# 142 - Under the Shadow of the Gods (3)

1. Under the Shadow of God (3)

The recuperation facility set up by the Magical Engineering Corps was located on a hill quite far from the academy. In front of it, the corps' base was set up as if to block the way, which also implied that they were protecting the students who would be responsible for the future of the empire.

Tents were set up everywhere, with recuperation tents for treating injured students concentrated in the center.

Looking out from the tent, Magic bullets continued to fly incessantly, painting the sky red. Now that the academy had virtually lost its function, the barrage continued to prevent the expansion of the kind of disaster—the domain—located in its center.

The Magic bullets, flying so densely that it was difficult to distinguish whether it was the red-tinged twilight or the lingering light painted by the Magic bullets, accurately struck the blue-glowing domain. Each time, intense explosions erupted, accompanied by rainbow-colored shrapnel.

Ivan barely managed to raise his exhausted body inside the tent. His face was pale, and his eyes were devoid of life. Having had his Magical Power sucked away, he looked as if only his shell remained.

"...How long was I out?"

Carla, who had been dozing off while nursing him closely, opened her eyes at Ivan's voice. Yawning, Carla looked at her watch and replied.

"About six hours."

"The situation...?"

"Lord Cascata and the Magical Engineering Corps are still fighting. It seems they're preventing the domain from expanding. How's your body?"

"Not good. I should have put in the effort like you, Carla."

Power that was born with, not built up by oneself, was so futile. It was merely power residing in his body, not entirely his own. Now that his Magical Power had been taken away, it seemed as if nothing was left.

"You're talking nonsense, so you must be doing alright."

Carla grinned. Behind her laughter, the sound of people busily moving about could be heard incessantly. The mechanical sounds of equipment, the driving sounds of Magical Power rotating, the urgent shouts of medical staff. And even the sound of explosions mixed in.

"Lord Cascata is continuously suppressing it with Venere's heart. But, um..."

Carla made a sullen expression. Sensing that it wasn't good news, Ivan looked at her and urged her to answer.

"...It seems it won't last long. It's said that Lord Cascata's Magical Power is being shaved off in chunks just by doing that."

"The fact that it can't be destroyed is even more absurd."

"Yeah, that's why it's even more absurd."

The answer came from a different direction. At the voice, Carla and Ivan's gazes turned towards it. Lorenzo was entering, pulling back the tent's entrance curtain. The dark shadows under his eyes made him look even more tired, but his eyes were still shining sharply.

"Venere's heart isn't just a simple organ, as you've seen. That's what hearts are originally. They're also vessels for containing will. They're also a medium for contracts. If even the heart is destroyed, there's a high possibility that the last remaining constraint will disappear. Rather, the Aether might take over the role of the complete heart, making it impossible to control."

Lorenzo unfolded a scroll on a small table. The scroll contained complex Magical Engineering formulas along with a drawing of a heart, with patterns attached to the heart drawing, one by one.

"Lord Cascata's current method is a temporary seal. Right now, Venere thinks she has become Aether itself. She seems to believe that she can exist without a heart."

That was probably true. She was fine without a heart, she was perfect now… Venere had said something to that effect.

"So, is there a way?"

At Carla's hasty question, Lorenzo brought his fingers to his lips. Then, realizing he didn't have any Magic Herb, he let out a long sigh.

"...In simple terms, the heart is the place where Venere's essence resides. During all those long years she lived while changing her Artificial body, only her heart never changed. In other words, the heart is Venere herself. Since that heart is in Lord Cascata's hands, Venere had no choice but to become his subordinate. Anyway, that's why Lord Cascata can temporarily control Venere. And..."

Lorenzo pointed to another part of the scroll. It depicted the blue Aether and the red heart touching each other.

"Venere is currently maintaining a balance between her own essence and the Aether. So, if the heart is destroyed, that balance will be broken, and the Aether may replace her essence. If that happens, she will no longer be Venere, but pure Aether itself."

"What happens then?"

At Carla's question, Lorenzo sighed and replied.

"...All Magical Engineering will become hers. Aether, that is, Magical Power, will become Venere. She will become Magical Engineering itself."

Carla could only gape.

Becoming Magical Engineering itself… it didn't really feel real.

"You can think of it as no one being able to stop it. Magic that we can only wield by going through circuits, she will become the higher-level Magical Engineering itself."

"Is there… a way?"

"...There is. I'll explain it from now on, so let's go to the central barracks."

\*

When Carla and Ivan followed Lorenzo to the central barracks, the first thing they saw was Emil and Liam, looking haggard.

"Emil!"

Emil, who was sitting with his brown hair listlessly drooping, turned his head at Carla's shout. Although his body was now clearly that of a woman to anyone who looked, Emil didn't seem to care about that part anymore.

"Liam, is your body alright?"

When Ivan asked Liam, Liam grinned and thumped his chest.

"I'm a bit better than Emil."

"I don't know if that means you're okay or not."

While Ivan was talking to Liam, Carla approached Emil. He was haggard, truly haggard, looking as if he would collapse and die at any moment.

"Emil, are you okay?"

Emil smiled at Carla. It was a truly fleeting, weak smile that seemed as if it would disappear at any moment.

"I'm okay… I feel like I'm alive now. I heard you guys went through a lot of trouble because of me. To save me… Liam became like that too…"

Emil's voice trembled.

Even as she looked at him, Carla didn't know what to say.

It was too much to even guess how rotten Emil's insides were, how festered they were.

"...I'll start the explanation now."

Everyone's gaze turned to Lorenzo.

Lorenzo placed the scroll on the table and said.

"To put it bluntly, Emil is the key."

At the same time, gazes turned to Emil.

Emil looked indifferent, as if he had heard the story in advance, but the corners of his eyes were trembling slightly.

"As you know, Ivan's Magical Power was originally absorbed by Emil. And that flowed into Venere as well. We focused on why Venere didn't directly absorb that Magical Power from Ivan. To induce Dremalo's carelessness? There's no reason to do that. Venere had plenty of opportunities to contact Ivan in the meantime. So, the conclusion is that there was a reason to have that Magical Power absorbed by Emil."

Lorenzo took out a box of Magic Herb. Looking around, one of the corps' soldiers brought an ashtray, and Lorenzo immediately lit a Magic Herb. Thin, white smoke rose.

"She was waiting for Emil to refine Ivan's Magical Power into pure Aether. According to Dremalo, Emil is the one who can refine Magical Power… that is, refine it into high-purity Aether. If you have Magical Power, it's literally Magical Power. You have to use it as Magic through Magical Engineering to get that power, but Aether isn't like that."

Dremalo had called Emil an Aether Vessel. He had thought it was just a formal term, but he didn't know it had this meaning.

"Then, Instructor Lorenzo. Can we regain Ivan's Magical Power through Emil?"

At Carla's question, Lorenzo nodded.

"In theory, that's possible. If it was absorbed, it should be possible to absorb it in reverse. But to do that, we need to directly contact Venere."

"But that place is…"

"Yes, it's dangerous. Very dangerous. Emil too, and Liam, you Carla, and Ivan. There's not a single one of you who's in good shape. But we have the Magical Engineering Corps. The corps will concentrate the bombardment in one place for us, and in the meantime, we'll dig into the gap and…"

"It's dangerous."

"...It's dangerous. It's a very dangerous thing. But it's also true that Ivan needs to regain his power, and… other than Emil, there's no one else who can do it."

Lorenzo rubbed the Magic Herb and put it out.

"We have no choice but to do it."

"We only have one chance. If Venere notices, it will become close to impossible to find another opportunity."

Lorenzo's gaze turned to Emil.

Emil was staring at the scroll with his mouth firmly shut.

"...I'll do it."

"Emil!"

Liam grabbed her shoulder.

Emil fiddled with Liam's hand, and on the other hand, she turned to him and smiled.

"It's okay, Liam. So many friends helped me. I think it's my turn to help now. If it's something I can do, it's right for me to do it."

"Is there no other way, Instructor?"

Liam asked in a rough voice. Lorenzo stared at Liam for a moment, then slowly shook his head.

"...Then I'll go too, Emil."

"Liam. The injuries you sustained because of me…"

"I'll go wherever you go. I said I'd be your support. Don't say anything more, Emil. No, Emilia. I'll go wherever you go, no matter what. I'll never let you go again."

Emil squeezed Liam's hand tightly.

With a determined look, Emil looked at Lorenzo.

"If I'm the key to all of this, I'll definitely do it. To regain Ivan's Magical Power, and to stop Venere…"

Carla looked at Emil and nodded lightly.

"Then let's each prepare. We'll start early tomorrow morning."

Outside the tent, people were still busily moving about.

In the distance, the Magical Engineering Corps' red Magic bullets were painting the sky, and rainbow-colored shrapnel was flashing as it collided with the dark blue domain.

Author's words (Author's afterword)

I want to eat sundae...

Sundae...sundaesundaesundae...

# 143 - Under the Shadow of the Gods (4)

1. Under the Shadow of God (4)

Beneath the appropriately tilted tent, kissed by the night's dew, a bleak dawn seeped in. The bluish light, heralding the approaching morning, glistened as it caught the dewdrops.

In the distance, the small lights of Mana bullets still flashed, creating the illusion that the night was not yet over.

"Is everyone ready?"

Lorenzo spoke, inhaling deeply from the Magic Herb. The subtle trembling of his fingertips and the dark shadows beneath his eyes revealed the heavy fatigue weighing him down.

"Yes."

Carla and Ivan answered simultaneously. In truth, there wasn't much Ivan could do in this operation, but to defeat Venere, he needed to regain his power. Besides, even Emil was participating despite not being fully recovered.

Unfortunately, the two who should be playing the most crucial roles were injured. Having even one injured person was troublesome enough, but two was a real headache. But what could they do? It was unavoidable. These two couldn't be left behind.

"Good. Let's go over it one more time. Once we set off, Lord Cascata will subtly adjust the firing direction of the Magical Engineering corps. The goal is to draw Venere's attention, but if he changes it too obviously, that perceptive bitch won't sit still. So, he'll make small, gradual adjustments. And taking advantage of that, we'll infiltrate through the garden entrance. We don't know exactly where she'll be, but the place where she first appeared is the most likely."

"...Probably. But that's not certain, is it?"

Lorenzo nodded at Carla's words. The biggest obstacle was not knowing her exact location. There was no guarantee they'd encounter her immediately upon entering.

"And when you enter the domain, use the barrier stones I'll give you. They'll protect you for a while even inside the domain. And when we encounter Venere, I'll use a flare. Then, the bombardment will intensify, and in that gap, we'll attempt to make direct contact with Venere… That's the plan. What do you think? Pretty clear, right?"

Lorenzo smiled awkwardly. But his humor wasn't particularly funny, so no one laughed.

"...Anyway, Emil, you're in the most danger since you have to make direct contact with Venere. You know that, right?"

"Yes, I know..."

The plan was simple: Venere had absorbed refined Magical Power, Aether, from Emil, so the reverse might be possible. There was a chance it wouldn't work, but at this point, they had to try.

"Finding Venere's presence… That's the hardest part."

"I can do that…!"

A thin voice interjected. Startled by the sudden voice, they turned to see Regina standing at the entrance of the tent. She seemed to have recovered much of her energy, but her haggard appearance made it clear she wasn't in normal condition.

"Regina!"

Carla exclaimed in surprise, and Regina gave her a faint smile.

"Regina's will was so strong. I brought her along so you could at least hear her out."

Albina said, revealing herself from behind Regina. Regina looked at Carla, then turned her gaze to Ivan and bowed slightly. The expressions of those around her conveyed bewilderment and a hint of doubt.

"...I think I can sense Venere's location. I was once connected to her consciousness, and I even drank what you might call her essence… So."

Lorenzo hesitated for a moment. Regina was also injured. Moreover, she had once been brainwashed by Venere and lost her sense of self. But what Regina was saying now wasn't wrong, and there was a possibility it could work.

"But I don't fully trust you."

Regina nodded at Lorenzo's words. Before Regina could say anything, Albina spoke first.

"I expect you wouldn't. But Regina's current condition is fine. The Magical Power remaining in her body is stable, and there's no noise in her consciousness. It seems the connection hasn't been completely severed, but conversely, that might be why she can find Venere's location."

As soon as Albina finished speaking, Regina opened her mouth.

"I… I think it's all my fault. Because I was manipulated, I became Venere's tool. So, this time, I really want to help… I promise."

Carla couldn't answer. She looked at Lorenzo, unsure of what to do, but he also seemed to be struggling to make a decision.

"...Carla, you have a great sense for detecting wavelengths. Can you sense if there's even a little noise mixed in Regina's wavelength?"

"I can try."

Venere was pure Magical Power, Aether, without any wavelengths, but Regina was a different story. Carla sensed Regina's wavelength, and it was definitely free of noise.

"It doesn't seem like there are any problems right now."

At those words, Lorenzo sighed.

"...Then let's take Regina with us. It seems like she'll be helpful anyway. And Regina, if you're brainwashed again…"

Regina nodded with a firm expression.

"Throw me into the domain. Let me die there."

\*

As they left the tent, a roar shook the heavens and the earth. Their gazes naturally turned to the sky, where crimson Mana bullets were pouring down like rain towards the domain.

"That's the Magical Engineering corps…"

"Yes, the power of the Empire. The Empire's proud standard magic cannon. Special Mana bullets explode, scattering Magical Power crystals around. So, it also has the effect of disrupting the landing point."

This was the power that prevented Venere's domain from expanding. Exceptional firepower that didn't rely on specific individuals.

"Even so, it's difficult to block pure Aether. Anyway, let's go. I'll signal, and Lord Cascata will gradually change the landing points."

The group quickly walked in formation. Lorenzo was at the front, followed by Carla and Ivan, then Regina and Emil, and Liam and Albina at the rear. Their figures, running through the sporadically flying, net-like flames, were obscured by the massive lights.

The Magical Engineering corps' bombardment seemed to occasionally penetrate the domain. When that happened, a flash of bluish-green light, like shattering glass, spread out. The domain, which threatened to cover the sky, was gradually broken and then restored, like cracks spreading across an eggshell and then sticking back together.

"It seems much smaller."

Carla pointed with her finger as she ran. Venere's domain definitely seemed much smaller than before. It used to resemble a giant dome, but now it was less than half that size.

"Humans are always evolving. Even with Aether… But if Venere becomes Aether itself, that evolution will be in vain. Anyway, let's hurry."

Not long after running, they entered the garden entrance. The domain was now just ahead, not far away.

"Prepare to use the barrier stones I gave you. Entering the domain without a barrier is instant death. Your Magical Power will be sucked away."

The barrier stones Lorenzo had distributed were small, blue-glowing orbs. Each of them clutched one, taking tense breaths as they waited for Lorenzo's signal.

"...Okay, firing the flare."

Lorenzo raised his hand towards the sky. With a low thud, a small Mana bullet was fired, and it exploded in the sky with a bang.

"Run!"

Lorenzo started running first. And following him, everyone ran. They dashed like the wind through the even more intense bombardment.

A translucent blue circle formed around Lorenzo. Seeing that, everyone broke their barrier stones, and similarly, a translucent blue circle enveloped them. At the same time, they entered the domain.

They felt no physical impact. It looked like a barrier from the outside, but only hot air was visible as they passed through.

"...My god."

The academy's garden was a scene straight out of hell. The beautiful scenery had vanished without a trace, and only the collapsed debris and the withered corpses of people lying among them were spread out in a gruesome display.

"I don't see her."

"No, I think it's over there."

Regina trembled as she raised her finger. She pointed to a place where the distortion was particularly severe, probably where the domain had first originated.

"I, I feel it there too…"

Emil pointed to a place completely different from where Regina was pointing. The places Regina and Emil were pointing to. One of the two places must be right—

—You managed to crawl in, you little rats. Cascata, that sly fox, played a trick.

Venere's voice was heard. The voice echoed and created a strange resonance, as if it were coming from all directions, making it impossible to determine its source.

Hearing that voice, Regina clenched her fist tightly. She had no intention of surviving this place from the start. The mistakes she had made were unforgivable, even if she repented. Even if she survived, she would have no face to show Carla or Ivan.

‘…Even if it costs me my life, I will…definitely stop that woman.’

Regina tensed every nerve in her body.

For the last time, really the last time, she wanted to help them.

Author's Note

I'll be taking a day off tomorrow!

# 144 - Under the Shadow of the Gods (5)

1. Under the Shadow of God (5)

Regina and Emil pointed in opposite directions. It was difficult to decide which way to go, but the longer they delayed, the more disadvantageous it would be for the group. Therefore, Lorenzo chose the direction Regina indicated.

Regina was more directly influenced by Venere than Emil, so Lorenzo judged that her direction was more likely to be correct, and it seemed he was right.

* Lucky bastards.

Venere was near the stairs leading to the library. Her semi-transparent body, like a glass doll, had blue Aether circulating instead of blood. In place of a heart, a brightly glowing Aether crystal pulsed, creating a bizarre atmosphere.

“…That must be her true form."No need to move between Artificial bodies anymore, one-armed woman." You impudent bitch.

Venere smiled as she looked at Carla. Her laughter echoed throughout the library, and the space itself trembled as if resonating with the sound.

* How foolish, really. Coming to find me is like walking to your own deaths. Didn't you ever think that I might have been waiting for you?

Everyone tensed at Venere's words. Carla, gritting her teeth, tried to step forward, but Emil grabbed her arm.

“Carla, wait… something’s wrong…”

Venere looked down at them and smiled. Her semi-transparent body was becoming clearer, little by little.

Over these long years, it's not just Magical Power that has increased. You need to be perceptive to survive. I've been waiting for you to come. Especially Ivan, and you, Emil.

Emil's face turned pale.

Venere reached out to Emil and said,

* To me, you are practically my nemesis. Someone with a circuit that can refine Magical Power into Aether. And someone who can turn Aether back into Magical Power. A dangerous element to me… and the master of that Magical Power, Ivan. You two are the ones I must kill.

“Spilling your weaknesses yourself, you must be out of your mind.”

Carla said sarcastically. If what she said was true, then Emil absolutely needed to make contact with Venere. Whether she was foolish or not, maybe she was just too confident, but Venere was blabbing her weaknesses.

* Do you think it's strange that I'm telling you my weaknesses? Don't you think I'm saying it because there's nothing you can do about it even if I tell you?

“Don’t be ridiculous. Now that I know your weaknesses, I will definitely kill you here.”

Carla raised her fist. The surging purple Magical Power enveloped her entire body, and the Lightning Bolt that erupted crackled fiercely.

Venere suddenly stopped laughing and reached out her hand. Immediately, sharp spears rose from behind her, each emitting a chilling, pale blue aura. As soon as Venere swung her hand, the spears flew towards the group.

“Watch out!”

Albina shouted and stepped forward, pressing both hands flat on the ground. At the same time, a yellow barrier spread out, enveloping the group, and the Aether spears struck the barrier repeatedly, creating loud, dull thuds.

“Kugh!”

Before the barrier could be repaired, an Aether spear struck Liam's shoulder and flew past. Liam clutched his shoulder and took a step back, and Emil rushed to his side.

“Liam…!"Paying attention to someone else, doing the same thing as your father."

An Aether spear that Venere launched flew towards Emil. Seeing an even larger, stronger-looking Aether spear flying towards them, Liam hugged Emil and rolled to the side.

To think you'd come to catch me with just this much, your courage is admirable.

Spears floated behind Venere. Seeing this, Albina moved her fingers, forming Hand seals, and shouted.

“Ancient guardian, I call upon your name to be here…”

Before Albina's incantation could finish, Venere smiled and waved her hand. As if by magic, the spears disappeared in an instant, and instead, a wave of Aether itself flew towards Albina. Just before the wave of Aether crashed down, the barely completed spell summoned an iron wall from beyond the dimensions, and the iron wall shook with a deafening roar as it faced the wave of Aether.

“Albina!”

Cold sweat streamed down Albina's face. Supported by Lorenzo, who helped her maintain her balance, Albina whispered,

“I can’t hold it for long, Lorenzo. We need to find another way quickly…!”

Even in the midst of this, the wave of Aether continued to crash down. The iron wall roared louder and louder, and its shaking intensified.

“Liam, protect Emil! Ivan, protect Regina! Carla, cover Albina!”

“No! Wait a moment!”

Carla stepped in front of Lorenzo, enveloping her body in Magical Power and accelerating even more fiercely. The purple Lightning Magic began to burn even more intensely, turning a deeper purple, and eventually, white.

“…I’ll try to stop it.”

An even larger and more dazzling Magical Power erupted from Carla's fist.

* You? Stop me? You must be scared? What if you lose your remaining arm?

“…Yes, I’m scared.”

If you cannot face fear, courage becomes recklessness.

Only when you face fear does courage find its strength.

“But a Mage has to fight when they need to, even if they’re scared.”

Carla clenched her fist even tighter.

Crackling, the sound of Lightning Bolt intensified.

“Ivan protected me. He helped me. Now it’s my turn to protect Ivan to balance things out.”

Venere burst into laughter.

* You, stop me? A one-armed woman?

“One-armed? Yeah, one-armed is good. It's kind of cool!”

Carla rushed forward without hesitation. As she kicked off the ground and ran, forgotten memories resurfaced.

What was I striving for?

What did I gain from that effort?

Wasn't I trying to make up for my innate lack of talent with effort?

Even in this state, I was not broken.

My efforts have not disappeared.

The memories of training and training and training suppress fear and bloom in this place.

Purple lightning swirled around her fist, flashing white.

Venere sneered at her and raised her hand.

A blue Aether barrier blocked Carla's path.

"-Lightning Bolt Descent!"”

Carla's fist, filled with Lightning Bolt, slammed into the Aether barrier.

The moment the wall and fist collided, a dazzling flash and a deafening roar erupted.

The barrier was intact, with only a few scratches.

Is that all you’ve got after all that bluster? How pathetic.

Venere raised her hand, and an Aether spear shot up from beneath Carla's feet.

She barely twisted her body to avoid it, but one grazed her side.

It stung, and then it felt warm, as if blood was flowing.

Venere waved her hand at Carla, who had momentarily lost her balance.

An Aether slash flew towards her neck in an instant, and Carla barely managed to dodge it by lowering her stance. She then leaped towards the barrier again.

Brain Armor.

Brain Storm.

Full Brain.

She summoned all the basic Magic from Lightning Magic and wrapped them around her body.

Drawing out all the basic stamina and strength, and a powerful blow drawn from them.

“Brain Horn!”

Carla's figure flashed and disappeared momentarily.

A wave of Aether swept through the place where she had been.

Carla's fist, having avoided the wave, slammed down on the barrier.

"Lightning Bolt Descent!"”

Once again, Lightning Bolt Descent erupted from the barrier.

“Carla! Now!”

With Albina's shout, Carla leaped again.

In that gap, the clasped hands of the dimensional golem summoned by Albina slammed down on the barrier.

Bang…!

The barrier shook with a deafening roar.

An attack from a physical entity from another dimension, not Aether or Magical Power.

From that, the barrier also acted as a weakness.

A crack formed in the barrier momentarily.

And into that crack, a blood-red sword flew and pierced.

“Carla!”

At Lorenzo's shout, Carla kicked the hilt of the sword deeply.

The sword, embedded in the barrier, dug in deeply, and the crack in the Aether barrier widened greatly.

“Lightning Bolt Descent!”

Once again, Carla's fist shook the barrier.

Dimensional golem, Lorenzo's sword, Carla's Lightning Bolt Descent—the barrier finally collapsed in part due to the continuous physical attacks.

“Think I’ll let you get away!"Just because you broke through one wall!"

She said it confidently, but Venere's eyes wavered slightly.

The barrier collapsed due to the unexpected barrage of physical attacks, and Venere, facing Carla who broke through it and approached her, summoned Aether spears and continued to pour them down. But in the meantime, Carla, who specialized in close combat, was already close to Venere.

* You lowly bitch...! I’ll seal your Magic itself…!

With a heavy sound, a huge pressure crushed Carla. A kind of sealing Magic that suppressed Magical Power so that it could not be emitted externally at all. But Carla, with a triumphant smile, shouted at Venere.

“You moron, I can’t even…!”

White lightning exploded from Carla's fist. Her Magical Power exceeded its limits, and a lightning so intense that it seemed to burn her whole body swirled around.

"I can't even emit Magical Power in the first place!"”

Carla's fist slammed into Venere's face.

Author's words (Author's Afterword)

I went to Akasaka to eat sundae, but when I got there, I wanted to eat cold noodles, so I ordered bibim cold noodles, but as I was eating, I wanted to eat mul cold noodles too, so I ordered another one and ate it, but as I was eating, I wanted to eat sundae too, so I ordered sundae, but then I felt like I was going to explode, so I even packed it up, but when I got home and tried to eat it, the smell was so disgusting that I couldn't eat it...

# 145 - Under the Shadow of the Gods (6)

1. Under the Shadow of God (6)

ㅡ Bang!

Carla's fist slammed into Venere's face.

A low but distinct thud, and the sensation of impact in her fist.

'Got her!'

Carla was certain it was a solid hit.

Her fist struck Venere's face, and the white Lightning Bolt of the Heavens that extended from her fist flowed over Venere's translucent face, momentarily distorting even her form. And in that moment, Carla could even capture Venere's distorted expression.

However, it was only for a moment.

* Such petty tricks.

Venere, who hadn't even flinched, spoke with a mocking voice. In her slightly raised hand, blue Aether swirled in a vortex, soon erupting with explosive force.

The shockwave of materialized Aether struck Carla. The instant the pure wave itself hit Carla's body, she tumbled and rolled like a kite with a severed string.

"Kagh…!"

Even as she rolled, Carla desperately tried to regain her balance. She reached out with her good right arm to support herself, but her body, missing its left arm, couldn't achieve proper balance, making it impossible to steady herself. Normally, she would have used both arms to launch herself into a roll, but that option was not available to her now.

Bang!

Carla's back slammed violently into the half-collapsed library wall. The structures that had barely been standing were knocked over by her impact, collapsing one after another like dominoes.

"Carla!"

Ivan shouted, but Venere was already launching her next attack.

Carla barely managed to pull herself away from the wall, grimacing. A sharp pain spread throughout her body from her back. Her head was spinning. Whether it was from the impact with the wall or a concussion, her vision was blurred, and she couldn't see properly.

'I have to get up, I have to get up…!'

Carla gritted her teeth and tried to stand. But it was too much with only her right arm, which was already throbbing with pain, making it difficult to move properly.

* How pathetic. To come at me with only one arm.

Venere's voice was full of mockery. Behind her, dozens more Aether Spheres were appearing. Each spear was much smaller than before, only about the thickness of a finger, but they were much sharper and more agile, capable of piercing through any obstacle in an instant.

No matter how hard you've tried, how much you've trained, there's a limit to an incomplete body. It was over the moment you lost your arm. You should have just gotten a prosthetic and gone off to get married.

"Carla!"

Albina shouted, but Carla couldn't get up easily. Her vision was blurred with dizziness, and she only had her right arm. No matter what she tried, it was difficult to maintain her balance. The basics she had practiced countless times were not working at all due to the absence of one arm.

The most important sense of balance for a martial artist. That sense of balance that both arms had provided was once again grabbing her ankle and holding her back.

From the start, a cripple like you could never become a Mage. And a martial arts type? What a joke. But don't worry. Soon everything will be over, and the age of Magical Engineering will come to an end. There's no need to feel wronged for going first.

Venere slowly raised her hand. As if to match her movement, the Aether Spheres all turned their heads towards Carla.

'I have to move, I have to move…!'

Carla desperately tried to get up. But her body wouldn't listen, and due to the impact with the wall and the loss of balance, her body wouldn't obey.

* You should close your eyes. It'll be over soon.

Venere swung her hand. The Aether Spheres flew towards Carla all at once, and Carla barely managed to roll across the ground, dodging a few. She planted her right arm on the ground and rolled sideways, dodging three more, but at less than half her usual speed, it wasn't enough.

Whoosh!

One of the spheres grazed her leg. The sharp Aether cut through her skin, and red blood flowed out.

"Kugh…!"

* How pathetic. Is this the level of the academy? I can't bear to look.

Venere sneered as she looked down at Carla.

* It's time to end this.

Venere raised her hand again.

I'll give you special attention, considering our past relationship.

A whip coiled around her hand. The whip, made of Aether, glowed with a blue light and swirled through the air with a soft sound in Venere's hand.

Whoosh!

The whip flew towards Carla. Even as Carla saw the whip, she couldn't dodge it properly due to her injured leg. In the end, the whip struck Carla's left shoulder with a sharp tearing sound. The whip made of Aether didn't just strike, but also began to absorb Magical Power the moment it touched her.

The purple Magical Power, unique to Carla's Lightning Magic, was forcibly sucked out of Carla's body and flowed into Venere. As it got closer to Venere, the purple gradually changed to blue as if it were being dyed, and it was converted into pure Aether and absorbed into Venere.

"Ghk, khuh…"

Carla closed her eyes tightly and trembled. Once again, Venere's whip struck Carla's thigh, drawing a red streak of blood.

"Carla!"

Ivan shouted and tried to run towards Carla. But Venere, her eyes flashing, swung her whip at Ivan, and Ivan also leaped away to avoid the whip.

* Now it's your turn, Ivan. The essence of ancient Magical Engineering, the possessor of that knowledge.

"Stop talking nonsense!"

Ivan shouted, grinding his teeth. Having lost his Magical Power, he was devastated by the fact that he was so powerless.

With your knowledge, I can become complete. I can become the true Magical Engineering, the master of all Magical Engineering.

"Ivan…run…!"

Carla, who had fallen to the ground, barely managed to shout to Ivan.

Blood was also flowing from the corner of her mouth.

“…Just hand over the knowledge? If I hand over the knowledge, you'll spare Carla, right?"

* Of course. But you know what it means to hand over the knowledge, right?

“You mean you'll suck my brain dry. You mean you'll take my life."- Yes, you know it well."

Ivan looked at Carla.

At her, wounded and unable to fight any longer.

Ivan, whose Magical Power had not fully returned, was so powerless.

He never worked hard because he was a genius, and he never knew that his past would return as such a huge karma.

His Magical Power had not fully returned.

And without Magical Power, his body was so powerless.

But he couldn't run away.

How could he run away when Carla was lying there like that?

* It looks like you've given up. Yes, that's a wise decision. You can't escape anyway. I am the absolute being in this domain.

Venere summoned a huge Aether Sphere.

A sphere so large and powerful that it couldn't be compared to anything she had created so far.

It was about twice the height of a person, and Aether was swirling at its end.

* Don't worry, I'll end it in one go. Cleanly, without pain.

With Venere's smile, the sphere flew into the sky.

Death emanated from the sphere as it cut through the wind.

He closed his eyes.

He felt sorry for Carla, who would be left alone.

To his friends, who he couldn't be with until the end.

In the end, because of his powerlessness, everythingㅡ

"Ivan!""

With someone's sharp shout, Ivan was pushed and fell to the ground.

Thud, the sound of something being pierced.

When Ivan opened his eyes and looked back.

Regina was standing in front of him.

Pierced by the huge Aether Sphere that had flown towards himㅡ

Yet, she was faintly smiling.

It was Regina.

"Regina!"

A huge Aether Sphere had completely penetrated Regina's chest.

The sphere, embedded near her heart, was definitely a fatal wound.

Red blood flowed down Regina's lips.

"Ivan…"

Regina said in a trembling voice.

Her complexion was pale, but her eyes were clear.

"Ivan, I'm sorry…I'm sorry…"

"Regina, why…! Why did you do this!"

Ivan's voice trembled.

Red blood was flowing endlessly from her wound and from Regina's mouth.

"Because, because of me…you guys…like this…"

Tears flowed from Regina's eyes.

"All, my, my fault…Venere…brainwashing, betrayal…"

Regina slowly collapsed.

Even though Ivan caught her, blood flowed endlessly from the spot where the disappearing Aether Sphere had pierced her.

"So, don't, don't die…"

Regina stroked Ivan's cheek with her trembling hand.

The blood that had seeped out from her hand drew bloodstains on Ivan's face.

"Carla…protect her…"

"Regina…!"

"Pr, promise…Carla, and…other, other friends…"

Regina's voice gradually faded.

It was clear that her life force was draining away and being depleted.

"What I couldn't…do…Ivan…"

Ivan bit his lip and couldn't say anything.

"Last, a…better choice…my will…"

Regina's eyes slowly closed.

The hand that had been stroking Ivan's face lost its strength and drooped.

"Regina…Reginaaaaa!"What a touching sight." But now it's really over. I've given you time to say goodbye, so that should be enough, right?

Venere summoned another Aether Sphere towards Ivan, who was screaming.

An even larger and sharper Aether spear, with a keen edge.

* No one will be able to save you now, Ivan. That girl's sacrifice will also be in vain.

Venere laughed mockingly.

* You won't be lonely on your way. Isn't that a good thing?

Ivan didn't answer.

Holding Regina's body, which had died in his arms, Ivan was looking at her.

Her warm body temperature seemed to be slowly cooling down.

The author's words (author's afterword)

Joomare is taking a break for rest...!

Taking a break means that there will be no serialization.

(I'm resting, but I'm afraid you'll say, "Rest, but please serialize.")

# 146 - Under the Shadow of the Gods (7)

1. Under the Shadow of the Gods (7)

Regina's body was still warm. As if alive, it was warm, soft, and still… as if it might breathe again. But Regina's eyelids were completely closed, never to open again, and now that her faint breaths had ceased, she seemed to have entered a peaceful eternal slumber.

Regina's last smile lingered vividly in front of him. Her final words, that last testament, echoed in his ears.

— Carla… protect me…

Why is it always like this? Ivan suddenly thought. Why can’t I, time and again, protect the people I cherish? Whenever he looked back at the goals he had set, it was always a series of failures. Perhaps it was due to his arrogance and pride.

He hadn’t been able to protect Carla properly, and now Regina had died for him. Why is it always like this? Why does this keep happening?

Something began to boil deep within Ivan's chest. It was one of the most primal emotions, something that could be named anger.

Anger towards Venere.

Anger at his own helplessness.

Anger at losing someone precious with his eyes wide open.

That anger was bubbling up from the depths of his heart.

But this anger was not just ordinary.

Something else—something different—was also boiling up alongside it.

Memories.

It was memories.

The memories of his past life, which had remained on the surface, surged up along with his anger.

Knowledge about magical engineering that he had dismissed as mere memory, which he hadn’t realized he possessed.

Understanding of the essence of magical power.

And—what had failed just before he could grasp it, what exactly was magical engineering?

Thud.

Thud.

Thud.

The heartbeat resonated.

It grew louder, more intense.

Like the sound of drums echoing on the battlefield, a heavy and powerful drumbeat began to resonate throughout the entire area, emanating from Ivan. The ground trembled, and even the air seemed to shudder.

— …What is this?

Venere flinched, startled. The unknown sensation emanating from Ivan filled her with an inexplicable unease. It was a feeling unlike anything she had ever experienced before, strange and bizarre.

No, this isn’t… it’s not that—Venere thought. This is something I’ve felt before, but it’s so immense that I couldn’t recognize it.

Aether.

This was indeed Aether.

It was not the Aether that had been refined and absorbed through Emil.

It was qualitatively different, a much purer and more powerful form of Aether that was emanating from Ivan.

— Wh-what are you doing…?!

A blue energy erupted from Ivan’s body with explosive force. It was something qualitatively different from the magical power that Venere had stolen. It felt as if he was not just gathering and refining magical power, but rather dominating Aether itself.

“…Now I understand. What you took from me and what I had left behind.”

Something flickered in Ivan's gaze. The realization that had not ended with memories, a realization that had been passed down from his past life, was awakening within him once more.

What is magical engineering?

What is the magical power that constitutes magical engineering?

What is the Aether that constitutes magical power?

And the truth that Ivan had barely touched in his past life—

Everything became clear.

Ivan could see what constituted Venere.

Things that could not even be called Aether.

Something that was merely close to Aether created by refining magical power.

Ivan slowly stood up.

He carefully laid Regina's body down on the ground and looked at her face once more.

“…Regina, just rest for a bit.”

Then he turned around and quietly glared at Venere.

At the moment Ivan's gaze fell upon her, Venere felt her body stiffen. She had no doubt that the power filling her body was Aether. A blue-hued power, fundamentally different from magical power, a crystallization of purity that even put magical power beneath it—Aether.

However, the moment Ivan looked at her, the Aether was surging wildly. The Aether that constituted Venere's body was undulating, as if it were shaking to return to Ivan.

“Come back.”

Ivan spoke softly to Venere. His voice was low yet powerful, almost commanding, and it carried an air of authority.

“Return to your master.”

At that moment, the blue Aether began to be sucked out of Venere's body like a receding tide. As if drawn by a magnet, the magical power that Venere had stolen from Ivan began to flow back to its original owner.

— What is this! What is happening…?!

Venere shouted in panic. The Aether that constituted her body was escaping uncontrollably, defying her commands. No matter how hard she tried to stop it, it was too forceful to be contained.

“Ivan!”

At that moment, Carla, who had been collapsed on the ground, managed to raise her body. She was still staggering, but her eyes were shining brightly as she looked at Ivan.

“Ivan, keep going!”

Carla gritted her teeth and stood up. Her injured leg throbbed with pain, and her mind screamed at her to collapse again, but she ignored it and stood tall.

— Y-yeah! Ivan! I don’t know what you’re doing, but if you stop, I’ll kill that girl right in front of you!

Venere, filled with rage, drew out her Aether sphere. But compared to before, its momentum and sharpness were clearly lacking. The sphere, which had once displayed its might, was now unable to show the same power as it had then.

— You one-armed fool…!

The sphere flew through the sky. Avoiding the terrifying sound of its passage, Carla instead lunged forward. Although she still struggled to maintain her balance, she used it to her advantage, dodging the sphere with unpredictable movements and getting closer to Venere.

“It’s fine if you call me one-armed…! Because that’s true!”

Carla shouted, panting.

“The real fool is… you, who can’t gain power unless it’s someone else’s!”

A deep purple Lightning Bolt began to condense in Carla's fist. The purple Lightning Bolt flowed along her arm. The handicap of being one-armed had now become a benefit. The magical power that had to be divided between two fists could now be concentrated in one place. This would lead to an even more powerful strike.

Even at that moment, the Aether escaping from Venere was flowing into Ivan. The thick blue haze rising up was rushing towards Ivan, naturally seeping into his body and beginning to circulate within him.

“You, who cannot live without stealing. You coveted power that cannot be contained in a meager vessel.”

Ivan slowly opened his eyes and approached Venere. With each step he took, strange magical patterns were drawn instead of footprints. Complex and intricate sigils were inscribed along his path.

— I-I can’t believe this…

Venere stepped back. But behind her, Carla was charging forward, and in front of her, Ivan was approaching. Meanwhile, the Aether continued to flow out, making it increasingly difficult for her to maintain her form.

— Not yet, not yet…! There’s still some of the artificial body left…!

Venere desperately resisted. Gathering all the remaining Aether, her entire body began to blur.

“You can’t escape…!”

With Ivan's quiet whisper, a magical sigil was drawn beneath Venere's feet. From the complex and intricate sigil, chains of iron shot up with a clanging sound.

— Ugh, what…!

The blurring Venere was bound tightly by the chains. The iron chains wrapped around her entire body as if to restrain her.

— Ugh…!

A groan filled with pain escaped her lips. Yet, Venere glared at Ivan with wide eyes, gritting her teeth.

— Do you think I’ll just take this…?! I’ve lived for a thousand years…! How could I fall to a mere brat like you…!

“The magical power you’ve accumulated over a thousand years is just that. Your wisdom is also just that. Even a thousand years wasted has its limits. You should start looking behind you.”

At Ivan's words, Venere barely turned to look behind her. There stood Carla. Carla's pale face, the fluttering sleeve of her left arm, and the sight of her charging forward with a blazing purple magical power—

Carla's fist, glowing with a deep purple hue, struck straight ahead. Omitting everything else, she dashed forward in a straight line, delivering her final blow with all her effort.

“Lightning Bolt…”

Carla's fist finally struck Venere's heart. More precisely, it struck the mass of Aether shaped like a heart. Without any resistance, it struck the place that had been giving power to Venere—

With a thunderous sound, a blinding flash erupted. As the dazzling light faded, there lay Venere, sprawled on the ground.

Now, she was no longer in the form of Aether but of a human. Venere, lying on the ground without one leg and one arm, had white hair and red eyes—she was murmuring even as she lay there.

“A thousand… years. I’ve built it up for a thousand years… my, my power…”

Carla staggered towards Venere. Complacency was never a good thing. Carla knew better than anyone what kind of consequences awaited at the end of that complacency.

“I’ve waited a thousand years… for this moment…”

“Shut up. Even if you live for a thousand years, if you’re like that, it’s better to just die.”

Carla raised her fist high.

The purple magical power swelled and surged.

“My, my thousand years…”

“Just dying is better. Regret is a luxury for someone like you.”

Carla's fist came crashing down.

With a sound like a watermelon bursting, it struck down.

# 147 - Sadness Belongs to the Survivors

1. Sorrow is the Lot of Those Left Behind

With Venere's death, the Domain had completely vanished.

And with the Aether, which had triggered this entire situation, returning to Ivan, things were settling down.

The Academy was slowly returning to its former state.

The destroyed buildings were still under reconstruction, but the people were gradually regaining their vitality.

However, on the other side, the funeral hall, located a bit away from the Academy, was shrouded in a somber atmosphere.

Was Regina the only one who died in this incident? Many had perished, and their funerals were being held together. Among them was Regina's coffin.

Ivan and Carla woke up at dawn to help with the funeral preparations. They were almost entirely responsible for Regina's arrangements. They meticulously cleaned Regina's body, her face, dressed her in her favorite dress, combed her hair neatly… and beautifully.

“…I’m sorry, Regina.”

Carla murmured softly. She gently stroked Regina's hair. She had been agonizing over what to say to Regina, who had ultimately protected Ivan and sacrificed herself, but all she could come up with was an apology.

“Carla.”

Ivan's voice came from behind. Turning around, Carla saw Ivan standing with his arms full of white lilies. Lilies, Regina's favorite flower. Perhaps being surrounded by those flowers as she departed would offer Regina a small comfort.

“Shall we place the flowers?”

“Yes.”

Carla carefully arranged the flowers around the coffin. It took some time as she was doing it with one hand, but Ivan silently helped her, decorating Regina's coffin with lilies.

“Regina did like lilies…”

“Yeah. Since it’s her last journey, I thought it would be nice to send her off surrounded by her favorite flowers.”

Carla gave a wry smile.

“They’re pure white flowers. I think they’re fitting to send Regina off.”

Ivan simply nodded in response.

As time passed, people gathered. Each person had lost someone dear to them, whether it was a colleague or a child. Albina and Lorenzo were among those dressed in black mourning clothes. There were also those who appeared despite not having fully recovered.

“Emil.”

Carla quickly rushed over to support Emil. Emil, who appeared with Liam, still looked gaunt, but he stood tall with Liam by his side.

“Emil, are you alright?”

“Yeah. I’m fine.”

“Liam, you could have rested too.”

Liam, whose injuries had been quite severe, still didn't seem fully recovered. He was wearing a black suit and looked dignified, but he still appeared sickly.

“Isn’t this the path to send Regina off? I couldn’t possibly rest.”

“Yeah, I think so too. It’s the path to send Regina off, so I had to come.”

Emil's face was pale, but his eyes were clear. Supported by Carla, Emil entered the funeral hall and carefully sat down on a chair with Liam.

The funeral began quietly.

As the priest recited the prayer, the attendees closed their eyes or bowed their heads, reminiscing about the deceased. They wanted to remember the departed in their memories, in their most beautiful form until the very end.

When the prayer ended, the priest quietly stepped back with a bow. It was now time for the bereaved families to express their condolences. The funeral hall was filled with the sounds of children wailing for their lost mothers, and the trembling voices of those who had lost colleagues or children, calling out names or sobbing.

Ivan slowly stood up and walked towards Regina's coffin. People didn't even glance at him. Everyone was sad in their own way. Everyone had lost someone, and there were as many sorrows as there were losses. Just as Ivan and Carla had lost Regina, other bereaved families had lost family members and colleagues.

Ivan approached Regina's coffin and gently touched it.

“…My friend Regina. My friend who studied together, fought together, and laughed together.”

Ivan took a deep breath. The Magical Power that he had now reverted from Magical Power flickered at his fingertips and then disappeared. His words stopped there. What should he say next? If it hadn't been for Regina, it would have been Ivan lying here. To Regina, who had thrown away her one and only life to protect Ivan. What words would be good enough to say?

Carla approached Ivan. She wondered if this was the right thing to do. Regina had liked Ivan, but in the end, Carla had taken Ivan away from her. She had been worried whether it was right to show them together like this, but—

“Regina, I’m sorry. And… thank you.”

Carla's voice was also small. Right next to her, a mother who had lost her son was sobbing, and on the other side, instructors who had lost colleagues were quietly offering prayers.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t protect you, Regina…”

Carla placed her hand on the coffin and then slowly removed it.

“Rest in peace now, my friend Regina.”

Emil approached, supported by Liam. Both of them silently bowed their heads. Emil whispered something towards Regina's coffin, but no sound came out. It was more like a farewell conveyed only in his heart.

The funeral hall was filled with individual sorrows. Those mourning Regina were just one of the many sorrows. Therefore, no one paid them special attention, and they too were careful not to disturb the sorrows of others.

It was now time to dedicate to Regina's family. Ivan, along with Carla, Emil, and Liam, quietly stepped back. Watching Regina's family, including the head of the Parla Merchant Guild, approach her coffin, they knew it was time for them to quietly withdraw.

As time passed, the coffins began to be moved to the burial site one by one. There were no extravagant eulogies or grand ceremonies. It was just a quiet, solemn farewell.

As soon as the coffins were moved to the burial site, it began to rain. Fine raindrops quietly fell, starting to dampen the ground. Watching the coffins, each placed in its designated spot, slowly return to the earth, the bereaved families were each having their final farewell in their respective places.

Watching Regina's coffin from a distance, they silently stood their ground. The place for watching the burial was for the bereaved families, and watching Regina's family wailing, they watched the scene with heavy hearts.

“The rain is very… Regina-like.”

Carla said after a long silence. It was indeed so. The fine raindrops, not even a downpour, seemed to be just enough to dampen the soil, making the burial easier. Just like Regina's kind and gentle nature.

“It is.”

Ivan raised his head in the rain. He could see Regina's family scattering handfuls of soil from afar. The head of the Parla Merchant Guild, grieving over the loss of his daughter, was also clearly visible, even though he didn't want to see it.

“…Let’s go back now.”

Liam said quietly.

“Regina wouldn’t want us to keep doing this.”

They slowly turned around. They walked out of the burial site in the rain, without anyone looking back. Each of them carried Regina in their hearts.

The road back to the Academy's temporary accommodation was quiet. Only the sound of rain quietly followed their footsteps.

“Carla.”

Ivan opened his mouth after walking for a while.

“Yeah?”

“Regina said at the end. She told me to protect you.”

Carla stopped walking for a moment.

“But I can fight well on my own now. Even though I’m missing an arm. Maybe that’s why I can become stronger.”

Carla smiled faintly and shook the shoulder of her left arm. The sleeve no longer swayed. The sleeve, which had been cut to a suitable length and sewn shut, only revealed the absence of her left arm, no longer swaying enough to flutter.

“So, what I’m trying to say is… let’s be each other’s strength now. You, me, and all of us.”

As Ivan spoke, Liam chuckled and put his hand on Emil's shoulder.

“I’m sorry, but I can’t do that.”

“Why?”

Carla asked before Ivan could. Liam smiled awkwardly and placed his hand on Emil's shoulder beside him.

“Once this is somewhat settled, I plan to return to my home country. I came alone, but this time, I’ll be with Emil.”

“…Huh?”

Emil's face was flushed at Liam's words, but he didn't deny it. His hair, which had been cut short like a boy's, had grown quite long and was now close to a bob, and although he was wearing a male student's uniform, his curves were now too obvious to hide.

“I have to be investigated too, so it’ll be difficult for now, but I’m going back to my home country. With Emil.”

“With Emil…?”

“Yeah. That’s how it turned out.”

“T-That’s how it turned out…”

Emil's face flushed even more. He didn't deny it, and Emil's appearance, actually affirming it, was just like a girl in love.

“I also have to… be investigated, but. I… didn’t participate in the rebellion, and I’m a victim, so. So… nothing much will happen, and… I can’t be without Liam now…”

“O-Oh… yeah, I see.”

It seemed like that was the case.

Carla and Ivan, although it was a bit sudden when they heard it, weren't surprised.

Perhaps that's why Carla could only smile awkwardly.

“Then send letters often. I think I’ll be curious to know if you’re doing well.”

“Of course, I will.”

Liam nodded.

And then they moved on again. They had reaffirmed that they would each walk their own path, but there were still homework to be solved. Regina's absence was felt here again, but they knew it was time to move forward, remembering her sacrifice.

A faint rainbow appeared on the rain-soaked road.

Author's Note

Nothing happened today.

I mean, it's not like something happens to me every day.

If you were expecting something, you can be disappointed.

# 148 - Father, Mother, Carla

1. Father, Mother, Carla

Three days had passed since the funeral. The academy provided temporary lodging, but most students didn't stay. Not long after the terrible incident, and with classes yet to properly begin, they had all returned home.

But amidst all that, Carla and Ivan were lazing around in the temporary lodging. Ivan didn't exactly have a place to return to, and Carla had a place to return to but no desire to go back.

Perhaps that was why the two of them were living like animals. Sleeping during the day, and spending more time naked than clothed at night—a truly animalistic existence.

Still, they had a conscience, so they behaved themselves during the day. The meals were decent, and there were no particular problems, so they spent the whole day eating and playing, then turned into animals again at night.

It was during the day, three days later. Carla was reading in her room when she received a letter from the dormitory supervisor.

"...Father."

The sealed envelope bore a familiar crest. The crest of a family she no longer particularly wanted to return to. The Cascata family crest. Her name, Carla Della Cascata—that label was stamped on the envelope.

Carla hesitated, then opened the letter. She didn't expect it to contain anything good, but the contents were surprisingly simple.

[Academy East Annex. 3 PM.]

Carla stared at the letter for a long time. Then she looked up at the clock. 2:40 PM... So impatient, as always, with no consideration for the recipient—typical of him.

Carla smacked her lips a couple of times and stood up. When Ivan asked where she was going, Carla replied that she had someone to see, slowly put on her school uniform jacket, and left the dormitory.

'What does he want to see me for again?'

Disappointment?

Or anger?

Or perhaps indifference, as always?

Carla smiled faintly. It was a self-deprecating smile. She thought she had given up and forgotten long ago, but it was amusing how she still cared about her father's reaction.

Even walking slowly, the East Annex wasn't far. So Carla arrived quickly. Looking at the central clock tower, it was 2:50 PM. 'There's no way that punctual guy is already here,' Carla thought as she pushed open the door to the annex and stepped inside.

"You've come."

What a surprise. Enrico was already there when Carla entered.

He was standing, looking out the window—not even bothering to turn around when Carla entered.

"...Yes."

Carla answered from the doorway.

A long silence followed.

Eventually, Enrico was the one who turned around.

His gaze was the same as always.

Enrico's gaze towards Carla was always cold.

"Come in and sit down."

Carla quietly went to sit on the chair Enrico indicated.

If she hadn't come at all, it would have been one thing, but since she was here, she might as well hear what he had to say.

"Would you like some tea?"

"No, thank you."

Carla refused outright. It wasn't as if they were in a situation where they could sit face to face and enjoy tea together.

"I see."

Perhaps he had expected Carla to answer that way. Enrico nodded readily and sat down across from Carla. Only a small table separated them, but the distance felt as vast as the ocean.

"I heard. You've done a great deed."

"It wasn't me. Ivan did it. If it weren't for Ivan, if Ivan hadn't put his heart into it, all the Mages would be out of a job. Do you understand?"

Enrico listened to her in silence. What Carla said was all true. If Ivan hadn't released the Aether again, if he hadn't converted it back into Magical Power and released it, the world might have become one without Magical Engineering. If Magical Engineering ceased to exist, Mages would be nothing more than useless freeloaders.

"...Yes. Well done."

Enrico didn't react much. As always, he simply stared at Carla.

"You don't seem to regret it."

"Regret what?"

"That you've become such a girl. And that you've given up the position of head of the family."

"I don't regret it. Why would I regret it? What's so great about being one of the Four Pillars? No, I don't regret it."

"I see. Then that's a relief."

"What's a relief? That you got rid of a nuisance?"

"It's a relief that you don't regret it."

"...What?"

Carla looked at Enrico with a puzzled expression.

She didn't know what he meant, what he was trying to say.

He wasn't about to start speaking in riddles again, was he?

Enrico was silent for a moment.

Then, he slowly opened his mouth.

"I thought you would still resent me... and regret it, thinking that way."

"......"

"It would be right for you to resent me. After all, it's my fault that you ended up that way..."

Enrico glanced at the sleeve of Carla's left arm.

Now neatly tailored, the sleeve didn't look particularly out of place.

"...Are you talking about Mother?"

"Yes. Yes... If I had arrived sooner that day. If I had..."

"Stop it."

Carla cut off Enrico's words with a sharp voice.

"What's the point of saying such things now?"

"I'm saying it because I know why you tried to become stronger, why you struggled."

Enrico looked directly at Carla.

"That I didn't protect your mother because I was weak, and that's why you tried to become stronger. And that that's ultimately why you've come this far. I know that."

Carla bit her lip. She wanted to deny it, but Enrico's words were not wrong. On the day her mother died, Carla had made a resolution as she watched her father arrive late. She would become stronger than anyone else, she would win against anyone. And—she would never lose to anyone again.

"So?"

"I'm sorry."

"...What?"

Carla looked at Enrico in surprise. Enrico, the haughty Cascata, was apologizing.

"I know you can't accept it. But I have to say what I have to say. Not only for not protecting your mother, but also for not raising you properly. I should apologize for those things."

"Now, now that it's come to this, what good is an apology..."

"You don't have to accept it."

"But you tried to sell me off to Schyskeil!"

The nightmare of almost marrying Lucas.

The terrible memory of the Inter-house Competition.

Thinking of those things, Enrico's apology felt like nothing more than a pretense.

"It was for your sake, Carla."

"What nonsense! Saying ridiculous things like marrying that guy as if I were being sold off, and then taking control from the inside...!"

"I thought that was the path for you to find peace. Could you, crippled as you were, walk the path of a Mage? And could you fight? If you needed someone's protection anyway, I thought Schyskeil was easier to deal with. But now I realize it was my misjudgment. ...You have ultimately become stronger in your own way."

Were these the right words?

But they didn't seem entirely wrong either.

"So I wanted to say it. I'm sorry, I wanted to apologize, even though it's late. Apologizing doesn't change the past, and it doesn't bring you back to the way you were."

Carla was speechless. This was the first time she had seen this side of her father. It was the first time her father, who had always been cold and strict, had shown such a side.

"I think it's fortunate that you've become stronger. Even though you've become a woman, even though you've lost an arm, you've ultimately become stronger as you intended. It's right for me to admit that my way was wrong."

"......"

"You ultimately protected him, didn't you? Even Ivan Contadino."

Carla thought of Ivan.

Protected—should she say that? It was true that she had protected him.

"That's enough. I have to admit that you've become stronger than me."

"...Even if you say that now."

"That's enough... Carla. Protecting those who are precious to you, isn't that what it means to be strong?"

Enrico let out a long sigh.

His figure leaning back against the sofa and sighing.

A weak figure that contrasted with his usual posture of always sitting upright, no matter where he was.

"The Imperial Palace will bestow a title upon you, Carla."

"...Yes, I heard."

"And Ivan... Your uncle will take him in. As a secretary."

"I heard that too."

"And... As soon as he gets used to it, he will become the Crown Prince."

"...What?!"

She didn't know that.

"The current Imperial Family has no descendants. It means the imperial line will be cut off. Ivan has the justification and the power. Moreover, with half of the Four Pillars collapsed, if Cascata supports him, other nobles will have no room to object."

What was this all about?

"Keep it to yourself. It's a word that hasn't been conveyed to anyone yet. It's not something to be gossiped about privately."

Even after Enrico left, Carla sat there for a long time.

She had received an apology.

She had received recognition.

She had heard an even more surprising story.

It wasn't a complete reconciliation.

There was still a wall between them that was difficult to overcome, and there were still unresolved grudges.

But still, she felt that the wall had become a little, just a little, lower.

'The strength to protect someone precious...'

The absence of her left arm.

A fatal weakness in martial arts.

But the strength to overcome it.

'Mother...'

Carla looked out the window.

The sunset was setting.

Suddenly, she wanted to see Ivan.

Author's Note

The ending is... soon...

Personally, I like to finish on Fridays, but I failed this time...

# 149 - Ready to Accept, Perfect Preparation

1. Ready to Accept, Fully Prepared

It had been two days since the meeting with Enrico Della Cascata, the head of the Cascata family.

Carla still felt a heaviness in her heart and a complicated state of mind, but unlike before, she no longer felt a surge of anger just at the thought of Enrico. Perhaps Ivan had picked up on Carla's mood and chose not to pry further.

That afternoon, a messenger from the imperial palace came to find the two of them.

“Lady Carla Della Cascata and Sir Ivan Contadino, kneel and receive His Majesty's message.”

An official proclamation bearing a golden seal. A command from the Empire's dignity, one that could not be refused.

“Lady Carla Della Cascata and Sir Ivan Contadino, accompany the messenger to the imperial palace.”

“We shall obey.”

Who would dare refuse such a command?

Besides, there was no reason to do so, especially since they had no enmity with the Emperor.

The two hurriedly began to prepare.

As it was an audience with the Emperor, they had to pay attention to their attire.

Although they would be provided with formal wear upon entering the palace, getting there was still a concern. So Carla donned a black formal suit, while Ivan chose a deep navy one. Carla neatly folded and secured her empty left sleeve.

“Are you okay?”

Ivan asked Carla, who was adjusting her outfit in front of the mirror.

“What do you mean?”

“About going to the palace. Aren't you feeling pressured?”

Carla thought for a moment before shaking her head in response.

“No, if anything, it feels refreshing. It finally seems like everything is coming to a proper conclusion.”

“Is that so…”

In truth, Ivan felt a bit pressured.

Even though they had met once before, this was still the Emperor of the Empire.

Meeting such a person was not exactly comfortable for someone like Ivan, who came from a common background.

“Everything is ready. Let's head out.”

After brushing off the wrinkles from Ivan's suit, Carla spoke to the messenger, and the two of them boarded the carriage to the imperial palace under the messenger's guidance.

When they arrived at the palace, the clock pointed to 2:50 PM.

They passed through the grand entrance of the massive palace and walked along a corridor lined with red carpets.

On either side, the royal guards stood in formation, guarding their path, while a magnificent chandelier sparkled above them.

“Carlo Della Cascata, Ivan Contadino. We have arrived at His Majesty's summons!”

With the attendant's shout, the enormous doors opened silently with a slight gap.

Though it was the second time seeing the audience chamber, it was still majestic.

The high ceiling, the lavish frescoes adorning the walls.

And at the end, the golden throne.

There sat the Emperor of the Empire.

“Come closer.”

The Emperor's voice resonated.

A voice imbued with dignity.

It carried the weight of an emperor ruling a nation, yet there was also a warmth that could be felt within.

Ivan and Carla walked across the red carpet to stand before the Emperor.

Without being told, they naturally knelt on one knee to pay their respects.

“Lady Carla Della Cascata, I stand here at Your Majesty's summons.”

“Sir Ivan Contadino, I stand here at Your Majesty's summons.”

“Rise.”

As the Emperor gestured, the two stood up, and to their surprise, the Emperor slowly rose from his throne.

And remarkably, he stepped down from the dais.

Seeing the Emperor up close, his frailty was evident.

The Emperor, who ruled over the continent and led a vast empire.

Yet even he could not defy the passage of time, and the marks of age were deeply etched in his wrinkles.

“You have grown more dignified since I last saw you, Ivan Contadino.”

“Your Majesty flatters me.”

“You have become even more beautiful, Carla Della Cascata.”

“It is an honor.”

The Emperor broke into a hearty laugh and patted the shoulders of the two. His touch was gentle, strong yet not overwhelming, truly a gesture of commendation.

“I wanted to meet you both in person. I heard you narrowly averted a great disaster. It would not be an exaggeration to say that you saved the Empire.”

“Your words are too kind, Your Majesty. It was not just our strength. It was made possible with the help of others.”

Ivan bowed his head as he spoke.

“We merely did what we had to do.”

“What you had to do.”

The Emperor smiled faintly.

“Was risking your lives simply a matter of duty?”

“If we had not acted, many more would have died or been injured.”

Carla, receiving the Emperor's gaze, bowed her head and replied.

“It would have been impossible with just our strength. It would have been impossible without the help of others.”

“You are humble. Both of you. But such humility should not obscure the truth.”

The Emperor turned and gestured.

At that, attendants brought a table and chairs and set them in the center of the audience chamber.

“Sit. Sit and speak comfortably.”

Only after the Emperor sat down did Carla and Ivan take their seats.

What could he be planning to discuss? But it didn’t seem like it would be anything bad.

“Listen, Ivan Contadino.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“It is said that the last Emperor of the ancient Empire resides within you.”

Ivan flinched in surprise, but he felt that the Emperor was already aware of this fact. After all, Venere must have known too. It was unlikely that the Emperor would be ignorant of such a matter.

“…Yes.”

“And you obtained Aether by killing Venere, then reverted it back to Magical Power and released it. If you had controlled the Aether, all the Mages of the world would have lost their power, and you could have reigned as the true ruler.”

Ivan took a breath and organized his thoughts. What should he say in response?—But no matter how he crafted his words, he could not hide the truth.

“…The woman I love is a Mage. I did not want to see her, with her unyielding will, lose her Magical Power and the path of a Mage.”

“Is that so? That lover must be referring to Carla Della Cascata.”

“Forgive me, but that is correct.”

“Good. Very good. It is a good thing. A young man should be able to love like that. To you, I am considering awarding the Empire's First-Class Merit Medal, although it is still under discussion.”

“Yes?”

The Empire's First-Class Merit Medal has only been awarded to a handful of people. It is the highest honor—

“And to Carla Della Cascata as well.”

To award both of them at once.

That alone was astonishing.

“Ivan Contadino. And I have one more thing for you.”

“What, what do you mean?”

The Emperor smiled at Ivan, who was clearly flustered by the unexpected news.

“I am thinking of granting you the title of Marquis.”

“…Yes?”

“Carla Della Cascata is already a member of the Cascata family. Although she has renounced her right to inherit the headship, blood does not lie. If you wish to take her as your wife, it is only right to grant you the qualification to establish an independent family. You have practically saved the fate of the Empire on your own, so the justification is ample.”

“But…”

“Oh, it seems you are unwilling. What should we do?”

The Emperor spoke with a smile. Not knowing who he was addressing, both Ivan and Carla hesitated to respond. Just then, someone emerged from behind a pillar and approached the Emperor from behind.

“It is a grace bestowed by His Majesty. Accept it gratefully.”

It was Lord Cascata.

As always, with a stiff expression, Lord Cascata spoke to Ivan.

“If you do not intend to take my niece as your wife while remaining a commoner, then accept it quietly.”

“Is that so? Then… yes, I understand.”

It was a tremendous elevation in status.

No matter how much Ivan spoke of his past life, the fact that he was born a commoner was undeniable.

Yet to receive the title of Marquis was an unprecedented turn of events.

“Thank you for Your Majesty's grace…”

“And Lord Cascata, you said you had something to say to your niece?”

“Yes.”

Lord Cascata stepped forward.

Standing side by side with the Emperor, he looked at Carla with gentle eyes and said,

“Carla, thank you for bringing honor to the name of Cascata.”

“I…”

“Enrico will be proud of you too.”

At those words, Carla fell silent.

The conversation from a few days ago—the one she had heard—was actually happening now.

“Were you surprised, Carla?”

“I was a bit surprised that Ivan is becoming a Marquis…”

Carla still seemed unable to believe it.

Even so, wasn’t it too shocking?

“The noble system of the Empire is quite broken. Two of the four pillars have collapsed. Contred von Schyskeil is permanently imprisoned, and Kiara is barely managing things, but it will be difficult to regain that power. So think positively. If Ivan establishes the Contadino Marquisate, it will also be a good thing for Cascata. It is your family, after all.”

“…That is true.”

“And you, Ivan Contadino.”

Ivan, standing next to Carla, flinched and looked at Lord Cascata.

“You will need to gain some experience as my secretary even after receiving the title of Marquis. This is not a suggestion or a proposal. Accept it as an obligation.”

“Ah, yes. That… yes. No problem.”

It seemed that the discussion about inheriting the throne was not yet on the table.

Carla, already aware of this fact, kept her mouth shut, deciding it was not the right time to speak.

As they left the audience chamber and made their way out of the palace, they reached the grand entrance just as their conversation with Lord Cascata concluded, and there, the two of them and Lord Cascata boarded separate carriages.

“Then go inside. There will likely be a few more procedures left. The medal awarding ceremony will also take place, as will the title awarding ceremony. I will inform you as soon as preparations are complete, so go inside.”

“Yes, understood.”

After catching a glimpse of Lord Cascata boarding his carriage, the two also got into theirs.

“I can’t believe it.”

“Right? I can’t believe I’m becoming a Marquis.”

“But you deserve it. If it weren’t for you, it would have been a real disaster.”

“That’s true, but…”

That was the end of that statement.

For a moment, an awkward silence hung between the two.

“…What should we do from now on?”

“Right. So much has happened. I feel like we should rest, but we’ve already rested quite a bit, haven’t we?”

The sun was setting.

The red sunset was painting the sky.

“Look.”

Carla gazed out the window.

Ivan quietly watched the sunset reflected on her face.

When Ivan called her name, Carla turned to him.

“…This might be sudden, but we’ve been together all this time.”

“Yeah.”

“…Shall we live together?”

“What?”

Carla frowned.

At her reaction, Ivan wondered if he had said something wrong and cleared his throat.

“…What I mean is, um… are you asking if we should get married?”

Carla’s face scrunched up even more.

“Is that a proposal?”

“Uh… something like that.”

“Do it again. You idiot.”

“Uh…?”

“Who proposes like this? Do it again.”

Carla’s words seemed like a joke, but they were not.

With a deeply furrowed brow, Carla glared at Ivan, and he found himself nodding without realizing it.

“I’ll prepare well… and do it again.”

“Do it properly, properly. I’m fully prepared to accept.”

And with that, Carla smiled.

She smiled.

A word from the author (Author's note)

Not being able to write 19+ is a lifelong regret.

# 150 - The Academy Prodigy Wants to Defeat the Genius

The academy's grand hall was bustling with people. Some of them were seated in chairs, but others were deliberately standing and chatting with acquaintances, creating a lively atmosphere.

The destroyed buildings had been rebuilt, and the ruined gardens were blooming again. The terrible incident had left deep and indelible scars in the hearts of the victims' families, but at least in this academy, all traces of it had been neatly erased, making them almost impossible to find.

Like a lie.

As if it had never happened.

The academy was regaining its vitality.

The front door of the grand hall opened silently, and the Imperial Guard entered and lined up. Their appearance signaled the start of the ceremony, and people stopped laughing and talking, turning their interested gazes to the podium.

The headmaster of the academy appeared first. He was followed by instructors who lined up in a row. The headmaster, standing on the podium, cleared his throat lightly and slowly began to speak.

"Thank you sincerely for gathering here despite your busy schedules."

The headmaster paused and looked around at the people gathered in the hall. People from all walks of life had gathered and were all looking at the headmaster.

"We had to face a terrible incident. The academy suffered irreparable damage in the process, and not only the academy but also those of you here suffered great wounds in your hearts. But today, we are gathered here for a new beginning."

Most of those present were connected to the memories of that day. There were dead instructors, and there were dead students. The aftermath of what happened at the academy had such a significant impact.

"We have lost much. Precious people, the order we believed in. And we almost lost many things that we took for granted."

The fact that Magical Engineering almost disappeared was an unknown fact. The existence of Ivan was also the same. Perhaps that was why the statement that they almost lost things they took for granted aroused some suspicion.

"But we are here. We have risen again, and we have come to this day, honoring the souls of those who sacrificed themselves."

The headmaster paused to catch his breath and said.

"The newly starting academy will be different from the past. Distinctly different from before, it will be a place where people are evaluated not by status, but by talent, and further by ability and skill. It will not be swayed by lineage, but will be evaluated by the pure skill and competence of the individual."

It wouldn't be easy. But it was something that had to be done.

"And those who are here today will lead the next era of Magical Engineering."

Applause erupted.

The day the academy restarted.

On a scale befitting the beginning, the renewed academy greeted its first day.

Exiting the bustling hall, Carla and Ivan walked side by side.

The neatly folded and sewn cuffs did not flutter in the wind.

With her right hand clasped in Ivan's, the two strolled around the vibrant academy.

The restored training grounds,

The newly built library,

Newly planted landscaping trees that were just beginning to hold life.

"There's no trace left, really."

"They tore down almost everything and rebuilt it. It would be a problem if there were traces left."

"Even so, to rebuild everything like this... it's amazing."

"It has to be amazing. The Imperial Family paid a lot of attention to it. Lord Cascata and I had a headache securing the budget for this."

"Did you?"

Carla grinned and squeezed Ivan's hand. Ivan smiled back at Carla.

"Is your uncle teaching you well?"

He hadn't told Ivan that he would be the next emperor, it seemed.

If he had, Ivan would have been so surprised that he would have run to Carla with his jaw dropped.

"Well... I don't know if I should say he's teaching me well... or if he's just torturing me too much..."

"What can you do? Imperial affairs can't be easy."

"I heard you're having a hard time too, Carla."

"...Yeah..."

Carla wasn't just playing around either. She had quit the academy a while ago, and she was busy preparing for her wedding with Ivan around next year. She was sweating as she learned the manners, behavior, language habits, and styles of a lady that she had never learned before. These were things she had never had to learn until now, so it was an even more painful time because they weren't habits.

"Ugh, it's really painful..."

Carla's face quickly clouded over. The excruciating time came back to her mind. Who would have imagined that she would learn such things, but since Ivan had become a marquis and was about to inherit the throne, she couldn't avoid learning them.

"...Well, it's still bearable."

Carla closed her mouth and narrowed her eyes primly. Ivan couldn't help but burst out laughing at the sight.

"Looking at you like this, I can't imagine you being the Carla who rushed at me so fiercely to beat me."

"I've already won, so it's okay."

"That's true."

"I've already won, so it's okay. Now my goal is to win in other areas."

"Other areas?"

"Yeah."

"Where?"

Carla didn't answer Ivan's question right away. Even so, her lips were moving as if she was trying to answer, but in the end, she couldn't answer and her face turned red.

"...There is, something like that."

"What is it? What is it? Tell me. I'm curious."

"No, there is something like that..."

Just as Ivan was about to press Carla again, someone far away was calling out to Ivan and Carla in a loud voice.

The figures of two people approaching.

His bear-like physique was still the same.

And next to him was Emil—Emilia, who was wearing a brown two-piece suit and whose hair had grown much longer.

"We've been looking for you. Where have you been wandering around?"

"We were just spending some quality time together as lovers. It's okay, isn't it?"

"I suppose so."

It was Liam and Emilia, whom they hadn't seen in a long time.

The two had headed to Liam's hometown together not long after the investigation was over.

She was now living under the name Emilia Foucault, taking Liam's surname instead of Aufstieg.

Emilia, who had thrown off the shackles of the past, wore a peaceful smile that she had never shown before.

"Emilia, your face looks much better."

"Yeah, Liam is treating me well too. My in-laws... well, not yet, but... Liam's parents are treating me well, so I'm at peace."

"That's good."

Liam was a nobleman from another country, so he wouldn't make Emilia suffer.

"So, we're getting married next month. Carla, Ivan. I hope you two will come and bless us."

It was a bit unexpected.

Even so, they didn't expect Liam and Emilia to get married sooner than Ivan and Carla.

But in fact, it was only a matter of time, and they had already expected the two to get together, so it was just unexpected and not surprising.

"I'll definitely go, Emilia."

"Yeah, thank you."

Emilia smiled brighter than ever as she shook Carla's hand and congratulated her.

It was as if the pain of a while ago was a lie.

Had the terrible memories that weighed down Emilia faded a lot now—they shouldn't have been so easily erased, but it seemed like Liam had taken care of Emilia with all his heart.

Carla thought that it would have been even better if Regina had been here. She always felt gloomy when she thought of Regina. She always felt like she had an indelible debt to her, and Ivan would feel the same. But if she brought up that story, it would only create a strange atmosphere in this good conversation, so Carla didn't bother to say it.

"By the way, Ivan. Is Lord Cascata treating you well?"

"...You're asking the same thing. I'm dying, it's killing me."

"But what can you do? You're a marquis now, so you have to take on that responsibility."

Liam, who was laughing and talking, looked up at the central clock tower and said.

"Emilia and I should be heading back now. It's getting quite late. Anyway, I'll send the wedding invitation to the Contadino Marquisate."

"Okay, I'll definitely go. Send me the invitation."

The two deliberately walked home from the academy.

The shadows of the two stretched long over the streets, which were already turning reddish-orange as the sun set.

"When will the prosthetic arm be finished?"

"I heard it'll take about a month or two. The adjustments are all done, and all that's left is to refine it."

Carla was now completely used to living with only one arm. But even so, it wouldn't be good for the marchioness, and the empress, although Carla was still keeping it a secret, to be one-armed, so she had decided to get a prosthetic arm.

"Get ready, Ivan."

"Why?"

"I'm going to beat you this time. Once I get my prosthetic arm, I'm really going to beat you."

"You've already won, haven't you?"

"I said there was one thing I couldn't win earlier. I have to win that too to win everything."

"So what is it?"

"You don't need to know."

Carla let go of Ivan's hand and ran ahead. Then, she turned around and stuck her tongue out at Ivan. Her appearance, silhouetted against the sunset, was truly mischievous.

"I'm not going to tell you, you idiot."

"No, how am I supposed to know if you don't tell me?"

"I don't know, you idiot."

The shadows stretched long.

Carla running away quickly, and Ivan chasing after her.

Everything is fine.

A world turning without incident.

There are people in that world.

The witch who tried to become a god is dead.

The thousand years she spent trying to dominate Magical Engineering and become a god were in vain.

All that remains are people.

Ordinary yet special individuals living their own lives.

They didn't need a god.

Their lives are the path they chose, and the future they created.

And that was enough.

"So what's the one thing I can't win against you—!"

<<The Academy Prodigy Wants to Beat the Genius>> The End.

A Word from the Author (Author's Afterword)

Thank you for all the overwhelming love you have given me.

I hope to see you again someday.

# BONUS: The Academy Prodigy Wants to Defeat the Genius - Final Review

Hello, this is binibig.

I’m here to share my final thoughts after completing <<The Academy Prodigy Wants to Defeat the Genius>>.

This has become my eighth completed work.

As those of you reading this may know, this novel originally wasn’t mine.

It was written by author Sooyubang, who had to stop, and I took over to finish it.

I’ve heard some people wonder if Sooyubang and I are the same person, but that’s not the case… haha.

Anyway, it seems like this title has had quite a few ups and downs.

Since it’s an academy story, it was quite challenging.

To be honest, my educational background isn’t very extensive.

I don’t have much knowledge or experience regarding school life.

However, I had to create a fictional space called an academy, and oh, that was quite something…

I started off boldly inheriting the material, but there were unexpected difficulties along the way.

Well, that’s something I had to deal with, so I’d appreciate it if you could just consider it a lament!

Anyway, that’s how it is.

I feel fortunate that I didn’t take a long break while writing this.

In the past, I would always end up taking breaks due to illness whenever I wrote something, but this time it didn’t happen…

However, a bigger incident did occur, haha…

I’m not sure if the readers were satisfied.

Personally, I tried to wrap things up well, but I feel like there are some lacking parts.

As for the side story, I’m not sure yet.

Honestly, right now, I just want to rest!ㅠㅠ

I feel like I’ve been sleeping all day; I can’t believe how sleepy I am… Plus, I haven’t been eating properly, so I’ve been surviving on ice cream for almost every meal, which has really drained my energy.

If I write any longer, it might turn into a long-winded rant, so I’ll take my leave here.

Thank you sincerely to everyone who has been with me up to this point!

I love you!