought."

Lorenzo smiled, folding his arms.

"As an instructor, I probably shouldn’t say this, but you’re sharp—seeing past this academy nonsense to the real issue. That’s the Cascata way, huh?"

"No."

Carla steadied her breath and stared him down.

"—Because I am a mage."