# 102 - Her and Her (5)

1. Her and Her (5)

Carla had been running for quite a while, but Regina had disappeared somewhere and was nowhere to be seen.

‘Where did she go?’

Had she always walked this fast?

Carla pondered for a moment, but it was hard to tell.

She had hardly ever seen Regina run—yet when she thought of Regina, it was more fitting to picture her gracefully running with her hair flowing in the wind.

In any case, at this moment, it didn’t matter how Regina ran.

Finding out where she had gone was the priority, and Carla saw some upperclassmen from another grade pointing in that direction as she rushed out.

After nodding her thanks to the upperclassman, Carla ran in that direction.

As she sprinted across the playground, her curiosity about how Regina could run so fast grew stronger.

Before long, she found herself near the entrance to the hill where they had smashed Slime on the first day. Since she had come this far, there was only one place to go, so Carla ran up the hill without hesitation.

How long had she been running? A massive old tree came into view at the top of the hill.

In truth, it wasn’t a place she had fond memories of—this was where she had been attacked by Venere on her way down from a lecture, resulting in her arm being shattered, so she had wanted to avoid it as much as possible.

Suppressing the urge to turn back immediately, Carla approached the roots of the tree. She could see Regina there, and at this moment, Regina was more important than the fear of the past.

“Regina.”

Carla approached Regina, who was standing by the roots of the tree, gently stroking the bark that had peeled away.

Regina was staring blankly at the old tree, her gaze fixed on the bare patches, and whether she noticed Carla approaching or not, she didn’t even glance in her direction.

“Regina.”

“Don’t come any closer.”

At Regina’s cold voice, Carla found herself stopping involuntarily.

But that was only for a moment; taking another step forward, Carla struggled to part her lips.

If it hadn’t been for her original self, perhaps things would have continued differently.

Their relationship had been such that guilt was unavoidable.

Regina liked Ivan.

For a very long time.

Carla, who was not unaware of this, had, albeit unintentionally and in an unavoidable situation, taken Ivan away from Regina.

“Regina. I’m sorry. I’m really sorry.”

As soon as those words left her mouth, Regina turned sharply to look at Carla.

It seemed it wasn’t a misunderstanding.

Regina’s eyes were filled with a deep blue fury, and facing that anger, Carla found herself gasping for breath and standing still.

“Sorry? What are you sorry for? Didn’t you say you hadn’t done anything wrong?”

That had never been said.

She swore she had never said such a thing.

But Carla couldn’t muster a defense.

Memories tend to twist themselves in whatever way is convenient for them. Carla hadn’t thought that deeply, but in any case, she didn’t want to provoke Regina’s temper right now.

“Are you feeling sorry for me? Because you’re the winner, the one who took Ivan, and you came here to pity and mock me?”

“That’s not it. Regina, it’s not like that.”

Carla sighed and tried to calm her breathing.

She was well aware that her temper was a flaw. So, she knew this wasn’t the time to lash out at Regina.

“It’s not like that. I’m not pitying you or mocking you… it’s not like that. But calm down. Regina, I didn’t come here to fight with you. I came to apologize and to tell you I was wrong.”

“……”

Regina bit her lip tightly and glared at Carla.

She knew well.

That it couldn’t be helped,

That Carla had no choice but to do so,

That there was no affection involved,

And that if it hadn’t been for that, Ivan wouldn’t have come out unscathed.

She knew it all too well.

She also knew that what she was doing now was utterly childish.

That this shouldn’t be happening,

That nothing would change,

That her love had ended,

And that she could no longer stand by Ivan’s side.

That was why she was angry.

She needed someone to vent her anger on.

Even though she had never felt that way before.

Seeing Carla made her furious.

It was clear she was angry.

At herself for being so weak.

At herself for not being able to take revenge.

At herself for not being able to say harsher words.

At herself for not being able to say more hurtful things.

That night.

It was the night Regina had tried to take Ivan away.

It was the night Regina realized her love had ended.

—You might fail at unrequited love, or even if it’s not unrequited, a love that was going well can fall apart. But most people just cry about it. Time heals, and with time, you can forget everything…

—But why should it be that way?

—Why should the victim endure and hold on? Can’t they just take it back?

—What I’m saying is, I can be your strength.

That was a tempting statement.

It sounded truly sweet.

In that moment, Regina almost nodded her head.

The idea that she could get Ivan back made her want to nod.

But she couldn’t do that.

The sweet whisper from someone unknown promised that Ivan would eventually return to her—

‘But the Ivan who comes back can’t possibly be the Ivan I loved.’

The Ivan who always smiled kindly and innocently.

The Ivan who had always been gentle to her.

That was the Ivan she had loved.

Even if she were to get Ivan back, would he be the Ivan she had loved?

After much contemplation and hesitation, Regina’s answer was a refusal.

“…No, I’ll decline.”

“Oh my, is that so?”

And with that, she smiled.

Her palm came closer, gently caressing Regina’s cheek.

In that moment, Regina flinched.

An indescribable sweet wave mixed into her magical power, and suddenly, Regina felt a wave of comfort wash over her—

“Carla.”

“Yeah.”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Sure, go ahead.”

Regina took a small breath.

For some reason, she felt angry when she looked at Carla.

She wanted to hurt her somehow, and a desire to wound her heart surged within her.

She wanted to hurt Carla in front of Ivan—such was the desire that flared up.

“…Do you love Ivan? Do you like him?”

Regina asked with difficulty.

At the very least, at least… she hoped for an answer that confirmed that.

But Carla didn’t respond right away.

She seemed to hesitate and ponder, mixing in a small hum, but Carla couldn’t answer.

“…It’s not, is it? Right?”

Regina smiled.

Slowly moving her steps, she passed by Carla.

“You’re really a bad person.”

Regina’s cold voice pierced Carla’s heart.

“Has Carla not come yet?”

It was just before the lecture was about to start, but neither Carla nor Regina had returned.

Ivan nodded absentmindedly at Lime’s casual question.

“Yeah, it seems she hasn’t come yet. It looks like it’s taking a while to calm Regina down.”

Ivan answered Liam’s question casually while thinking.

If he could, he would want to spread out his magical power to find out their location.

But recklessly using his magical senses in the daylight at the academy was risky.

Was it really worth it to take on such risks? Ivan silently waited for Carla to return.

‘Hmm. I have no idea how far they’ve gone or what they’re doing. Is a conversation supposed to last this long? Is there really a reason for them to leave me waiting this long?’

No—wasn’t that the case?

In the end, Ivan had no intention of taking both of them.

If he had to choose, it would be Carla.

So it seemed like it would be fine to soothe her with kind words and have her return, but he couldn’t understand why it had to take this long for a conversation.

“I should bring Emil too. He asked for some time to think, but it seems like he’s taking too long. When the instructor arrives, let him know, Ivan.”

“Okay.”

Ivan answered absentmindedly.

“Oh, the princess has arrived. The prince has been waiting, so hurry and go in, Carla.”

Liam’s voice reached Ivan, and he quickly turned his gaze in that direction.

Sure enough, Carla, looking haggard, entered the classroom and glanced around.

“Where’s Regina?”

When Ivan asked, Carla replied with a sigh.

“…It’s no use. It might even be worse.”

At her answer, Ivan furrowed his brows for a moment before speaking again.

“Then just stop. It’s not like anything will change just because you’re worried.”

“What?”

Carla, who was about to sit at her desk, turned her head sharply and glared at Ivan.

She seemed to be in a bad mood, so Ivan remained silent, looking at her.

“Are you saying to just leave Regina alone? The girl who got hurt because of me? Is that really what you think? Huh? Ivan, is that really what you think?”

Ivan didn’t answer.

He made a low humming sound, scratched his cheek with his finger, and then smiled slightly.

“You’ve been taking care of Regina for a while now, haven’t you? You weren’t that kind of person.”

Carla didn’t flinch at those words.

Instead, she looked at Ivan with wide eyes and replied.

“I’ve always been like this.”

“Is that so?”

Ivan nodded.

Had she always been like this?—It didn’t seem so, but somehow he found this side of Carla appealing.

# 103 - Her and Her (6)

1. She and Her (6)

Despite the class starting, there were only three people in the lecture hall.

Ivan, Carla, and Liam.

Thanks to that, Albina, standing at the podium, narrowed her eyes and asked Ivan.

"Ivan, where did Emil and Regina go?"

"Um, I don't know."

Ivan answered with a smile.

He really didn't know—he couldn't lie about not knowing.

"For both of them to be absent, this is quite bad..."

It was then.

The lecture hall door opened silently, and a haggard-looking Regina appeared.

"I'm sorry I'm late."

With those words, Regina went straight to her seat.

Ignoring the curious gazes flying around her, Regina sat down and silently opened her textbook.

"So, only Emil is absent. Um, Liam?"

"Yes?"

"After class, go look for Emil. He'll probably be in his dorm room."

"Yes, I will."

"And Carla."

"Yes?"

Despite the sudden call, Carla remained calm.

Albina cleared her throat once and spoke to Carla, who was answering in an orderly manner.

"...Come to the lecture hall after class. I have something to tell you."

"Yes, I understand."

"Can I come too?"

Ivan suddenly raised his hand high.

Albina thought, she had heard from Lorenzo, but could those two really have become something or other... Regina seemed to be ignoring it, but she probably didn't feel good inside.

"No. Only Carla should come. It's personal."

"Oh, yes. I understand."

She thought he was unusually compliant, but Ivan was whispering something to Carla.

Judging by the way Carla's face was wrinkling, he probably said something like he would be waiting until the end, but Albina didn't need to worry about that.

"Now, let's start the class. This class will cover the flow of operations and combat aspects related to the wheel bombardment operation carried out by Mages in the annihilation operation in the southern Echenola Gorge..."

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"The battle in the Echenola Gorge can be said to be an important battle that determined the fate of the Empire and the Amos Kingdom. Driving the Amos Kingdom forces into the center of the gorge, and rather than single-shot power, continuous and steady bombardment over a wide area led to the depletion of the enemy's resources..."

Albina continued the class, moving the blue and red chips placed on either side of the map drawn on the blackboard.

"Ah, class is over. Anyway, this wheel bombardment in the Echenola Gorge is a very important point, so make sure you know it well. Let's end the class here. Good job today, everyone."

Albina finished the class with the bell signaling the end of the class.

Although it was said to be an important class, Liam wasn't really listening to the contents of the class.

Throughout the class, Liam's gaze was fixed on Emil's empty seat.

Even then, at the slightest sound, his gaze would involuntarily turn to the lecture hall door, wondering if Emil had come.

"Then, I'll go look for Emil."

Liam said as he stood up.

Carla had already packed her bag and was leaving the lecture hall, following Albina, and Liam, noticing the subtle atmosphere between Ivan and Regina, hurried out of the lecture hall, whether there was a response or not.

'That guy Ivan, I don't know if he doesn't know Regina's feelings or if he's pretending not to know.'

He had no intention of getting involved in that.

Problems between men and women usually ended up with results that weren't very good, and in the end, getting involved was mostly useless.

Liam therefore had no intention of getting involved in the love triangle surrounding Carla, Ivan, and Regina. Whether they fought or whatever, it was up to them, that was exactly his position.

'But why am I so worried about Emil?'

In fact, he could just pretend not to know.

It's none of his business!

What does Liam care what Emil is hiding?

He has no relationship with him, and he doesn't even need to care.

'But having seen those eyes...'

Walking towards the dormitory, Liam scratched his head roughly.

With his bear-like physique and seemingly fierce appearance, he walked fiercely, causing those he encountered to flinch and step back, which also subtly bothered Liam.

'Cowardly bastards... and these guys are the hegemonic power of the continent.'

No matter what anyone said, the Empire was the hegemonic power of this continent.

Unfortunately, Liam's homeland was weaker than the Empire.

If it hadn't quickly become a vassal state and had its sovereignty guaranteed, it would probably have been destroyed or become a satellite state of the Empire by now.

'That guy, he's definitely locked himself in his room.'

Given Emil's personality, he wouldn't be crouching somewhere.

He hates being seen by others, so he's definitely locked in his room, feeling sorry for himself.

Liam entered the dormitory and went straight to Emil's room.

Emil's room—that night, he had collided head-on with Emil coming out of the room. Because of that incident, he knew exactly where Emil's room was.

'Regina did say some harsh things... tsk.'

Liam stood in front of Emil's door and raised his hand to knock.

Now that students were gradually returning to the dormitory, there was a little noise, but among that noise, something clearly struck Liam's ear.

It was the sound of sobbing coming from inside Emil's room.

"...Emil, I'm coming in."

No need for knocking.

Liam threw the door open with the thought that he would break the door down and get permission later. But unexpectedly, the door wasn't locked, and so Liam stumbled a few steps into the room, unable to overcome his momentum.

"Li, Liam?"

Like a startled rabbit—that was Liam's first impression of Emil.

His eyes were round, and he had cried quite a bit, his eyes were swollen, and he was looking at Liam with a rabbit-like face.

"...Wh, what are you doing alone in your room? Were you crying?"

Where does he look like a man?

That was the first thing Liam thought, but he knew that such words were not appropriate in this situation.

"N, no. I wasn't crying."

"I wondered why you didn't come to class and what you were doing alone, so you were feeling sorry for yourself like this?"

"N, no."

Emil turned his head away now, but it was already too late.

Liam had seen Emil's face, and there was no use in hiding it.

"I didn't come to the lecture, and I was worried because you, who always came to class well, didn't come."

Liam didn't ask for Emil's permission.

He closed the door he had opened, strode into the room, sat side by side on the sofa where Emil was crouching, and casually crossed his legs.

"Th, the sofa will collapse."

"If it can't withstand this much, it can't be called a sofa. In my opinion, the sofa isn't the problem? Emil. You're the biggest problem."

"...I can't say you're wrong."

With a sniff, Emil wiped his eyes with his sleeve.

He was shouting with his whole body that he had cried, but he said he hadn't cried, which was ridiculous, but anyway, Liam was going to listen to Emil's situation.

"...Liam, am I that hopeless? Am I really useless?"

Emil asked cautiously.

Liam was dumbfounded on the one hand, but pitiful on the other.

This immature guy didn't understand that Regina had deliberately spewed out thorny words.

"That's not it. Is that why you were like this? What do you mean you're hopeless?"

"But I... can't use proper Magic. Only Mana bullet rapid fire or..."

"That's something. You should have listened to today's class. In the Echenola Gorge wheel battle, how much Mana bullet's wide-range continuous bombardment..."

Liam stopped talking when he saw Emil's face.

"...That's not it, Emil. You know that. How much have you helped me so far? Don't you remember the Inter-house Competition? Regina quickly ran out of Magical Power and wasn't much help, but you stayed behind me until the end."

That wasn't wrong.

Regina's total Magical Power wasn't that great, and the Magical Engineering she used consumed a lot of Magical Power, so her endurance was weak. But Emil, on the other hand, protected Liam's rear with Mana bullet rapid fire, which consumed less Magical Power compared to his large amount of Magical Power.

"But that was all, Liam. Not standing in front of you, not beside you. Just helping you from behind with Mana bullet rapid fire was all..."

"Haa..."

Liam let out a long sigh.

How did these Empire guys become the hegemonic power?

The men are all pale and effeminate like this, how?

Liam raised his pot-lid-like hand and messed up Emil's hair.

"Ah, wh, what are you doing...!"

A sulky expression.

He seems to want to look angry, but Liam doesn't see it that way at all.

"Don't say that, Emil. Thanks to you, I felt something for the first time."

"Wh, what is it?"

He actually wanted to say it last time, but he was too embarrassed.

Liam slowly opened his mouth.

"I realized for the first time how reassuring it is to have someone watching my back."

"What...?"

Again, startled rabbit eyes.

Liam smiled without realizing it and said again.

"When you're behind me, when you're behind me, I don't have to worry about my back. I felt like I didn't have to worry about at least my back."

"Y, your back..."

Emil's eyes widened, then looked down again, carefully looked at Liam, met Liam's gaze, and then looked down again.

"D, do you really think so?"

"Yes. Definitely. So I'm the one who completely trusts you and has faith in you like this. So let's have dinner together. I'll pick you up later."

Emil stared silently at Liam's hand, which was stretched out in front of him.

To trust his back, to have faith in him, to be able to entrust everything—words he was hearing for the first time in his life.

Words he heard for the first time among the words that measured Emil's limits, saying that his usefulness was only this much.

Emil slowly reached out and took Liam's hand.

It's so big.

And—

It's also warm.

# 104 - Her and Her (7)

1. She and Her (7)

Carla followed Albina to the instructor's office without much thought.

Albina didn't say anything while climbing the stairs, nor while walking down the hallway after reaching the top, and Carla was the same.

After all, the biggest reason was that the two weren't close enough to have a private conversation.

"Come in."

"Yes."

Albina opened the door to the instructor's office first, followed by Carla.

Click, thud—the sound of the door closing.

Then, as Albina flicked her fingers, Magical Power enveloped the entire instructor's office.

As the Silence Magic surrounding the entire instructor's office activated, the conversation inside would no longer leak out.

"Do you think Ivan followed us?"

"I don't know. I don't think he would have."

Carla subtly extended her senses, but she didn't feel Ivan's wavelength.

Perhaps because she had become more sensitive, her wavelength detection felt more skilled than before. Since he wasn't being detected, he probably hadn't followed.

"Are you getting along well with Ivan?"

"Yes, we're getting along well. There aren't any particular problems."

"I heard you're living in the same room."

"...That's how it turned out."

It wasn't a story worth hiding—everyone who needed to know already knew, and the rumors had probably spread quite widely.

Above all, with Regina spreading the rumors all over the place, it would be stranger if there weren't any rumors.

"Anyway… well, the reason I called you here today is about…"

Albina sat down in her chair and cleared her throat.

Telling a student that her trial would be held required considerable courage, and Albina was realizing anew that it wasn't an easy task.

"...About Lucas's matter."

"Yes."

Even though it was about killing someone, Carla didn't seem particularly moved.

Albina was surprised by her blankly looking at her, waiting for her to continue.

"You're not very surprised, are you?"

"Isn't it something I have to go through anyway? I suppose you're about to ask how I can be so calm after killing someone."

"Well, yes."

"Once I'm commissioned and deployed to the battlefield, killing people will become routine. I can just think of it as experiencing it in advance. And Lucas, well, I think he deserved to die."

'I really can't figure this kid out.'

Albina wondered what she was like at this age—she couldn't remember well, but she didn't think she was this extreme.

Reflecting on how much confusion she had fallen into when she was first deployed to the battlefield and killed someone, even though they were the enemy, Carla was quite exceptional.

"...Ahem. Well, anyway."

"Has the trial date been set?"

"Yes, how did you know?"

Albina couldn't hide the surprised look on her face.

Looking at Albina, Carla thought that this person seemed quite naive.

"It was the only procedure left, wasn't it? Besides, isn't it just a formality? I acted in self-defense, and Schaiskeil will have a hard time refuting that."

"That's true, but. Well, first, take this."

Albina took out a document hidden in her drawer and handed it to Carla.

Carla received the document politely with both hands and read through it quickly, and at just one—specifically designated—place, her gaze stopped.

"Contred von Schyskeil personally did this? That might be disadvantageous for me."

Carla put down the document and said to Albina.

Albina also recalled that item she mentioned, just one—that place—and replied.

"Yes. Contred von Schyskeil. Contred personally designated Kiara di Servitore as a witness."

Kiara di Servitore.

The young lady of the Servitore family.

But the Servitore family was already heavily influenced by Schaiskeil.

And the young lady who had stood against Ivan and Carla with Lucas during the Inter-house Competition.

The document stated that Contred von Schyskeil had personally requested her as a witness.

"Kiara didn't directly witness what happened at the time. I mean, Kiara wasn't there at the moment I killed Lucas. So why is she coming out as a witness?"

"I'm wondering that too."

Albina said, tapping the desk with her finger.

"But when Lucas died, the only people at the scene were you, Ivan, and Kiara."

Albina stared at Carla.

But with that alone, no matter how intelligent Carla was, she couldn't grasp what she was trying to say.

"That's right."

"Lucas is already dead, and you're in the position of being accused, so you can't testify. That leaves only Kiara, and since Contred requested her as a witness, she won't say anything favorable to Cascata."

"……."

"What you should be most concerned about is the possibility that Kiara might be pressured by Schaiskeil and commit perjury."

"……."

Carla looked down at the document and closed her mouth.

\*

After Liam left, only Ivan and Regina remained in the lecture hall.

Ivan intended to wait for Carla to return, and while doing so, he was staring blankly at Regina's back.

* When did you start taking care of Regina like this? You weren't this kind of person.

I've always been like this.

Carla, glaring at Ivan with her eyes wide open.

Ivan scratched the bridge of his nose as he thought of Carla.

What should he do about this?

He hadn't noticed when he wasn't paying attention, but now that he was paying attention, he kept worrying about it.

'…To have to be mindful of others, this is… I don't want to go back to how I was before.'

The life of a commoner is a life of being mindful and cunning.

You have to be mindful of the nobles, and you have to be more cunning than others to act even a little bit more shrewdly so that you can at least eat properly.

Ivan didn't want to go back to that life.

His childhood when he didn't know anything, and the memories of his past life that he had regained.

Although the two were mixed together, his life as a commoner was by no means a good memory.

Unconsciously, the memories of his past life, and the desire to regain his identity from his past life as if it were his own.

Then, perhaps it would be right to cut Regina off here.

It was a thought that suddenly occurred to him.

But.

Would it be okay to just watch her collapse?

'…To think I'm having these thoughts, have I become soft?'

With that question in mind, Ivan pretended to slowly turn the pages of his book, glancing sideways at Regina.

Normally, she should have already left the lecture hall.

What could be the reason she was still sitting there?

Regina's fingertips were meaninglessly stroking the textbook.

Her gaze was directed at the letters, but it seemed she wasn't actually reading anything.

…This is even more worrying than Carla.

Ivan thought so and tried to turn his gaze away again.

But at that moment, he saw her hand trembling faintly.

'I guess I have no choice.'

Ivan sighed and got up from his seat.

His heavy footsteps headed towards her.

"Regina."

She flinched and raised her head.

Her eyes, filled with a gloomy light, turned to Ivan.

"……."

Ivan smiled and looked down at her.

Unlike Ivan, who was smiling, Regina was not smiling.

It felt as if she was wearing a mask, looking at Ivan from beyond a layer.

"...Do you have something to say to me?"

"Not really."

Ivan quietly sat down in the seat in front of Regina.

Regina stared at Ivan without saying a word.

However, the fingers holding the textbook were trembling faintly.

The anxiety seeping out from Regina was being revealed through those fingers.

"Did you come to make excuses? Or are you going to pity me like Carla?"

"What is there to explain? You know everything, Regina."

Ivan remained calm.

Regina, looking at Ivan, twisted her lips slightly and smiled.

But her eyes weren't smiling at all.

"I guess so. You wouldn't have any guilt."

"Regina."

A conversation full of sarcasm.

Ivan saw Regina in a new light.

Love changes people, or was it simply because of that that Regina had changed so much?

"...I'm sorry that I couldn't respond to your feelings, Regina. But."

"There's no need to add unnecessary words to an apology, is there?"

"Yeah, you're right. Regina, I'm sorry."

"It's okay. …If it's anyone's fault, it's my fault for being too late."

Regina lowered her gaze slightly.

The hand that had been holding the textbook had already released it and was now neatly placed on the desk with both hands clasped together.

"Don't feel guilty. You and Carla, you actually look good together. Carla is better than me. Appearance, family, wealth, power, everything. So I don't think it's strange that you're falling for Carla."

"Regina."

"Why? Isn't what I'm saying true?"

"You've changed. You didn't used to say things like that."

"Changed?"

Regina raised her gaze again and looked at Ivan.

Originally, originally?

What was I like originally?

An unknown annoyance surged up.

The emotions that were heating up her body were surging so fiercely that Regina herself couldn't suppress them.

"There's no such thing as changed. I've always been like this. You just didn't know."

"No, Regina. You were a little more…"

"A little more gentle and kind? And this is the result? I have to smile insincerely even after being robbed in front of my eyes!?

ㅡ Thud!

Regina suddenly stood up, causing the chair to fall over with a loud noise.

But neither Ivan nor Regina even glanced at it.

"If you're going to say things like I've changed, then stop. Do I have to tell you again that you two look really good together? I'm not qualified to be there, so I have to laugh and bless you, is that what you're trying to say is like me?"

Ivan didn't say anything.

Looking up at Regina, Ivan just stared at her silently.

"Okay, then I'll ask you too. Ivan."

"Yeah. Anything."

"...Do you even love Carla? Do you even like her?"

At the sudden question, Ivan couldn't answer.

Ivan was speechless at the unexpected question.

Seeing that, Regina wore a cold smile.

"Yeah, I knew it. There's no such thing as love, is there? It's just a relationship where you spend the night together, that's all."

"Regina. I don't know what you're trying to say."

"If you don't know, think about it carefully. Even from now on. I might have been nothing to you, but Carla might not be."

With those words, Regina brushed past Ivan.

Watching her leave the lecture hall without being able to stop her, Ivan sat there blankly.

"...Do I even love her, huh?"

Rewinding Regina's words, Ivan ran a hand over his face.

Do I love her, do I even like her?

It was a difficult question.

# 105 - Her and Her (8)

1. She and Her (8)

The empty classroom, bathed in the setting sun, exuded a desolate atmosphere.

Though it was a space occupied by only five students, the difference between having five and having one, even with such a small number, was quite distinct.

* Do you even love Carla? Do you even like her?

‘Love, huh.’

Ivan had two experiences.

One he possessed only as a memory, but the weight of that memory was by no means light—the experience of a past life that could also be called Ivan.

And the other was his experience as Ivan, living as a commoner.

If these two experiences, with their different weights, were placed on a scale, it would inevitably tip towards the experience of his past life—because its value was incomparable.

Even looking into both of these experiences, love did not exist for Ivan. There was nothing that could be called affection, let alone love, nor anything that could be called negative affection or maternal love.

‘I don’t know what those feelings mean…’

A feeling he didn’t know because he had never received it.

A feeling he couldn’t know because he had never given it.

It was a feeling that could only be known by giving or receiving, but it was a feeling he had never experienced.

That was why Regina's casual remark resonated so deeply with Ivan.

‘Hmm. Carla Della Cascata…’

Thinking about it with his chin resting on his hand, Carla was merely an object of exploitation to him.

If things continued as they were, it was certain that he would marry her, and it was also certain that he would go from being a commoner to the son-in-law of a great noble.

If that happened, even if it was difficult to obtain the position of head of the family, it wouldn't be too difficult to gain power within the family.

If he could get even a part of the Cascata's power in his hands, and if Ivan's own strength was added to that, with no legitimate heir to the Imperial Family yet—Ivan thought it was entirely possible.

However, however—this feeling was strange.

His mind was full of thoughts of exploitation, but when he thought about Carla, a strange emotion began to surface little by little.

Even at the Aufstieg banquet, she acted as if Ivan's affairs were her own, and she didn't hesitate to passionately express her emotions, as if Ivan was about to defect to Aufstieg.

‘…I’m just using her. Carla is just that kind of existence to me.’

Ivan shook his head and closed his eyes.

Carla Della Cascata was that kind of existence.

She had to be that kind of existence.

Meanwhile, Carla left the instructor's office and walked down the hallway.

It wasn't a long hallway, but perhaps because her steps were heavy, the hallway seemed unusually long.

‘I didn’t exactly not expect Kiara to be able to come out as a witness, but still.’

That was right.

Kiara wasn't exactly in that spot—in that exact spot—but she was there nonetheless, and even if she committed perjury, there was no one to refute it except Carla.

So, even if the situation became complicated, what she had to think about was… what kind of testimony Kiara would give.

If she could know that in advance, she could establish a logic to refute anything, anything at all.

‘This has become a headache.’

How did things turn out like this?

But if she hadn't killed Lucas at that time, even more troublesome things would have happened.

If Ivan had been hit with the Aphrodisiac while Lucas was still alive, something terrible would have happened. Assuming the worst-case scenario, Ivan's circuits would have reversed, ending his life as a Mage, and Carla, watching that scene, would have—

‘Ah, let’s get rid of these terrible thoughts.’

Carla shook her head to shake off the stray thoughts.

It couldn't be helped.

She could go directly to Kiara and ask, but that would be more likely to stir up trouble.

In the end, she couldn't respond right now.

There was nothing to do but wait.

Before she knew it, twilight had fallen on the campus.

The trees, bathed in the orange twilight, cast long shadows, and the campus was enveloped in silence except for the occasional shouts of training.

Carla looked down at the campus for a moment before returning to the classroom, where she ran into Ivan.

“You didn’t go back?”

“I was waiting.”

“I see.”

As Carla entered the classroom, Ivan also stood up from his seat.

Since his purpose was to wait for Carla, there was no reason to stay in the classroom any longer.

“I don’t know what happened, but was it resolved well?”

Ivan asked as they left the classroom and went down the stairs.

Carla pondered for a moment on how to answer, but the deliberation didn't last long.

He would find out anyway, and even if she hid it from Ivan, she couldn't hide it for long.

“Kiara is going to appear as a witness in the Imperial trial.”

“Kiara, you mean that girl who was with Lucas?”

“Yeah.”

“She’s going to commit perjury, isn’t she?”

Carla silently nodded.

He was certainly smart, Ivan was.

He had grasped the context already, even though she had only told him one thing.

The two walked towards the dormitory.

It was quite late in the day, so there weren't many students to be seen.

Walking along the forest path, thick with the shadows of dense conifers, Ivan said.

“Still, I don’t think you need to worry too much.”

“Why?”

“Either way, you’re a Cascata. If there’s a chance that you’ll be at a disadvantage, it’s if it flows into a murder triggered by a love affair. Schyskeil wouldn’t like that very much either.”

That was true.

If the eldest daughter of the great noble Cascata killed the eldest son of the great noble Schyskeil because of a simple love affair, how ugly would that be?

For the great nobles, who were united by pride and face, it was an absolute disgrace that was difficult to accept.

“So Enrico won’t stand still. He won’t let it flow in that direction, and if that’s the case, Kiara’s testimony won’t be that threatening either. I don’t think you need to worry?”

“…Maybe.”

But Carla had a lingering unpleasant feeling.

As Ivan said, if Carla was to be at a disadvantage, the story would have to flow into a love affair, and if that happened, Carla had some unfavorable elements.

The scandal involving Ivan was the biggest problem…

Rumors had spread so widely that there were few people who didn't know about it.

Because of that rumor, it wouldn't be good in many ways if it flowed into a love affair.

“Somehow, it’ll pass. Face is important, isn’t it, for nobles.”

“…It’s not just because of that.”

Carla, who had thrown her bag down carelessly, lay sprawled on the bed and said.

Her skirt was disheveled, and her purplish-black hair was scattered like black flower petals as she looked up at the ceiling.

“Your face will be affected too. As you said, if you become a noble, face is an important factor.”

“My face?”

When Ivan picked up the bag that Carla had thrown down carelessly and placed it on the desk, Carla answered while still looking up at the ceiling.

“Your face will be affected.”

“My face?”

“Yeah. If you…”

Carla hesitated, then gripped the end of the blanket tightly.

Her gaze kept falling to the floor, and her breathing became slightly rough.

“…If you become my husband, face will be important, won’t it.”

With those words, she turned away.

Her face felt strangely hot.

Ivan's hand, too, stopped at those words.

Carla's words, which she had uttered as if it were nothing—it seemed that it wasn't nothing.

Carla's face was also flushed red, and her eyes, which had been looking up at the ceiling, were tightly closed, and her lips were firmly shut.

Ivan quietly stared at Carla.

The words Carla had uttered, and the words Regina had said.

Those words, which were by no means meaningless, weighed heavily on him.

Ivan let out a long breath and opened his mouth with difficulty.

“…I guess so. I can’t just think that nothing will happen.”

\*

After a late dinner, as the dark night arrived.

Even after showering, Carla said that she wasn't in the mood—but Ivan also felt down today, so the two were lying on the same bed, trying to sleep without anything happening.

As Carla turned away from Ivan, Ivan quietly stared at her back.

Her delicate lines drew a gentle curve, revealing the curves of her body.

Ivan, who had been quietly staring at those lines, sighed softly and turned away as well.

* Do you even love Carla? Do you even like her?

If you become my husband…

Marriage was something that could not be found in any experience.

He had never loved anyone, let alone married, nor had he ever been loved.

Ivan didn't know love.

The emotion of love was foreign to Ivan.

He had never received love, and therefore didn't know how to give it.

It was as if someone who didn't know colors was trying to paint with a brush, with only vague sensations swirling in his head.

Carla, whom he had only thought of as an object to be used.

What Regina had said, and what Carla had said.

The worries triggered by those things unexpectedly created worries that prevented Ivan from falling asleep.

If Carla disappeared.

If in that trial, Kiara's perjury caused some harm to Carla.

What would happen to me?

Would I be okay?

Ivan didn't know.

If Carla disappeared.

If she disappeared.

Was it just one plan that had gone awry,

Or was something deeper getting twisted?

He couldn't come to a conclusion.

But what was certain was,

The moment the thought reached there,

His fist was clenched tightly without him even realizing it.

# 106 - Her and Her (9)

1. She and She (9)

That night, Carla couldn't sleep at all.

With Ivan sleeping right next to her, she couldn't toss and turn audibly, but lying with her back to him, she let out long, muffled sighs, worrying and worrying again.

Eventually, feeling uncomfortable, she quietly got up, put on her gown, and made her way to the window.

Sitting on the wide window sill, she curled up with her knees together, stubbornly pressing her lips shut.

‘There’s absolutely nothing to predict.’

What kind of testimony would Kiara give?

That there was an aphrodisiac, or that there wasn’t?

But that was something that happened when Kiara wasn’t there.

If she claimed there wasn’t one, Carla could counter by asking her to reenact the situation when she killed Lucas—she wouldn’t know, after all.

What if she claimed there was one…?

That doesn’t make sense either.

For Schaiske, there was no reason to request a witness.

Did Carla ambush?

At that time, Carla had one arm missing.

No matter what, she wasn’t a suitable opponent, so there were too many loopholes.

In the end, it meant that Kiara had no testimony she could give.

Holding onto such an unsolvable dilemma, Carla worried, and in a fit of frustration, she tugged at her hair and grimaced.

“How about meeting Kiara directly?”

“Ah. You’re awake?”

“Someone’s worrying so loudly.”

Ivan, who she thought was asleep, opened his eyes and slowly sat up in bed.

Feeling awkward, Carla kept her mouth shut and looked down, while Ivan approached her and sat on the window sill.

Faced with him unexpectedly, Carla finally let out a faint sigh and spoke to Ivan.

“I can’t guess anything at all. I don’t know what Kiara will testify about, and whatever she says will ultimately fall apart logically. I have no idea what she’s up to.”

“To be honest, I feel the same way.”

Ivan didn’t even understand why there was a royal trial.

What’s the point of a trial?

If someone says who the victim is, who the perpetrator is, and that there were these circumstances and those circumstances, isn’t it just that the head of the relevant office makes the judgment without even going to the emperor?

Perhaps it’s because he’s a high noble—besides, Ivan couldn’t assert anything since he had never seen a case where one high noble killed another.

“So just meet Kiara. She probably won’t tell you what kind of testimony she’ll give, but you should be able to get a rough idea of the atmosphere, right?”

At Ivan’s words, Carla pondered for a moment.

In fact, that method was the best.

Worrying here wouldn’t yield any answers.

“…I’ll have to meet Kiara tomorrow.”

“Yeah. That way, I can call it my rain.”

“…Can you not use that word when you’re Ivan? It’s really creepy.”

Seeing Carla frown as she spoke, Ivan laughed.

With a voice full of laughter, he said again.

“I mean, I’m the man you can lean on. It’s okay to rely on me a little, Carla.”

That was quite a nice thing to say, Carla thought.

She only thought it, but didn’t say it out loud.

At the same time.

Regina was also unable to sleep.

Recently, she had been feeling that something was strange about herself.

Her emotions were too tumultuous, and it was hard to suppress the surging passion.

Since childhood, she had received lessons on being a priestess—cultivating the demeanor of a lady, how to conduct herself and her mindset as a woman, and even the anxiety that if she didn’t uphold those, she would have no reason to exist.

Having grown up thoroughly educated on how to behave, speak, and think when she became the wife of a noble, she was quite accustomed to suppressing and enduring her own emotions.

Gentle, kind, patient, and soft-spoken, the ideal woman of the empire.

Though she was molded by someone who took inspiration from a painting, Regina Parla was now tormented by the self-loathing of feeling that she had become strange.

‘Why am I like this lately?’

Ivan and Carla.

Just seeing these two made the blood in her veins feel like it was burning hot.

Her emotions were swirling, and it felt like they were violently raging within her body without a way to escape.

Whenever she had something to say, she had always followed her father’s teaching to repeat it three times in her head before speaking, but for the past few days, she couldn’t do that.

‘Ivan…’

The Ivan in her memories was still smiling.

Calling her name affectionately, he looked as if he would reach out his hand at any moment, smiling brightly.

But when Regina reached out to grasp that hand, the kind voice that had called her name suddenly called out Carla’s name, and from behind her, Carla appeared, embracing Ivan and sharing a passionate hug.

‘It’s hot…’

It wasn’t the time to be hot.

It was just about to enter early summer; if anything, it should be late spring.

In such a season, Regina felt an unexpected heat and got out of bed.

Her body was hot, and her throat was hot.

Even after drinking two glasses of cold water from the pot she had placed by her bedside, Regina couldn’t control her heated body.

‘I need to get some fresh air…’

Would it help if she got some cold air?

Her room, located on the outermost side of the dormitory, was just a short walk to the right after opening the door, leading directly to the right garden of the dormitory.

She knew that garden had no door for entering or exiting, so even when the curfew of the dormitory came, it wasn’t locked.

‘Just a little, I’ll just get some fresh air and come back.’

Could it be that she caught a cold?

Thinking that, Regina carefully grasped the doorknob leading to the garden and slowly turned it.

As expected, the unlocked door opened with a tiny metallic sound, and a cold breeze seeped through the slightly opened gap, cooling her heated body.

“It feels refreshing…”

A garden at night has its own charm.

In this late hour, with no one around, even the flowers seemed to close their buds and bow their heads.

In a place where only the full moon silently looked down, Regina strolled through the garden.

“I feel like I can breathe now.”

As the cold night breeze blew in, her hot body felt like it was cooling down.

On a normal day, she would have curled up from the cold instead of feeling refreshed, but Regina was only experiencing the sensation of coolness.

“I should sit a little longer before going back…”

So refreshing,

So invigorating,

So delightful.

When Regina wanted to hold onto this wonderful feeling a little longer and sat on a bench—at that moment, she realized someone was already standing in front of her.

The refreshing sensation she had been feeling vanished in an instant.

“How is it?”

This time, no shadows were cast by the moonlight.

With thick, silvery-white hair and red-tinted eyes.

When she saw the woman looking at her with a chillingly red gaze, Regina instinctively curled her toes and gripped the bench tightly.

“…W-What do you mean by that?”

It was her.

The very woman who had suggested that she should take Ivan away.

“Do you still have no intention of accepting my proposal?”

“No. Ivan is… Ivan.”

Even if she were to take him away, he wouldn’t be the Ivan she loved.

Even if she were to take him away, he wouldn’t be the Ivan she loved, so it would mean nothing.

“Hmmm…”

The white-haired woman made a strange sound and smiled faintly.

“You want something from me, don’t you?”

“Oh, not at all.”

She answered with a smile, “Really, I don’t want anything like that.”

“I just felt that your unrequited love was pitiful. So I came to offer my help, that’s all.”

“Don’t lie.”

“Hmmm. Still, you seem quite resolute. It should have been time for you to be swayed by your emotions, but seeing you still holding back means you’re stronger than I expected.”

“…Did you do something strange to me?”

As soon as Regina heard her words, she realized.

“No? I didn’t do anything like that.”

“Then why are my emotions…”

Regina’s voice trembled.

Though she said no, it was this woman.

Regina had been feeling strange lately, and it was because this woman had done something—

“I didn’t do anything strange. It’s just pure magic. It’s not something strange, is it?”

“W-What kind of sophistry…”

“Hey.”

The white-haired woman, still smiling, raised her finger and waved it gently.

“Don’t misunderstand. I just helped you be a little more honest with your emotions. I came to see the fruits of that, and your patience is much greater than I expected.”

“W-What do you mean?!”

Regina jumped up from the bench where she had been sitting.

Her instincts were ringing alarm bells.

This woman is dangerous.

She shouldn’t get close to this woman.

She needed to put distance between herself and this woman right now—

What could be called a woman’s intuition was ringing madly, sending danger warnings to Regina.

“Oh, oh. There’s no need to try to avoid me. Now, I’m just trying to encourage you a bit more.”

The woman smiled.

Before Regina could step back, the woman’s palm touched Regina’s forehead.

“W-What are you—”

Startled, Regina tried to swat her hand away.

No, she tried to.

The moment she touched her hand—an overwhelming sensation coursed through her body.

It felt as if thousands and thousands of cold ice picks were piercing her entire being.

That sensation made Regina kneel down without realizing it.

# 107 - Her and Her

1. Her and Her (10)

"Ah, ahn, haaa…"

Regina, without realizing it, knelt down, gasping for breath.

It felt like she couldn't properly inhale, and even when she exhaled, the air in her lungs wouldn't fully escape.

A terrible pain, as if tiny ice picks were embedded all over her skin, was overwhelming Regina.

Her forehead, her forehead.

The white-haired woman, the place where her touch had been, this distant and vast darkness spreading from there.

The foreign darkness soon subsided.

Or perhaps it didn't subside.

It felt as if it had assimilated into her, and now the alien sense of incongruity felt natural.

Ivan stood before Regina.

Ivan stood there, wearing the smile that had once made her heart flutter.

— Regina.

Ivan extended his hand to her as she sat there.

Regina reached out to Ivan without hesitation.

Hand met hand, and Ivan's warm, soft touch grasped Regina's hand—

But then, Ivan's hand retreated.

'Wh-why…? Ivan, Ivan…?'

Regina's plaintive cry didn't seem to reach Ivan, as he withdrew the hand he had offered her and moved further away.

'Ivan, Ivan…! Pl-please, take my hand…!'

Regina cried out in a hushed voice.

She was sitting here, she was here, it was too late, but she was right here, Regina cried out, trying to get up and chase after Ivan.

However, her hand couldn't reach Ivan.

Suddenly, Carla appeared beside Ivan, and with a cold smile, she left Regina with a sneer—and then clung to Ivan's side, linking arms with him.

"Are you still hung up on her, Ivan?"

A voice whispered in her ear.

Carla's voice was clear to Regina.

"You can forget about her now. You chose me, didn't you? And I chose you."

'No, no! That can't be…'

She couldn't bring herself to say that it couldn't be.

She already knew that Ivan had chosen Carla, so she couldn't deny it.

But—

That was an unavoidable situation.

It was a situation she couldn't help.

Carla was trying to steal Ivan from her…

"No matter how you look at it, I'm better than Regina, right? Choosing me was a wise decision, Ivan."

Regina's eyes widened.

That sounded as if Carla would have seduced Ivan even if that situation hadn't occurred.

"Yes, Carla. You're much better."

Ivan's gaze,

His uncharacteristically cold gaze,

Scanned Regina once.

"Than Regina, that is."

'No!!!'

Regina clutched her head and curled up.

She screamed that it wasn't true, but no sound came out.

The raging waves of emotion within her swallowed her whole.

'No, no…'

No matter how much she shook her head, nothing changed.

'Ivan, Ivan should have been mine…'

Ivan didn't return.

But she couldn't accept it.

'…Right.'

Regina's movements stopped.

Her eyes, which had been adrift in the storm, sank deeply.

'Carla is bad. Carla is the bad one. Carla is bad…'

Ivan should have been hers.

'So, I have to get him back. Ivan has to be mine.'

Carla is bad.

Carla took him away.

Ivan, who had never been hers, had somehow become Regina's man.

Without realizing the awkwardness, the incongruity, Regina repeated to herself.

I have to get him back.

I have to get Ivan back.

From Carla—

Everything is Carla's fault.

"Where are you going?"

Ivan, knowing that Carla had tossed and turned all night, asked as he watched her busily preparing to go out early in the morning.

"I need to see Kiara."

"You're thinking of meeting her to talk, right?"

"Yeah."

Carla nodded.

Perhaps even if they met, there wouldn't be a clear answer.

But even if she kept worrying like this, there wouldn't be an answer either.

So, Carla decided that it would be better to meet and talk.

"At this hour, Kiara should still be in her room. So, it's better to go now."

"Wouldn't it be better to meet after class?"

"No. If I keep this up, I won't be able to focus in class. It's better to meet and talk right away to ease my mind."

Ivan gave up trying to dissuade Carla.

What she said wasn't entirely wrong.

"Then, I'll be back."

"Yeah. I hope you have a good outcome."

Carla didn't respond to that.

Carla stood in front of Kiara's door and took a deep breath.

She knocked loudly enough to be heard inside, and after a moment, a voice asked who it was.

"Carla Della Cascata. I'd like to talk for a moment."

— …Come in.

When Carla opened the door and entered, Kiara was already dressed, despite the early hour.

She had been sitting on the living room sofa reading a book, but when she saw Carla enter, she slowly closed the book and stood up.

"It's early in the morning, but what brings you here?"

"I think you know why I've come. Can we talk for a moment?"

"Since you've already come in, since I've already let you in, I don't really have a choice. Please, sit down. Will it be a long story?"

"…I don't know."

Carla sat across from Kiara, observing her complexion.

Pale—that was her first impression.

The Kiara she had encountered a few times before, when Lucas was still alive, hadn't looked this bad.

Her skin, which had been as fair and white as Carla's, was now so pale that it could be called ashen. There were dark circles under her eyes, as if she hadn't been sleeping properly, and she looked emaciated, as if she hadn't been eating properly, making her look like she was sick.

"I expected it. That you would come to me. I'm actually a little surprised it took you longer than I thought."

"Coming right away would be too obvious."

"You found out after receiving the trial date notification, right?"

"Yes, that's right."

Carla took a moment to catch her breath and organize her thoughts.

What should she say, how should she put it?

Should she speak in the roundabout way of the nobility?

But the answer was already clear.

"…I want to know what kind of testimony you'll give in court."

"Is that important?"

"It's important."

"Is it? I suppose it is. But I'm a little surprised. I didn't think you would seem this desperate."

Kiara was surprised that Carla seemed more urgent than she had expected.

Of course, even if Kiara testified, it wouldn't change Carla from innocent to guilty.

The outcome of the trial was already determined.

She didn't know what Contred von Schyskeil was trying to achieve by having her testify that Lucas really had an Aphrodisiac, as he had instructed her to do.

But at least she could guess that it wasn't to lead to a guilty verdict.

"It's important. You're a noble, so you understand. It's a matter of face."

"Is it?"

"It's not just my face, it's Ivan's face too."

A different light flickered in Kiara's eyes.

She had thought Carla was extremely selfish—as nobles usually were.

But if she cared this much about the face of a commoner like Ivan, it was practically proof that the rumors circulating in the academy were true.

"I don't know about the connection. But I can't tell you what kind of testimony I'll give."

"You're going to lie, aren't you? Perjury, I mean."

Kiara fell silent at those words.

"You can say whatever you want. But there's no guarantee that I'll commit perjury. So, there's no need for you to jump to conclusions."

Carla didn't hesitate.

Instead, she spoke even faster, continuing her words as soon as Kiara finished speaking.

"I won't be able to interfere with whether you lie, whether you commit perjury. You're already under Schyskeil's claws. But if you commit perjury, you should know that it could mean you're at odds with Cascata."

"Will Cascata's beak turn towards us?"

"Cascata's beak is that sensitive. And its wings are very wide. The wings are so large that the ends don't touch, so there's plenty of room."

An arrogant statement that they would gladly accept her even if she left Schyskeil and defected to Cascata.

But if Carla was the one saying it, it was understandable.

"It's difficult for me to answer when it's not Enrico, or even Fabio Della Cascata, but Miss Carla who's saying that. Schyskeil's claws are also very thick and strong."

"You're being threatened."

Kiara fell silent at those words.

Kiara, who had been moving her lips several times, picked up the book she had put down again.

"I think I should finish reading this book and prepare for school. Time is running out."

"Okay. I understand your answer. Fabio is still young, and Enrico is still healthy. And I also have two good arms. And if another pillar is built, Cascata's wings will cover the empire under one crown. I hope you make a good decision."

"Please leave safely."

Kiara wasn't looking at Carla.

Carla glanced at her as she opened the book, and then left her room.

'…It might not be a big deal.'

That's what she thought.

But the moment Carla closed Kiara's door, she felt an unknown anxiety creeping in.

The anxiety continued to follow her as she walked down the hallway, and she even felt like someone was watching her.

Even when she used Magical Power detection, there was nothing particularly suspicious, but there was a strange sense of unease, as if someone was glaring at her.

'Hoo.'

Carla eased her tense nerves with a sigh and looked around.

And the next moment, she realized that her fingertips had become strangely cold.

'What is this feeling?'

An unknown sense of unease.

And, anxiety.

Trying to shake off those feelings, Carla walked down the hallway back to her room, unaware that someone was watching her from outside the window.

# 108 - Her and Her

1. She and She (11)

The prey that is 'being hunted' does not flee; rather, it is paralyzed in front of the predator and cannot escape.

Kiara, standing before Contred, was just like that.

Like a mouse in front of a snake, like a frog in front of a snake, Kiara could do nothing, think nothing, and say nothing, sitting frozen as if glued to the sofa.

“Tomorrow is finally here, Kiara.”

“…Yes, my lord.”

“I believe your testimony.”

“Yes.”

“The girl from Cascata came to find you.”

“…Yes.”

“Remember your position well. Even if Schyskeil's claws cannot tear apart Cascata's wings, they must leave a scar.”

Kiara's only response was a small, quiet “Yes” once more.

“There is only one thing you must do, Kiara.”

“I understand, my lord. I will do as instructed.”

“Good. You should. Now, you may go.”

Kiara staggered and barely managed to stand.

She managed to greet Contred, and with a wobbly step, she left the reception room, disappearing through the closing door.

She would head to her guest room and try to sleep.

But sleep would not come, and she would spend the night with her eyes wide open, attending the trial that awaited her tomorrow.

Contred raised his glass.

He swirled the deep red wine in the glass a few times, then took a sip, savoring the aroma before slowly swallowing it.

‘I knew Kiara wouldn’t waver…’

To testify that there was an aphrodisiac was Contred's way of tarnishing Cascata's honor.

Now that the matter had dragged on to a royal trial, and with Lord Cascata still standing strong as the royal court mage, Carla would not be found guilty.

There would be back-and-forth arguments and exchanges, but they would not affect the outcome of the trial—it was merely a formality.

It was merely to embellish the fact that the judgment was made under the solemn authority of the emperor after hearing both sides.

If a not guilty verdict was inevitable, it would be satisfying to throw mud at Cascata's face.

“…The price of my son's life is only this much. Schyskeil's future looks bleak.”

The succession is unsatisfactory.

Currently, Schyskeil, like Lucas, has a younger brother who is merely a mediocre talent, making the future truly dark.

Thus, he had allied with Aufstieg, but now he somewhat regretted not seeking another method.

“The die has already been cast. There is no turning back now. It cannot be helped, it cannot be helped…”

Setting down his glass, Contred rested his chin on his hand, recalling the woman he had met that afternoon.

A woman with white hair and striking red eyes.

To her, who had come from Aufstieg, Contred had passed on a poison.

Among the poisons possessed by Schyskeil, it was one that had a peculiar form, gradually altering both body and consciousness until it ultimately led to death.

Contred already knew where and how to use that poison, having given her a sufficient amount.

“If everything goes as planned, all will be calm.”

Contred tilted his glass once more.

The emperor, now in a body that could be described as elderly, sat at his desk.

A few sheets of paper fluttered in the candlelight, shifting back and forth under his touch.

“Cascata's nephew, indeed.”

In truth, a murder case or two was not a big deal.

As everyone had expected, the emperor was not concerned with whatever arguments arose from there.

After all, the verdict would be not guilty, and Carla Della Cascata would leave the courtroom with a light heart.

However, the document in the emperor's hand detailed the history of Ivan Contadino, not the defendant Carla Della Cascata.

‘According to Lord Cascata's report, this guy is definitely it.’

Ivan Contadino.

A figure from a long-vanished empire, now only found in records, presumed to be the reincarnation of that emperor.

He had shown talent at a young age, learned magic under the sponsorship of Albina, who was an instructor at the academy, and thanks to that, he had entered the academy and seduced Carla Della Cascata.

Though it was still just a suspicion, if observed a little longer, he would surely reveal his magical nature, and a request for the release of magical tools stored in the royal treasury was made.

The emperor read the document back and forth for a long time.

‘…He is too dangerous.’

His character was described as extremely calm, decisive, and rational.

If he were to fully regain his memories of his past life and completely harness that power, a bloodstorm would sweep through the empire; thus, Lord Cascata's assertion that he must be killed the moment it becomes certain.

Even if there is a 99.9% suspicion, without 0.1% evidence, one cannot be certain; if there is a 0.1% possibility—that is, if that young man is not the being feared by the emperor and Lord Cascata, then an innocent promising young man would meet an untimely death.

Considering such aspects, the emperor felt a sense of loyalty from Lord Cascata, and a satisfied smile crept onto his face.

He lifted his hand, grasped the imperial seal, and stamped it onto the document.

“With this, it is settled. Then I should start to get some rest. My age is making my eyesight dim…”

Shoving the documents into a leather sleeve and then back into the desk drawer, the emperor stood up and let out a big yawn.

“I'll be back.”

“Yeah. I want to go with you… but I guess I can’t.”

“It’s impossible. Even if you came, you wouldn’t be able to get in, you commoner. Trying to observe a noble trial is far from your reach.”

Carla teased Ivan, sticking her tongue out at him.

At that, Ivan couldn't help but smile, but it was only for a moment before he waved his hand at Carla with a stiffened face.

“Have a good trip. Nothing will happen, and you’ll come back just fine, so don’t worry.”

“Okay. Keep the house safe.”

Even after Carla closed the door and disappeared, Ivan stood there for a while.

Carla Della Cascata—

He had only thought of using her.

That had not changed even now.

The background of Cascata that she possessed would surely give him wings.

But if Carla were to go out like that and not return, or if some other problem were to arise, in that case…

‘…Such a thing must not happen.’

Was it simply because she still had value to be used?

Or was there another reason?

Ivan could not yet make a precise judgment on that matter.

But one thing was certain: while thinking about her utility value with his head, at this moment, he was thinking with his heart.

Even though she was a defendant, she was still a high noble, and the carriage sent by the royal court was a splendid upper-class carriage.

The carriage carrying Carla stopped at the royal court, located in a remote area of the royal outer castle.

Dismounting in that place, which was impressively gray compared to the lavish gold-decorated royal castle, Carla passed through the guards standing watch with a stern face and moved inside the court.

“Carla, did you get some sleep?”

Albina, who met her near the entrance, immediately asked that question upon seeing Carla.

“I managed to get by. But you look more haggard than I do, instructor.”

Indeed, Albina appeared even more worn than Carla.

Although Carla was the defendant, it felt as if Albina was the one on trial.

“Albina has been very worried about you.”

As Lorenzo extinguished the Magic Herb, he said, and Carla bowed her head slightly to Albina.

“Thank you.”

“No, no. Since a student is on trial… Anyway, let’s go in now. It’s almost time.”

“Yes, let’s.”

Lorenzo led the way, and Carla and Albina walked side by side down the corridor.

There was no conversation throughout.

Inside the court, the defense team from the Cascata family and the defense team from the Schyskeil family were already engaged in a war of nerves, but Carla did not cast a glance at them as she entered the courtroom.

Sitting in the defendant's seat, Carla looked around.

In the Cascata camp, Enrico was present, and beside him was Fabio, who looked extremely worried. On the opposite side, in the Schyskeil camp, Contred and his first wife were seated.

Everyone had stiff faces, so Carla did not greet anyone and simply sat quietly, staring straight ahead.

— Ding, ding—

The bell signaling the hour rang out.

And at the same time, the courtroom door opened, revealing the emperor dressed in a black velvet robe.

Everyone stood up to pay their respects to the emperor, and in that heavy atmosphere, the emperor walked to the center of the courtroom and took his seat as the judge.

Once he sat down in the stiff wooden chair, everyone took their seats and waited for the emperor to speak.

“From now on, we will begin the trial concerning the murder of Lucas von Schyskeil, the eldest son of the Schyskeil family, by Carla Della Cascata, the daughter of the Cascata family.”

With those words from the emperor, the trial began.

# 109 - The Value of Words

1. The Value of Words

The trial proceeded exactly as anyone could have predicted.

In fact, Carla barely had a chance to speak; everyone else exchanged words as they saw fit, and the trial moved forward.

The Cascata family's legal team seemed to think their victory was already secured, as they simply reiterated the points they had made previously. The Schaiskeil side was no different.

That was the case.

Until the witness appeared, that is.

"We will now hear the testimony of the witness designated by Schaiskeil. Is that acceptable?"

"Proceed."

Among the Schaiskeil legal team was a particularly tall, somewhat stooped man.

Carla had never seen him before. When he addressed the Emperor, the Emperor, seemingly uninterested, waved his hand in approval.

"Witness, Kiara di Servitore. Lady Servitore, please enter."

Next to the main door at the back of the courtroom, there was a smaller wooden door.

When Carla turned to look, the door opened, and Kiara, pale-faced, entered the courtroom.

The heavy atmosphere of the courtroom seemed light compared to her face.

Kiara, not frowning but utterly devoid of expression, walked to the witness stand with that same blank face. The tall, stooped man turned and bowed deeply towards someone.

"I will make a direct petition."

A man stood up from the audience seats, and the atmosphere in the courtroom shifted instantly.

The man was Contred von Schyskeil, the current head of the Schaiskeil family—Lucas's father.

"Lord Schaiskeil will make a direct petition?"

The Emperor looked intrigued.

It was not a common sight for the plaintiff's father, especially the head of the family, to step forward to make a petition himself.

"Proceed. You must have something to say."

The Emperor nodded in approval, and Contred bowed deeply in gratitude.

He then walked from the audience seats to stand next to the witness stand, glancing at Kiara.

"Kiara di Servitore, Lady Servitore. How long have you known my inadequate son, Lucas?"

"...I first met the Young Master when I was five years old. We have grown up together ever since, so it has been 15 years this year."

"Quite a long time. It seems like a long time to us, but it must feel especially significant since you have spent almost your entire lives together."

"That is correct."

Carla wondered what they were trying to say.

What kind of conversation were they trying to have, having called Kiara as a witness?

Contred was not even looking at Carla.

As if she were of no consequence, Contred was exchanging questions and answers with Kiara.

"Then, Lady Servitore, you must know well the nature of my poor son Lucas, who was killed this time."

"Yes, I know..."

"It was never a good nature. I know it well. Eccentric, impatient, and frustrated when things didn't go his way. He had to have whatever he wanted in his hands. Otherwise, he would become enraged. And he was terribly clumsy at expressing his true feelings. He needed someone to understand him. Isn't that so?"

There was a strange meaning in Contred's question.

If it was a rebuke, it was not a light emotion.

As a father, the resentment he could have for his child was contained within it.

"He also liked women. So, let me ask you one thing. Lady Servitore, in your opinion, did Lucas love Lady Cascata over there?"

Even at that moment, Contred did not look at Carla.

Rather, Kiara was the only one who turned her head to look at Carla once.

Kiara, unnaturally turning her head as if the joints would creak, looked at Carla, then turned her head back to look at Contred.

"...Yes."

"No!"

Carla shouted "That's a lie!" and tried to jump up.

However, the guards standing on either side of her, the defendant, restrained her, and Carla bit her lip and sat back down.

"That's right. Lucas was clumsy in how he expressed himself. My son Lucas, that is. Don't you think so, Lady Servitore?"

"...I think so too."

"To Lady Cascata, he was probably sincere. That's what I think."

Contred's words seemed to make no sense at all.

But Carla could clearly feel it.

This was a kind of groundwork.

"To Lady Cascata, Lucas was sincere. I think he did his best to show his affection. Even if it looked like a dark harassment to others."

At this moment, due to Contred's words, many of the aristocratic audience members gathered here had a similar thought.

That Lucas's harsh bullying of Carla might have been his own way of expressing affection—like a boy who is not honest with a girl he likes and bullies her.

"Let me ask you one thing, Lady Servitore. During the Inter-house Competition...especially during the Exploration Game. Did you see Lucas trying to use an Aphrodisiac on Lady Cascata?"

Carla's gaze turned to Kiara.

She didn't want to see Contred's calm face.

Carla only looked at Kiara.

Kiara sighed softly and moved her lips several times.

Then, then finally—

"...Yes, I saw it."

A sigh rippled through the audience.

This testimony was tantamount to acknowledging Carla's innocence, her self-defense.

Although she would be found innocent anyway, and it was an obvious trial, with this testimony, Lucas von Schaiskeil's death was the result of Carla's actions to protect herself.

"Yes, I suppose so."

Carla, who had been inwardly sighing in relief, turned her gaze back to Contred.

His face was so calm that it felt strange.

"Lady Cascata."

"Yes."

Carla opened her mouth for the first time since entering this courtroom.

Except for procedures such as oaths and affirmations, it was the first time.

"I want to say I'm sorry to you. My son caused you great trouble. What you did was undoubtedly self-defense, and my son Lucas caused you great trouble by even using prohibited drugs."

"Ah, no. It's okay..."

"Moreover, he coveted a woman who had a lover. Even if an engagement was being pursued. Even though the engagement ceremony had not yet taken place, he shouldn't have done that."

"...Excuse me?"

Carla glared at Contred.

Something was going wrong.

She felt a chill down her spine.

Contred approached Carla.

He seemed expressionless, but there was a very faint smile on his lips.

"Didn't you know? That there was talk of an engagement between Lucas and you. So Lucas treated you as if you were already engaged. The engagement ceremony had not yet taken place, and there were talks of marriage, and you even had a lover. It must have been a difficult situation for you."

"L, Lord."

Before Carla could say anything, Contred turned around.

His gaze was directed at Enrico Della Cascata, the current head of the Cascata family, who was sitting there.

"Oh, dear Lord Enrico Della Cascata. It is truly unfortunate to meet in such a place. But, isn't it unavoidable? My inadequate son flirted with Lady Cascata, who clearly had a lover, as if they were already engaged."

Enrico's face was frozen.

It was true that there had been talks of marriage, but they had not held an engagement ceremony.

In other words, the two of them were not related at the time—although Lucas had already treated Carla as if she were his fiancée.

"Even though the one who took Lady Cascata's Virginity was a commoner."

The audience was instantly abuzz.

Was the rumor true? Had Lady Cascata given her body to a commoner? Had they tried to cover up that fact and form a marriage relationship with Schaiskeil?

"Therefore, Your Majesty, I must formally apologize in this place. On behalf of my son, Lucas von Schaiskeil, who is already dead and returned to the earth, unable to speak for himself. To Lady Carla Della Cascata, and to Lord Enrico Della Cascata."

The Emperor looked down at Contred with interest.

"—He was an inadequate son, but he caused great trouble. In the name of Schaiskeil, I apologize."

That was Contred's last petition.

With those words, Contred returned to the audience seats.

But after that, no one opened their mouth.

Lucas von Schaiskeil lost his life.

Contred von Schyskeil lost his son.

Enrico Della Cascata was branded with the disgrace of trying to sell his daughter, who was not a virgin, while deceiving others.

Carla Della Cascata was branded with the disgrace of having slept with a commoner, tarnishing the honor of the nobility.

Two things were true.

Two things were not true.

But there was no way to prove it, and since Ivan's existence was known, even if Carla denied it, no one would believe her.

The lies mixed in with the truth hid in the shadows where no one could prove them, spreading widely throughout the courtroom.

# 110 - The Value of Words (2)

1. The Value of Words (2)

The verdict was inevitably not guilty.

As Carla had anticipated, as Enrico had anticipated, as everyone had anticipated, Carla was acquitted on the grounds of self-defense, and not long after, the trial came to an end.

However, Carla's mind was a tangled mess that she could not unravel.

The trial had concluded in the worst possible way among the worst she had feared, and she found herself sitting in the defendant's seat, slowly rising to leave the courtroom.

How effective would Contrede's cleverly mixed petition of truth and falsehood be? Carla could easily foresee that it would leave a significant stain on the honor of Cascata.

As evidence of this, the moment she stepped out of the courtroom, the gazes of the nobles, who had already exited, turned toward her in unison.

Gazes that felt like arrows flying and piercing her.

They were far colder and more contemptuous than when she had lost her arm, and they were icy looks of disdain directed at her for having mingled with commoners and for having committed murder because of it.

— How could the dignity of the nobility be so shattered...

— Is this what Cascata has come to? What has happened to the honor of the great nobility?

In reality, such conversations would not occur.

At least Carla was cloaked in the guise of the eldest daughter of the great noble Cascata, and there would be no one bold enough to whisper such words in her presence.

But she felt as if she could hear those whispers.

It seemed as if their eyes were whispering, and Carla could not lift her bowed head.

“Carla, Carla. Are you okay?”

At the sound of the familiar voice, Carla finally lifted her head.

Albina, with a worried expression, grabbed her shoulder and shook her.

“What’s wrong? What happened?”

Although she was an instructor, it was still difficult for her to be considered a noble, so Albina could not enter the spectators' area.

And beside her, Lorenzo silently looked at Carla.

“Seeing you come out safely, it doesn’t seem like you were detained or anything, but are you okay? Your complexion looks terrible.”

“…I’m fine, I’m fine. Yes.”

Carla shook her head and removed Albina's hand from her shoulder.

As if waiting for that moment, Lorenzo stepped closer to Carla and spoke.

“Carla. Enrico is waiting for you outside. I think it would be best to go to him right away.”

“…Yes.”

Carla weakly nodded and walked down the corridor.

In truth, it would be a lie to say she hadn’t anticipated this.

She didn’t know what kind of testimony Kiara would give, but she had not thought it would be favorable to her.

She had only seen Kiara with an aphrodisiac; that was the extent of her testimony.

The bones and flesh of that were purely Contrede's skill.

Contrede had cleverly mixed truth and falsehood with Kiara's single remark.

He must have already known that he could not overturn the verdict.

And using that to tarnish the honor of Cascata—perhaps that was even more pragmatic.

Leaving behind the worried gazes of Albina and Lorenzo, she stepped out of the courtroom.

Walking to the carriage stop where the carriage was parked, Carla slowly scanned the carriage adorned with the family crest of Cascata and cautiously opened the door.

“Get in.”

Enrico, sitting inside the carriage, did not even look at her.

He maintained his posture, staring straight ahead, not even giving her a glance.

“…Yes.”

It was to be expected—she thought he might slap her right away, but this was a better response than she had anticipated.

“Sit down. Fabio, you too.”

Carla quietly sat down on the seat without saying a word.

Fabio looked at her with a sympathetic gaze, but he remained silent, as if he had already heard something from Enrico.

“Carla.”

“…Yes.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

Carla, who had been keeping her head down, immediately lifted it at those words.

She had thought he would be furious about the tarnished honor.

But unexpectedly, there was no sign of agitation in Enrico's gaze directed at Carla.

“If you mix one truth with ten lies, you cannot distinguish which is true and which is false. Schaiske is a being that can only do that to Cascata.”

Enrico's calm tone continued.

“From the moment we accepted Ivan Contadino, it was as if we had already taken on the stigma of Cascata. And… Cascata is not so weak. The strength of a family that has shared history with the Empire will not lose its luster over such a stigma.”

“…But I…”

“After all, you are a daughter. What could a daughter do that would lead to long-lasting rumors?”

If the son, who would be the heir of the family, were to engage in disgraceful behavior, that would lead to scandalous rumors.

Just like Lucas of Schaiske, his lack of virtue and character would be talked about for quite some time, even evoking sympathy for Schaiske.

“So don’t worry about it. It might even be a good thing. If you can help Ivan grow quickly into a worthy individual, the reputation of Cascata will rise even higher. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

Carla stared at Enrico with her mouth agape.

Given his personality, she had never expected such a reaction—

“Yes.”

“And pay more attention to Ivan Contadino. Schaiske is full of poisonous rats. You never know what kind of poison they might carry in those tiny claws. If something were to happen to Ivan Contadino, that would be when your honor would truly plummet.”

In other words, Enrico's message was clear.

The stigma that had already been taken on could not be helped.

And that stigma was not a significant matter for Cascata.

There were ways to wash it away, so there was no need to worry about it now.

“…I will do my best.”

“The talent of Ivan…”

Perhaps.

Enrico had something weighing on his mind for a moment—but still.

“The talent is real. If you manage him well, he could push aside pathetic characters like Bricone or Aufstieg and become a new pillar.”

“I’ll do my best.”

“Good. Then I’ll take you to the academy. After that, it will be up to you to handle things. You must do your best not to bring further disgrace to the family.”

Carla nodded with a firm expression.

“Anyway, it didn’t go smoothly, so I feel relieved.”

Even as he said that, Contrede had a somewhat unsatisfied, uneasy expression.

The wine glass in his hand was still filled with a crimson liquid, sloshing around, and after taking a sip, Contrede let out a long sigh.

“It’s truly unfortunate that this is all we can do. It seems that the power of Cascata and Schaiske has grown too far apart to be overcome now.”

“It will soon be reversed, so don’t worry too much.”

“……”

Contrede looked at the woman sitting across from him without responding.

Setting down the sloshing wine glass, Contrede pushed a small box that had been on the table toward her.

“Use it sparingly. If it gets discovered, our Schaiske will take the blame.”

“Don’t worry about that, sir.”

The white-haired woman with red eyes smiled brightly.

“Everything will flow according to its natural course.”

“…You speak well.”

In the mirror, Regina's gaze was devoid of vitality.

Once sparkling with a blue hue, like a jewel blooming with life, the girl’s eyes now resembled shattered fragments of a gem, sunk deep into the abyss, losing their brilliance and becoming murky.

“I didn’t do anything wrong.”

Regina tightened her grip on the bottle she held.

The transparent liquid inside the bottle swayed slightly with her movements, creating bubbles.

“Carla did something wrong. It’s Carla… who caused this. Ivan was supposed to be mine. Isn’t that right… But, but… Carla, you ruined everything.”

A fleeting darkness passed through Regina’s eyes.

So quick that no one noticed it.

“It will be okay now. Everything will be fine now. Carla… has enchanted Ivan. If I give him this, he will return to his senses. Not to Carla… but to me… he will come back to me.”

The white-haired woman with red eyes.

Though Regina did not even know her name, she was like a benefactor to her.

The love potion handed to her by that woman—

If she just fed this to Ivan, he would return to her, as the woman had said.

Regina hugged the vial tightly to her chest once more.

The love potion that would bring Ivan back to her.

If she just fed this to Ivan, her love would be fulfilled again.

Regina believed this without a doubt.

To her, this potion was nothing short of salvation.

# 111 - Strange Feeling (1)

1. A Strange Feeling (1)

"You must remember my words, Carla. Do not tarnish the family's honor any further."

"...I understand."

There was no honorific language exchanged.

Carla's response was casual, but Enrico did not mind that.

Carla closed the carriage door and turned around.

As if waiting for her to turn, the carriage sped away, and at the sound, Carla glanced back.

The slowly receding silhouette of the carriage.

As she quietly watched it, Carla let out a faint sigh and turned back again.

Now it was time to return to the academy.

Time to go back to the dormitory—

Still, thinking that someone was waiting for her in the dormitory made it somewhat better.

'...Better? What’s better about it? I wonder if he’ll even wait for me.'

That was uncertain.

Perhaps he would be waiting, or perhaps not... but still, there was the bond they had built over time.

It was at that moment Carla was lost in thought.

Standing still, wondering what she was doing, thinking she should go back and rest a bit, feeling tired—at that moment.

"Did you have a good trip?"

Carla jumped slightly and looked up.

She hadn’t expected to hear a voice here at all.

When she looked up, she saw a shadow standing a few steps away, backlit by the streetlamp.

Recognizing the silhouette now familiar to her, Carla cleared her throat and composed her expression.

"...Well, I had a good trip. Of course, I was acquitted."

"Is that so?"

As Ivan approached Carla, the darkness lightened, revealing his face under the streetlamp.

With a smile on his face, Ivan looked at Carla as he came closer.

"You did well."

"Yeah. I'm tired, so I want to go in and rest."

"Sure. Let’s go in. What about dinner?"

"I’m not hungry."

It was hardly surprising that she wouldn’t think of food.

Having gone all day without eating properly, she was exhausted from the long trial.

Though she was hungry, she felt no appetite at all.

"I figured as much, so I made some food for you. It’s a salad that’s fine even if it’s cold."

"A salad, huh."

"I also brought some lemon. Should I sprinkle it on?"

"You should just do it without asking, you fool."

Hehe, Ivan chuckled.

Strangely enough, now that this had happened, Carla felt a peculiar sense of returning home.

Throughout the journey back to the dormitory, Ivan remained silent.

Carla, too, was tired and had nothing in particular to say, so an awkward silence lingered between them.

This silence continued until they returned to their room, and even while Carla changed her clothes, it persisted.

Ivan, noticing Carla’s dark and tired expression, couldn’t find the words to speak, while Carla, in her own way, found her mind too cluttered to say anything.

"...I’m exhausted."

It was Carla who broke the silence.

As soon as they returned to the room, she flopped down onto the sofa in the living room and let out a long sigh.

"You did well. It must have been hard."

Ivan quietly approached her from behind and began to massage her shoulders.

It seemed that the tension had built up significantly, indicating she was quite fatigued.

"It’s okay."

"I hope my involvement didn’t cause you any trouble."

"...I expected it."

The problem was that things had unfolded in a much worse way than she had anticipated.

What happened in the courtroom today would likely spread like wildfire by tomorrow, and the way others looked at Carla in the academy would surely become a concern.

After all, being born into nobility and raised as a noble, Carla had a habit of valuing her reputation.

For someone like her, being able to foresee how others would perceive her was quite troubling.

"Can you tell me what happened?"

Carla kept her mouth shut.

But she understood that hiding what had happened today from Ivan would be impossible.

He would find out anyway—

Even if she didn’t say anything today, the rumors would inevitably reach Ivan’s ears. Since it wouldn’t be something she could hide for long, it might be better to just tell him.

"...It felt like I was stabbed by Schaiske."

"Weren’t you acquitted?"

"It was an unexpected attack, something like that."

Carla covered her face and let out a groan.

Given her position, she couldn’t argue there, but the fact that she had to endure it in silence was infuriating. If she had just shot back at them... well, if she had done that, it wouldn’t have ended well. With the Emperor present, such actions would have led to serious consequences...

"So, what happened was..."

"Well, in the end, it became a back-and-forth. Since Schaiske came at you like that, you were acquitted, but your reputation has plummeted."

"That’s how it turned out."

Seeing Carla’s face grow red with rising anger, Ivan felt a bit flustered.

It was understandable; who could have predicted that Schaiske would act like that?

From this perspective, it felt like winning a battle but losing the war.

Moreover, the innocent Ivan was caught up in it—though he wasn’t entirely innocent.

"I’m going to wash up. I need to get ready for bed. I’m too tired."

"Uh, okay. Take care."

With a deep sigh, Carla finally stood up.

Gathering her clothes to change into, she headed toward the shower, while Ivan watched her retreating figure and, with a soft hum, stood up and approached the window.

The lights were off, and a few streetlamps cast a dim glow over the night view.

Compared to the splendid night view from the Cascata mansion, this one was rather shabby, but it was still a decent scene for sorting out his thoughts.

'What should I do now?'

Carla’s social reputation had undoubtedly hit rock bottom.

Of course, for Ivan himself, once he had become a noble with the power of Cascata, there would be no problem achieving his goal of rising further using his own strength.

However, with Carla’s reputation plummeting like this, there would inevitably be setbacks in his plan to utilize the power of Cascata as he intended.

'...Is there anyone to replace her?'

Someone to replace Carla.

Someone who could take her place in the plans he intended to carry out.

Such a person.

'There isn’t.'

There isn’t.

No, there shouldn’t be.

Ivan suddenly felt strange about this thought.

Who was Carla Della Cascata to him?

Just a target to be used.

The eldest daughter of a prestigious noble family.

Moreover, someone he had to smile at while wearing a mask during his childhood—someone he thought was a rival.

If it had come to this, it would be right to prepare another plan.

Now that Carla’s value as a tool had significantly diminished, it wouldn’t be a bad idea to look for someone better than her.

'...But I don’t want to.'

The truth is, there is no one better than Carla—that was just a convenient excuse.

In reality, he hadn’t even thought about looking for someone better than Carla.

'A strange feeling...'

Someone better than Carla.

He didn’t want to look, nor did he feel inclined to.

It was a peculiar feeling.

For Ivan, it was a strange emotion he had never felt before.

At the same time.

Academy Training Ground.

—Thud!

The great sword that struck the scarecrow was pushed back by a fierce recoil.

Originally, Liam should have ignored that level of recoil and gripped the handle again to strike the scarecrow, but he let go of the great sword as if throwing it away.

Then he walked over to the side and plopped down.

"Phew..."

Liam let out a long sigh.

His behavior was completely unlike him, and Emil, who had been training with Liam, approached him while wiping the sweat off his brow.

"Liam, is something wrong?"

"Nothing’s wrong."

"That’s not true. Something’s bothering you."

"...I can’t hide it from you."

No, even if it weren’t me, anyone would feel that way when they looked at you—Emil suppressed the words that rose to his throat and asked again.

"What’s going on?"

—He only asked that, but Emil flinched and shrank back under Liam’s intense gaze.

"Why, why...?"

"It’s because of you, Emil."

"Why me?!"

Suddenly being targeted by an arrow made Emil shout.

No, what did I do?

Emil hadn’t done anything, but Liam’s sudden focus on him startled him.

"I’m just too concerned about you."

"W-what?"

It sounded like a careless remark.

But the sharpness of that statement was too much.

It wasn’t a joke; Liam’s gaze was too serious for Emil to laugh it off.

"I can’t concentrate at all because I’m too worried about you."

"W-what did I do..."

His heart raced.

Suddenly, his heart was pounding, and his face felt hot.

"You’ve been brooding alone. That thing where you don’t say anything and just worry by yourself. Did you think I wouldn’t know, Emil?"

"W-what are you talking about?"

"I can tell at a glance, Emil. That you’re holding something in and suffering alone."

Emil couldn’t say anything.

Liam was strangely poking at the core of the issue while casually shaking him up.

"I don’t care if you have any secrets. We’re friends, right? Am I the only one who thinks that?"

"T-that’s..."

Emil couldn’t respond.

His mind went blank, not knowing how to answer, as he met Liam’s earnest gaze