# The Academy's Prodigy Wants to Defeat the Genius - 20

"Alright, Carla the mage. Seeing through the essence of things is an important virtue for a mage. In that regard, you have a fine mindset. So, shall we discuss something more fundamental? Ivan, step aside for a moment."

Lorenzo practically shoved Ivan aside and took the seat he had been occupying.

Carla, sitting on the bed, quietly observed his actions, while Lorenzo grinned and met her gaze.

"Now, there are two options. One is a prosthetic arm and the other… Hmm, yes. Ivan, and the rest of you—could you step out for a bit? I’d prefer if you all waited outside."

"But, Carla—"

Ivan hesitated at Lorenzo’s request, looking at Carla.

She was still unstable—

Ivan wanted to stay by her side.

A part of him held onto the guilt that if he had arrived sooner, maybe Carla’s arm wouldn’t have been lost.

"Leave, Ivan."

But contrary to his thoughts, Carla dismissed him coldly.

Since the patient herself was saying so, he had no choice but to comply. Shoulders slumped, Ivan stepped out of the room.

"Ivan, are you alright?"

Regina placed a comforting hand on his shoulder as he left, just before the door closed behind them. Then, Lorenzo snapped his fingers, activating a soundproofing spell before turning back to Carla.

"Let’s continue, one option is a prosthetic arm. But you already know, don’t you? Prosthetics won’t let you use magic as you did before. Military prosthetics are still in development and even the prototypes aren’t ready for practical use. The others are purely for daily activities—none allow mana circulation."

"…I’m aware."

She wasn’t truly familiar with prosthetics, having never needed them before. But she understood their purpose: they were meant to aid in daily life, not to return injured soldiers to the battlefield.

"The other option… is body transmutation."

"Body transmutation?"

"Also known as transmutation magic, almost no one practices it. Moreover, it’s forbidden magic. That’s why I sent the others away."

"Forbidden magic… That makes sense."

"Carla as I said, transmutation magic is forbidden. It’s not something one discusses openly. It was first developed around five hundred years ago and there was once a legendary mage who freely replicated human bodies, transferring memories to extend the lineage of magic."

"They actually existed?"

Carla’s eyes lit up.

If such magic could create living human bodies, producing a single arm should be nothing.

"No, Carla. Not ‘exists.’"

"What?"

"‘Existed,’ past tense."

"What do you mean?"

Carla fell silent.

The change in tense implied something significant.

Could it be—

"Just as you’re thinking, I believe the woman who died the other day might have been that very mage."

"What… What are you saying?"

"More precisely, a figure suspected to be that legendary mage is the one who died."

"No way…"

"That’s exactly right. Most likely, the mage was the one killed by Ivan."

Carla pondered Lorenzo’s words.

The countless duplicates in the forest.

She had torn them all apart herself.

They hadn’t bled, but otherwise, they had felt just like real people.

"So, you’re saying… Venere was that mage?"

"I don’t know her name, she was only known as the Witch of Transmutation. But from what you’ve told me and from Ivan’s account, it makes sense to suspect that this ‘Venere’ was her and we don’t even know if she truly died. Ivan may be strong, but he’s still just an academy student. A legendary mage wouldn’t have fallen so easily. What died could have been another duplicate—her true body might still be out there."

"Then, if we find her…"

Hope flickered in Carla’s eyes.

She clenched her fist.

She had stood at a crossroads, facing the possibility of living the rest of her life as an amputee, of abandoning her dream of being a mage—

But now, there was a chance.

"If I were you, I’d try to track her down. But even if you find her, she’s unlikely to cooperate. Not only did you fight her, but one of her forms—whether a duplicate or her true self—was killed by Ivan."

"That’s something we won’t know until we try—"

"Either way, that’s all I have to tell you. Carla, aside from your arm, your body has fully recovered. You can attend classes starting tomorrow, but… I wouldn’t recommend it. Psychological wounds don’t heal so easily. Rest while you can."

Lorenzo stood from his chair.

Carla didn’t look at him and Lorenzo, having expected as much, simply turned and walked to the door without hesitation.

“Alright, that’s it for my visit, kids. The rest is up to you.”

As his voice faded, Ivan burst into the room.

Regina followed close behind, though her attention seemed to be on Ivan rather than Carla.

"Carla!"

Ivan took the empty seat beside her.

Carla looked at him for a moment—

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

That voice echoed in her mind.

She shook her head to clear the thought.

"…Don’t expect me to thank you."

Carla spoke while turning her head away.

"Carla! But Ivan was only thinking of you—"

It was Regina.

She had heard the story, but with large gaps in the explanation. To her, it simply seemed like Ivan had saved Carla. That was why she couldn’t understand Carla’s cold attitude now.

The truth was, Regina still hadn’t fully accepted Carla.

In her memories, Carla was still Carlo. Even knowing the truth, accepting it was an entirely different matter.

"Regina, don’t. Carla’s just overwhelmed right now."

"But… Ivan, you saved her…"

"No, Regina. Carla has every right to be angry at me, if I had been stronger… If I had been just a little stronger… I’m sorry, Carla."

Carla bit her lip.

‘Sorry? For what?’

"If I had been stronger, I could have saved you sooner. If that had happened, your arm…"

‘You.

You’re always like this.

You were born with talent, always gaining things effortlessly, while I struggled just to catch up to you—’

"If you’re going to talk like that, just get out, Ivan."

"Carla?"

"If you’re going to say things like that, then get out. Do you think I want your apologies? If I were the kind of person who could just sit here and take comfort in that—! If I were that weak—! You don’t even understand why I learned magic in the first place!"

—Idiot, you act so strong, yet when it really matters, you can’t do anything. Why do you even learn magic? Is it supposed to give you extra lives? If not, then why? What’s the point?

As Carla shouted in frustration, Ivan was suddenly reminded of what she had said when she saved him from the carriage attack just days ago.

Carla had saved him.

Unlike him now, she had saved him without a scratch.

But he—

Ivan clenched his trembling fists.

The wind from the open window rustled Carla’s empty sleeve. Seeing it, Ivan closed his eyes.

"Even so, I am sorry. You saved me, Carla. But I… I didn’t save you. That’s why I’m sorry, I thought that was what learning magic was for…"

"Stop whining like you’re some tragic hero and just disappear from my sight. Please, just go…"

Her voice shook.

Like a blade, her words cut deep.

"Carla. he only came to visit you."

Liam, unable to watch any longer, finally stepped in.

It was a difficult conversation to interrupt, but at this point, Carla seemed to be going too far.

"Shut up and get out! All of you! Just leave! I don’t need your worthless sympathy… Get out, all of you!"

Carla’s voice rose, her face flushed with anger.

Liam narrowed his eyes, studying her before speaking.

"…One day, when you’re in real danger, no one will be there to save you, Carla. Remember that."

"Then I’ll handle it myself, so stop worrying about me."

Liam didn’t reply.

He simply turned and left the hospital room.

"Ivan, let’s just give her space."

Ivan still seemed like he had more to say.

But before he could, Regina grabbed his arm and pulled him out of the room.

"……"

The only one left was Emil, who leaned against the wall, watching Carla in silence.

For a long moment, he seemed like he wanted to say something.

But in the end, he just let out a deep sigh and walked out as well.

The empty hospital room.

The cold wind swirling inside.

The lone bed and Carla, sitting atop it.

Finally, reality set in.

Finally, she faced it.

Finally, reality spoke to her, in a voice as cold as ice.

‘What can you do now, like this?’

"What do they think I am… I can handle myself, I can—"

‘I can handle it.

I can take care of myself.

But how?

With just one arm?

Finding the real body of that mage—how?’

Before she could finish her thought, Carla slammed her fist down on the bed.

Thud. Thud.

The bed dented slightly under her strikes, and eventually, she buried her face into her trembling fist.



Eventually, she collapsed onto the bed, drained of strength.

Her vacant gaze remained fixed on the ceiling, devoid of hope—until, finally, the tears she had held back spilled over, trailing down her clenched fist and soaking into the bedsheet.

The setting sun cast a deep crimson glow into the hospital room.

Her empty sleeve fluttered helplessly in the breeze and the only sound that filled the room was Carla’s muffled sobs, quiet yet overwhelming.

# The Academy's Prodigy Wants to Defeat the Genius - 21

The moment Lorenzo stepped out of the hospital, he lit a cigarette.

As soon as the flame touched the tip, wisps of smoke curled into the air, spreading the distinct sharp yet refreshing scent of magic-infused tobacco.

"Hospitals these days… No flexibility at all, won’t even let a man smoke."

Taking a deep drag, he exhaled audibly, feeling the tension in his body ease.

"Instructor! Instructor—!"

He had barely smoked half the cigarette when a voice called out to him.

Lorenzo stubbed it out in his portable ashtray and turned around.

"Ivan? What is it?"

It was Ivan.

His face was flushed, breath heavy, as if he had sprinted over.

Lorenzo waited patiently for him to catch his breath.

"It’s about… Albina…"

"…Did you just call her ‘Albina’?"

For someone to call Albina by that name—it could mean many things. Lorenzo immediately caught onto it, giving Ivan a curious look. Realizing his slip, Ivan quickly corrected himself.

"Ah, I mean… I’ve known her since I was young, so it just stuck. Sorry."

"Hmph."

At least he knew how to apologize properly.

Despite being a commoner, the kid had an honest air about him.

Lorenzo’s impression of him improved slightly as he replied.

"Well, I suppose that makes sense. But as for Albina—I already told you what I know."

"Do you think she’ll really be dismissed?"

"Hard to say."

Should he say it?

He hesitated, but in the end, he decided there was no harm.

"Most likely, she’ll be dismissed and she won’t be allowed to teach again. Excuse me, mind if I light another?"

"Oh—uh, of course."

Lorenzo pulled out another cigarette from his coat.

A small flame flickered at his fingertip, lighting the end. Once more, smoke drifted into the night air.

"That’s what it means to be an instructor. We’re responsible for our students."

"But it wasn’t Instructor Albina’s fault! The attack happened because of the academy’s—"

"The academy will take responsibility, too. I never said it wouldn’t, but an accident that happens during class? That’s on Albina, as the instructor in charge. It’s not about blame—it’s about responsibility. She was in that position, so she has to answer for it."

"…I see."

Ivan visibly deflated.

At twenty, just barely stepping into adulthood, he didn’t yet understand the way the world worked.

He was still too young for that.

"You said ‘most likely.’ Does that mean… there’s a chance she won’t be dismissed?"

"That’s right."

Lorenzo flicked the ash from his cigarette into the tray, then exhaled deeply.

This whole conversation was already strange—having to discuss such matters with a student.

"The academy needs a reason to keep Albina. Something that convinces them she should stay. …That’s not something I can help with, that’s up to the academy."

"…I understand."

Lorenzo patted Ivan lightly on the shoulder.

"Hang in there. I’ll see what I can do, too."

"Yes, Instructor. Thank you."

Ivan bowed deeply before turning to leave.

Lorenzo had already said everything he needed to and besides, there was someone else waiting for Ivan—

The moment Lorenzo disappeared around the corner, Regina approached.

"Ivan."

"Oh, Regina."

"You ran off so suddenly… I had a hard time keeping up."

She flashed a bright smile, slightly out of breath.

Ivan forced a small smile in return.

"I had something to ask Instructor Lorenzo."

"About what?"

She stepped closer, curious.

With her rosy cheeks and lively expression, she looked so full of energy.

Ivan, unconsciously, took a small step back.

"I was worried about Instructor Albina, she protected us."

"I see… Judging by your face… you didn’t get the answer you wanted, did you?"

"Seems that way."

"I thought so…"

A defeated Ivan.

Regina couldn't help but feel sorry for him.

They had played together since childhood—the three of them. Even if Carlo had been Carla all along, that didn’t erase the time they had spent together.

"Ivan."

Ivan flinched when Regina suddenly grabbed his hand, instinctively trying to pull away.

"Don’t pull away."

"O-okay…"

Warmth.

Unlike Carla, who always pushed him away coldly, Regina’s touch was gentle and comforting.

"Carla’s situation isn’t your fault and the reason she’s so angry…"

Even Regina herself struggled to understand it completely.

But saying that outright wouldn’t help.

"She’s probably lashing out because she doesn’t want you to blame yourself. That’s just how Carla is, right?"

"Yeah… she’s always been like that."

"Our Ivan is so kind."

Regina giggled, ruffling Ivan’s hair.

Her fingers ran through his wind-tossed hair, smoothing it down.

"So let’s try to understand Carla and don’t worry—Instructor Albina will be fine, I’m sure of it."

"…Yeah."

Meanwhile, Lorenzo leaned against a wall, cigarette in hand, listening to their conversation.

‘Ah, youth. What a time to be alive.’

Young love—there was something about it that warmed the heart, even just watching it from afar.

Lorenzo found himself smiling without realizing it.

Until he turned around.

And stopped dead in his tracks at the sight of over a dozen men standing before him.

Clad in black hooded cloaks, their faces obscured save for their lower jaws, they exuded an unmistakable presence.

"Well, well. A lot of people seem to be looking for me today, am I getting too popular?"

"Don’t be flippant, Lorenzo."

"Ah, I see. A noble sent you lot, didn’t they?"

Lorenzo shrugged.

Truthfully, he hadn’t even noticed their presence until they revealed themselves.

Which meant that even if he tried to fight, he had no chance.

For people with such skill to be walking so openly within the academy…

"Acting Instructor Lorenzo. Cease your meddling, this isn’t something for you to pry into."

"…You lot can read minds, too, huh?"

Albina.

The attack.

Carla.

The academy.

These weren’t things he could just ignore and then there was Emil’s strange reaction when he left the hospital room—

There was plenty to dig into if he wanted to.

"A mere low-ranking noble like you has no place interfering, this concerns the Empire’s future. No, the very fate of this continent. It is far beyond your station."

"……"

"Consider this your warning, understood?"

"Oh, loud and clear. I’ll keep my mouth shut, just like a good-for-nothing noble should."

With Lorenzo’s flippant remark, the cloaked figures turned and disappeared, one by one.

As the last of them vanished, Lorenzo silently raised his middle finger in their direction before walking away.

Thud.

Carla swayed and ended up hitting her head against the side of the carriage.

A sharp jolt of pain shot through her skull.

"Can’t you drive properly?!"

Her sharp yell was met with a panicked apology from the coachman beyond the curtain.

Carla knew it was just her own irritation talking.

But missing an entire arm, even a small shake of the carriage was enough to throw off her balance completely.

She had never realized just how much her limbs contributed to her overall equilibrium and then there was the weight in front of her.

That, too, annoyed her to no end.

‘Was a woman’s body always this useless?’

Everything felt off.

When she could still fight, the increased flexibility and agility had seemed like an advantage.

But now that she couldn’t fight, all she could notice were the inconveniences.

Her hips, for instance.

The widened pelvis and prominent curves made even sitting on a bench feel cramped and her chest—

Every movement caused an unnecessary bounce, an extra weight that was impossible to ignore.

A woman’s body was nothing but a bundle of inconveniences!

“Miss, we’re nearly at the estate!”

The coachman’s voice snapped Carla out of her thoughts and she glanced out the window.

Sure enough, as dusk settled, the Cascata estate loomed ahead.

‘…The old man and the brat are going to laugh their heads off. Ugh…’

She had never cared about the whole “heir” business.

But now, returning in this state—

Unable to fight—

She could already imagine what that old man and that upstart would say.

Her irritation flared anew as the carriage rolled to a stop before the grand entrance of the estate.

“Step aside, I’ll open it.”

‘That voice…’

Before Carla could react, the carriage door swung open.

Standing before her was a middle-aged man—

Enrico della Cascata.

His expression was unreadable as he looked at Carla.

No—

As he looked at the empty sleeve of her left arm, fluttering in the night breeze.

# The Academy's Prodigy Wants to Defeat the Genius - 22

Imperial Court Mage—Carlo della Cascata.

Known more by his surname than his given name and always addressed with the honorific ‘Sir Cascata’ as a sign of respect.

He meticulously adjusted his shirt to ensure there were no wrinkles, straightened his tie, and then carefully extended his palm.

As his hand reached toward the massive stone gate, a faint white light appeared, forming a square sigil precisely at chest height, seemingly inviting his touch.

When Sir Cascata placed his palm against the glowing sigil, a deep rumbling sound resonated and the stone doors slowly parted.

Inside, the chamber was not entirely dark.

The round table was empty, devoid of occupants.

Instead, seven orbs, shimmering in colors from red to violet, were neatly arranged upon it in a circular formation.

"It has been a while, Cascata has arrived."

At his low declaration, the red orb flickered.

—It has been some time, Sir Cascata. Have you been well?

"Yes, thanks to the elders, I have been managing without trouble."

Before his words had even fully settled, the other orbs flickered to life, voices overlapping as they spoke.

—That is good to hear. Your well-being is of utmost importance.

—It is time for those with vitality, like yourself, to take action rather than us old relics.

—Indeed… The appointed time is drawing near.

"Yes, elders. I am well aware and making thorough preparations. I have enrolled in the academy… and I have also removed a sponsor. I intend to stir the resonance further."

—Be cautious, Sir Cascata. If the timing is missed, the descent may occur prematurely.

"I understand, the plan is progressing smoothly. Mercurio has been detained and though Venere has perished… replacements are abundant, so there will be no issue."

—Indeed, we heard of Venere’s demise. She should have worked with Mercurio, but at least the distinction between her main body and duplicates is meaningless.

"Yes."

—Then we shall assume there are no deviations in the plan. Now, about your niece—this is quite the revelation. How could such a deception remain unnoticed for so long? Even we believed that child to be the rightful heir of Cascata.

Sir Cascata did not immediately respond.

He had already grasped the situation well enough.

His namesake nephew, Carlo della Cascata and yet, that same nephew had now been revealed as a daughter all along—

Even for Sir Cascata, this news had come as a shock.

Of course, his calculating mind had swiftly pieced together what had transpired and he knew exactly how to deflect.

"Such things are not uncommon, are they? A cherished son, obtained late, is protected at all costs—even at the expense of a daughter. This is nothing unusual."

—That much is true. But for a girl, she seems to have quite the competitive spirit. It would be difficult to find a suitable marriage arrangement for someone so unruly.

"She is a good-hearted child. An unfortunate accident…"

—Indeed, but you should head to the academy soon. We have heard that your niece was involved in a significant incident.

"Yes, but that is merely fate taking its course."

—Would it not be possible to use one of Venere’s duplicates?

"Once the plan is concluded and all is settled, I shall consider it."

—Very well, we entrust the future plans entirely to you.

"Understood."

As Sir Cascata bowed deeply, the orbs dimmed one by one, losing their glow and returning to a dull gray.

Straightening once more, his expression hardened.

‘Foolish child…’

“…Assist her. She will struggle to step down on her own.”

Enrico, who had been silently watching what was now his ‘daughter,’ finally turned away and spoke.

The butler, Basilov, who had been waiting nearby, stepped forward, extending a hand to Carla.

"Move your hand, I can do it myself."

Carla’s gaze was fixed solely on Enrico’s retreating figure as she spoke.

Basilov was entirely disregarded, yet he withdrew silently at her cold words.

The narrow carriage steps.

Carla carefully placed her foot down, maintaining balance with her right hand against the carriage wall and managed to descend.

Only then did she fully feel the weight of the servants’ gazes upon her.

‘Was it pity?

Regret?

Or was it simply sympathy?’

Whatever it was, the ambiguous stares irked her.

Just as she was about to lash out, Enrico, standing atop the mansion’s front steps, turned slightly and spoke.

"If you have descended, come inside. Dinner will go cold."

With that, he turned fully and walked into the mansion.

Even after stepping inside, his lips parted a few times as if he wanted to say something—

But he did not wait for his daughter.

"Your arm…"

"Shut up and eat, brat."

A neatly sliced steak was not placed before Carla.

Not that she could have cut it anyway.

Given the severity of her injury, eating normally would have been difficult.

While the rest of the family—if they could even be called that, as there were only two others—Enrico and Fabio, ate their steaks, Carla was left with a bowl of thick, nourishing broth with shredded chicken.

Even this was inconvenient.

If her right hand had also been injured, she would have struggled just to eat this.

"What are you going to do about your arm?"

"That’s none of your concern, I’ll be fine as I am."

"That’s just your opinion."

Ignoring Fabio’s question, Carla slowly spooned the soup.

It did, at least, sit well in her stomach.

"Fabio is not wrong, Carla. Have you given any thought to your arm?"

"……."

Carla did not answer Enrico’s question.

Not because she didn’t want to, but because she had no answer to give.

"Without an arm, continuing the art of Lightning Magic will be difficult."

He was right.

Lightning Magic was fundamentally rooted in physical enhancement.

A magic that strengthened the body, heightened the senses and used that enhanced body to conduct electricity, leading the battlefield with sheer force. A combat magic meant for those who dominated in close combat.

Even after sacrificing both wings of her magic circuits in the Offering ten years ago, all to gain more power—

She had now lost an arm and the Waterfall Temple, where she had pledged herself, did not grant wishes to restore limbs. Besides, was there anything left for Carla to offer in exchange?

"I will arrange for a prosthetic, one that will allow you to function in daily life. But you will withdraw from the academy and prepare to marry into House Scheiskell."

"What?"

Carla’s eyes widened in shock.

This was the most absurd thing she had ever heard.

And more than that—Scheiskell?

"Yes, Lucas von Scheiskell, the heir of House Scheiskell."

"Are you insane?!"

Bang!

Carla slammed her fist onto the table, rising abruptly.

Her bowl of porridge overturned and even Enrico and Fabio’s plates rattled from the impact.

"Do you even understand what you’re saying?!"

"Sit down, Carla."

"How can I sit and listen to this?! Lucas—Lucas?! You expect me to marry that lunatic?! Why would I?! Besides, I was originally—"

She bit her tongue.

She couldn’t speak of the Offering.

She couldn’t reveal that she had once been a man.

Not in this dining hall, where servants bustled about clearing the mess she had made.

But even without that, the idea of her—once a man—marrying another man was absurd.

Unthinkable, impossible.

"You should be grateful they’re willing to accept a damaged bride, Carla. You knew this was inevitable, you understand what role a daughter plays in a noble family."

"Shut up! I will never get married!"

"…Carla."

A spark of lightning crackled—

And suddenly, Enrico was standing in front of her.

The aura of a war veteran, a man who had once rampaged through battlefields, pressed down on her. His fierce gaze bore into her like a blade.

"What can you do?"

His hand pressed down on Carla’s shoulder.

The left shoulder. The one where her arm was gone.

"You cannot even move. As a mage—as a Cascata mage—what can you possibly do? What right do you have to call yourself a mage?"

"I—!"

Carla refused to back down.

Her right hand, crackling with lightning, lashed out at Enrico’s face.

But he caught her fist with ease.

"That makes both of your attacks useless. Meanwhile, I still have another hand. Kicks? You think I don’t have them too? What can you do now, Carla? The ‘heir’ of House Cascata—Carla della Cascata, answer me."

Carla trembled, gritting her teeth, glaring at Enrico.

Her eyes burned with fury, but Enrico met them without flinching.

"You have two months, the academy’s midterm exam is then. Take the test. If you pass, I will continue to observe you. But if you fail and are expelled—"

Enrico turned away, his voice cold as steel.

"—Your name will become Carla von Scheiskell."

# The Academy's Prodigy Wants to Defeat the Genius - 23

Women, inevitably, had less physical strength than men and were at a disadvantage in direct combat.

This was the natural order, a truth woven into the empire’s militaristic values—where power determined worth. Sons were always preferred.

The higher the noble standing, the more deeply entrenched this belief became.

Daughters were little more than tools for political marriage, valued only for the alliances they could secure. Their role was to sit gracefully in social circles, wear elegant smiles, and bear sons to continue the family lineage.

There were exceptions—Albina, for example, had graduated from the academy and joined the Mage Corps, becoming a career soldier. But even in the military, women faced limits to their advancement.

At least they were allowed to learn freely. That, Carla supposed, was something.

‘What a joke…’

She threw herself onto the bed, thoughts churning.

Only days ago, she had been a man. Even with the problem of her body’s transformation, she had never thought it would lead to talk of marriage.

She had never planned to inherit the family estate, so passing the heir’s duties to Fabio didn’t bother her.

But Enrico’s words… they weren’t something she could just dismiss. If she failed the midterms—

‘That bastard would really go through with it.’

People gossiped about Enrico della Cascata’s devotion. How he had never remarried, never taken a concubine after his wife’s death in a carriage ambush.

Carla knew better.

If he had truly loved her mother, he would have shed at least a single tear at the funeral.

‘I have to pass the midterms, I’ll think about everything else after that.’

She had the option to skip them, but Enrico would never allow it.

That was obvious.

‘Lucas, though? He’s insane.’

House Cascata and House Scheiskell—on paper, a logical match.

But person to person? Marrying Lucas, infamous for his depravity, was the worst possible outcome.

“Absolute worst.”

Lying on the bed, she stared blankly at the ceiling.

A storm of emotions raged inside her, too complex to put into words.

Where had everything gone wrong?

Her desire to surpass Ivan? No—something more fundamental than that.

She had trained relentlessly to grow stronger.

No one could claim she hadn’t worked for her power.

She had abandoned the luxuries of noble life, forsaken the security of her birthright, all to refine her magic.

And yet—

She had hit a wall. To surpass it, she had turned to her family’s secret arts.

And now? She was trapped in this body. This female body and on top of that, she had lost an arm.

‘…Did I make the wrong choice?’

A bitter heat rose in her chest, an emotion she couldn’t name.

Anger? Regret? Something else?

‘This isn’t like me.’

She felt weak.

Carla studied herself, detached, analytical.

Losing an arm—was it enough to break her?

Or was this body affecting her mind, too?

Her patience seemed thinner, her emotions too volatile.

‘Where did it all go wrong?’

But there was no answer.

The next morning.

As Carla stepped toward the carriage bound for the academy, unease gnawed at her.

She had barely slept.

Every time she closed her eyes, she relived the moment her arm was torn away.

She would wake with a scream, drenched in sweat.

By the time the sun rose, she had given up on rest entirely.

"Remember last night’s conversation. If you fail the midterms—"

"I get it, stop repeating yourself."

She didn’t even look at Enrico as she snapped back.

So that was why he had bothered to see her off this morning. Just to say this.

Not a word about her arm.

At the very least, she had expected some kind of concern for that.

"I won’t die waiting for help like Mother did. I won’t be weak like her and I don’t need your understanding. I’ll grow stronger—on my own."

Without waiting for a response, Carla climbed into the carriage.

The door shut.

The carriage was just about to depart when—

The door opened again.

"What now?"

Enrico reached inside and straightened the loose sleeve of her left arm.

“…Make sure it doesn’t get caught."

Carla didn’t respond.

Not when the door shut.

Not when the carriage began to move.

Not for a long while.

She had spent her sleepless night thinking.

About that man, the one barely fit to be called a substitute instructor—Lorenzo.

About what he had said.

About the Witch of transmutation magic—the one who might have been Venere.

It was ridiculous, really.

The victim was now the one hunting for her attacker.

But there was no other choice.

‘Two months left…’

The first priority was restoring her arm.

Learning a new form of magic was impossible at this stage and using Lightning Magic with only one arm was absurd.

Her magic circuits had already been severed during the Offering ten years ago, leaving her with no other options.

‘Restoring my arm comes first.’

If she wanted to properly take the midterm exam, she needed to regain her arm.

With her arm intact, the exam would be easy.

These thoughts occupied her mind as the carriage finally arrived at the academy.

As she stepped down, Carla’s gaze was drawn to an all-too-familiar crest on another carriage.

The insignia of House Cascata—accompanied by the imperial symbol of the four twin ravens.

‘Uncle is here?’

The elder brother of Enrico della Cascata and the current Royal Court Mage.

A man whose knowledge of magic was unparalleled and whose expertise in celestial foresight bordered on prophecy.

More than anyone else in the world, he was the man Carla respected the most.

Her heart pounded as she entered the lecture hall, eyes sweeping across the room.

Regina Parla, Emil-something, Liam-something—

‘Ivan isn’t here? Strange.’

That model student hadn’t arrived yet, that was unusual.

‘Not my problem.’

What mattered was whether Lord Cascata had come to the academy.

She wanted to go to him immediately, but she couldn’t just leave class.

“…Carla.”

As she set her bag down, Carla looked up.

Looming over her, tall enough to nearly block the ceiling from view, was Liam.

Expressionless as ever, he gazed down at her.

"What is it?"

"Are you alright?"

"What?"

"Your arm."

He gestured toward her empty left sleeve, swaying limply.

"…It doesn’t hurt, there’s no pain."

"I see."

Despite that, Liam didn’t leave.

He neither spoke further nor returned to his seat.

"Do you have something else to say?"

After a long hesitation—

"…Just… stay strong."

"What?"

"I heard from Ivan, you fought despite your injuries. That’s… impressive. So… yeah. Stay strong."

"Uh… okay."

The moment he finished speaking, Liam hurried back to his seat.

Carla, left bewildered, sat in stunned silence.

She hadn’t expected that.

Sure, Ivan had said something similar, but he had known her for years.

But to hear it from Liam—someone she had barely interacted with, and not even on friendly terms—was…

Strange.

“…Carla?”

A hesitant voice from beside her.

"…Emil?"

"Ah, y-yeah. Emil, you remembered?"

He smiled nervously, fingers fidgeting, his face slightly flushed.

"Uh, your arm… magic…"

"Yeah, it was magic. Not sure what kind."

"That—"

Before Emil could finish, the classroom door burst open.

Lorenzo strode in, his usual nonchalant manner intact.

"You’re all early, not a single latecomer."

Except Ivan wasn’t here.

Was this guy even doing his job properly?

Carla barely had time to consider it before—

"Carla, head to the headmaster’s office. You have a guest."

"A guest?"

"Yeah the Royal Court Mage is here for you."

Carla couldn’t suppress her smile as she stood.

"Ivan’s already there, so bring him back with you."

Her smile disappeared.

Why—why was Ivan’s name involved again?

# The Academy's Prodigy Wants to Defeat the Genius - 24

The harsh temper often masked it, leading people to misunderstand, but Carla della Cascata’s attitude towards magic was exceptionally serious and earnest.

Setting aside the family motto that magic should be respected, her dedication to magic, her thirst for knowledge and her commitment to its study were unparalleled. That’s why she deeply revered the esteemed Cascata Lord, widely regarded as the Empire’s finest authority on magic.

‘Uncle is here, it’s been so long since I last saw him.’

How many years had it been? At least seven or eight. The thought of meeting her most respected uncle again made Carla’s heart swell with excitement—

“Oh, who do we have here? The esteemed Lady Carla della Cascata.”

—only to plummet in an instant.

“…Why aren’t you in class?”

“I was on my way there, actually.”

It was Lucas.

Lucas von Scheiskerl.

Meeting the person she revered the most only to be interrupted by the person she loathed the most—it was enough to ruin Carla’s mood completely.

Just look at that gaudy blond hair.

He had slicked it back, but it still screamed of tackiness. The mana seeping from his body was unrestrained, a clear sign of his lack of control.

Carla could take him down in one move—

‘Ah…’

Right.

She couldn’t do that anymore.

The stark reminder of her current state hit her hard.

“Where are you off to in such a hurry? I heard Lord Cascata is here are you going to see him?”

“…Yes.”

“Then I should come along.”

“Why?”

Carla narrowed her eyes.

There was no reason for Lucas to tag along to meet the court magician, Lord Cascata and then, a bad feeling settled in her gut.

“Hmm? Didn’t the Cascata elder already tell you?”

The ominous premonition took form, slithering around her like a coiled serpent.

A creeping sense of unease wrapped around her, suffocating and tight.

“In two months, you’ll be my wife. Shouldn’t I introduce myself properly in advance?”

Carla’s face flushed red with fury.

Her clenched fists trembled violently and just one more push would—

“Oh, are you going to hit me? Go ahead if you want. But if you fail your midterms, everyone in the academy will know that you’re destined to be my wife, are you fine with that?”

That couldn’t happen.

Carla felt as if she had been doused with cold water, her reason snapping back instantly.

No matter what, she would pass her midterms, but letting such a rumor spread would be disastrous.

“Think it over, Carla. I don’t mind watching you struggle only to end up as mine anyway. Lightning Magic isn’t so easily wielded and I know better than anyone that it’s useless with only one arm. Two months—I can wait. Just looking at your face makes the wait worthwhile. Isn’t it wonderful? Carla della Cascata, becoming Carla von Scheiskerl.”

With a creepy chuckle, Lucas tapped Carla’s left shoulder twice before walking away.

He had deliberately struck her left shoulder—the place of her greatest shame. Carla’s body shook with humiliation.

The academy’s headmaster’s office, located in the central fourth floor, exuded an air of vintage yet simple sophistication.

As Carla raised her hand to knock, the heavy oak door silently swung open on its own.

The scent of jasmine wafted out as she stepped inside. But the details of the room didn’t interest her.

The office, furnished primarily with wood, was elegant yet understated. But Carla’s eyes immediately landed on the man sitting with his back to her on the guest sofa—an all-too-familiar figure.

Then her gaze shifted to the other occupant, facing him.

Ivan.

‘…Why is Ivan here?’

Shouldn’t she have been summoned first?

Swallowing down her rising frustration, Carla stood in silence, waiting.

It would be rude to step forward before being addressed.

“Ah, Carla, you’re here. Come in.”

The headmaster, an elderly man with silver hair and a starry gleam in his sharp eyes, beckoned her forward. As she walked towards the sofa, the man seated there rose to greet her.

“Carlo… no, Carla. It’s been a while.”

The man smiled warmly.

The moment Carla saw his face, all her worries melted away.

Unlike her father, this man evoked emotions she couldn’t quite describe.

Swept up in those emotions, she quickened her pace, stepping forward to bow deeply.

“Uncle, it’s been too long.”

“Indeed, indeed—my dear niece. It has been far too long.”

Carla saw the look of confusion in Lord Cascata’s eyes.

It was a gaze that felt somewhat unfamiliar, different from the one she had always respected. Only now did a small sprout of regret begin to grow within her.

“Come, sit. Headmaster, thank you for calling Carla here.”

“Oh, not at all, Lord Cascata. Rather, I regret that our academy’s investigation has been progressing slowly.”

“What can be done? Those responsible must have been meticulous in their planning, so catching them won’t be easy. Carla, is your arm all right?”

“Yes, it’s fine. It doesn’t hurt or anything…”

Carla replied as she looked at Lord Cascata, but she was aware that Ivan, sitting next to her, was not looking at him but at her. His gaze carried emotions—regret, sorrow, guilt—emotions that made her uneasy.

“The academy is doing its best to track down those responsible for your injury. They will be found, rest assured… though I suppose training will be difficult for you.”

“I—I will help in any way I can!”

It was Ivan who spoke up.

Carla, unknowingly, frowned as she turned to look at him, but it seemed that Ivan didn’t mind. His face was set in determination as he looked at Lord Cascata.

“I bear responsibility for what happened to Carla. If only I had been stronger, if only I had arrived sooner, she wouldn’t have been hurt. I will do everything in my power to help her!”

“Oh…”

Lord Cascata stroked his beard in quiet admiration. He had only met Ivan once, back when he was introduced as the top scorer of the entrance exam. He never expected the boy to show such strong emotions toward Carla.

“I heard that before coming to the academy, you lived in the Cascata domain. So, you and Carla knew each other?”

“Yes, that’s right. We were childhood friends! Though back then, she had a different name…”

“Indeed, you used to share my name back then. You were called Carlo della Cascata, weren’t you?”

Lord Cascata smiled warmly.

Ivan nodded, his expression softening.

“Yes, that was the name. We were childhood friends and she was the one who first taught me magic.”

“You two certainly share a deep bond. I came to see my niece, but I’ve also heard a good story today.”

“Th—that’s too much praise.”

“No, not at all. Then, I will leave Carla’s care to you. Now… Headmaster, I worry I may be taking up too much of your time.”

“Not at all, Lord Cascata. Rather, we are deeply sorry that something unfortunate has happened to your noble house.”

“No, no. The fault lies with the culprit and they must be held accountable.”

Lord Cascata smiled as he spoke, but the headmaster could not return the smile as easily.

The meaning was clear.

The Cascata family was demanding justice.

The academy must catch the culprit.

“You made a wish at the waterfall, didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

On the way back to the carriage, Carla walked alongside Lord Cascata under the pretense of escorting him.

“You didn’t think about the consequences… No, that’s not it. The Waterfall God never reveals what price will be taken. You didn’t expect this outcome, did you?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“It can’t be helped, then. Carla—calling you that really makes it feel like I have another niece… Anyway, Carla, I will look into your arm. I’ve heard that military-grade prosthetics are in development. I will see what I can find.”

At that moment, Carla hesitated.

Should she ask him about human transmutation?

But as Lorenzo had said, it was forbidden magic. Asking Lord Cascata, a man who walked the righteous path, about such things felt premature.

Instead, burdened by frustration, she spoke impulsively.

“…Father.”

“Hm? Enrico? What about him?”

By then, they had reached the carriage.

The coachman quickly ran forward to open the door and Lord Cascata casually placed his foot on the step to board.

“In two months, the academy will hold its midterm exams.”

“That soon? And?”

Seated inside, Lord Cascata removed his hat and placed it on his lap, looking at Carla as if urging her to continue.

“If I fail the midterms… I will have to leave the academy… and be married to the eldest son of the Scheiskehl family.”

“The eldest Scheiskehl? That fool, Lucas?”

Lord Cascata had a keen eye for people.

Carla had hoped—just maybe—that since he looked down on Lucas, he wouldn’t approve of such a marriage—

“Well, it’s not the worst idea. You would find him intolerable, of course, but wouldn’t it be easy for you to manipulate him? That way, you could weaken the Scheiskehl family’s influence. Enrico’s reasoning is sound, I don’t find the idea unacceptable.”

“…What?”

Carla could only gape in shock.

“I’ll say it again, you’ll dislike it, but you must get used to it. The price paid to the Waterfall God never returns, you must adapt. From the perspective of easing the burden on Fabio, who will succeed Enrico as head of the family, it’s not a bad choice. Think it over. Now, I must be going. Write if you ever need help. Take care, Carla.”

“Y—yes…”

Carla stood still, watching the carriage disappear into the distance.

Her tightly clenched fists trembled.

# The Academy's Prodigy Wants to Defeat the Genius - 25

No one could truly understand Carla’s confusion.

Only four people knew for certain that she had originally been a man: herself, Enrico, Fabio, and Lord Cascata.

The servants likely knew as well, but to Carla, they were not worth considering as people in this regard, so she did not count them.

Because of this, no one could comprehend the turmoil Carla harbored within her. Even among those who knew her past, none truly understood her.

At least, that was how she felt.

Even the one person she had believed would understand—Lord Cascata—had responded in a way that shattered that belief.

She had paid too great a price and she had realized it far too late.

“Carla, you don’t look well. Are you okay?”

Ivan asked as he gently held onto the sleeve of Carla’s left arm, which fluttered in the wind.

Carla, her complexion pale, glanced at Ivan but hesitated, her lips parting slightly before she let out a small sigh and shook her head.

However, to Ivan, that alone was shocking.

Carla, Carla della Cascata—his childhood friend, whom he had not seen in ten years.

He had thought she was a boy, but even knowing now that she was a girl, the fact remained that she was his friend.

…Or so he believed.

But then, look.

Her downcast gaze.

The long eyelashes that framed those eyes.

The way they trembled with her sigh.

The delicate flush of her cheeks, contrasting with her otherwise pale complexion.

Her sharp nose, her soft red lips.

“…What are you staring at?”

Even her husky yet clear voice.

“A-ah, nothing. Do you want to go to the infirmary? I can take you.”

“…No, I don’t need to.”

It took energy to show irritation.

Under normal circumstances, Carla would have snapped at Ivan with sharp words, but the series of shocking revelations had drained her.

“S-so? Should we head back to the classroom?”

“…Yeah.”

A rare occurrence—at least since she had entered the academy.

Carla speaking so softly was unusual.

Of course, Ivan failed to notice that it was simply because she lacked the energy to argue.

“Oh, the two of you are back. Did the academy hold a proper celebration for the top and second-ranked students? Was the third-ranked not there?”

“I don’t know who that is, but no, they weren’t.”

It didn’t feel much like a celebration.

In any case, only the two of them had been present, so Carla gave a perfunctory answer and took her seat.

“The third-ranked is Wilhelm von Mittenburg. At least remember his name, Carla.”

“I’m not interested.”

Lorenzo had been rambling, but he soon realized that Carla was paying no attention.

Well, there was no point in telling her things she wouldn’t bother listening to.

“Anyway, to continue—once you graduate from this academy, you’ll undergo another aptitude test. Based on the results, you’ll be assigned a military specialization. While all of you will be military magicians, the deployment roles will differ.”

Not all magicians were the same. Generally, they were divided into close-combat, bombardment, and support roles.

Close-combat magicians were skilled in martial arts, bombardment magicians specialized in mid-to-long-range magical artillery and support magicians focused on reinforcement magic.

“I don’t see any support types here. Or am I wrong, Emil?”

“U-uh, y-yes?!”

Emil, who had been listening attentively, flinched at the sudden mention of his name.

“How much of Aufstich’s family magic have you mastered?”

“A-ah, I… I’ve only learned the secret spells…”

“Is that so? The Aufstich family is known for their Descendant Magic. Have you not learned it yet?”

Emil’s face went pale.

Descendant Magic, a superior form of summoning magic, was the specialty of the Aufstich family. The difference in the summoned entities was vast.

The Dimensional Dragon that Albina had summoned during the academy attack was a high-level spell in summoning magic, but in Descendant Magic, it was merely lower-tier. At its pinnacle, Descendant Magic was said to be capable of summoning gods themselves.

Thus, as the heir of the Aufstich family, Emil was expected to master it.

Even if he had yet to do so.

“You should train diligently at the academy. It would be disgraceful if you failed to master your family’s magic.”

“Y-yes…”

Emil lowered his head, his voice barely audible.

Tears welled in his eyes, but he quickly wiped them away with his sleeve, believing no one had noticed.

Lorenzo, however, was watching him intently.

“Now, about military magicians—there’s no guarantee you’ll always fight on stable ground. Mud and trenches are commonplace. The enemy also has magicians and battles will take place under bombardment. So, maintaining balance while carrying weight is fundamental, like this.”

Lorenzo set his textbook down, raised his hand, and snapped his fingers.

RUMBLE.

In an instant, the surroundings transformed into a barren wasteland.

Or at least, that’s how it appeared.

Screams echoed in the distance, and fireballs rained down from the sky.

“Everyone, stand up.”

At Lorenzo’s command, the students rose.

“Wha—?!”

A sharp gasp from Liam.

The ground had turned into thick mud, swallowing their feet. The firm stone floor had disappeared, making it hard to maintain balance.

“Try to endure, don’t fall and while maintaining your balance, cast a spell—anything you can.”

Lorenzo’s voice remained calm.

Even the area around his podium was affected, yet he stood effortlessly, even swaying slightly with the shifting ground while conjuring flames at his fingertips.

Maintaining balance alone was difficult.

But casting magic on top of that? That was another challenge entirely.

Liam struggled to produce a flame, only to have it flicker out.

Emil attempted a spell but ended up falling face-first.

Regina summoned ice crystals but shrieked as she fell onto her backside.

And then—

‘Ugh…’

Carla couldn’t even stand.

She was completely face-down in the mud, her beautiful face now covered in dirt.

‘If only my arm were fine.

If only my arm were fine…

Then I could handle something like this…’

Her mana flow only worked through her right arm.

She had tried channeling it into her legs, but maintaining balance was purely a matter of physical capability.

Even if she stood, she couldn’t keep her upper body steady.

“Carla, are you okay?!”

Ivan rushed to her side as she struggled to push herself up with her right hand.

‘Ivan… Ivan.

He looked fine.’

Balanced, just like Lorenzo. He moved fluidly with the shifting ground, maintaining stability while several swirling currents of mana spun behind him.

“…You.”

Carla’s voice was barely restrained.

“I’ll help you!”

Ivan slipped his arm under Carla’s, intending to lift her up.

On the right side, it was fine.

But on the left—where there was nothing to support—his hand slipped and landed directly on her chest.

Soft.

Warm.

Overflowing beyond his palm.

“…Oh.”

Ivan let out a sharp yelp and quickly withdrew his hand.

As a result, Carla, who had been using his support to lift herself up, fell back into the mud face-first.

“…You… did that on purpose?”

“N-no! I-I didn’t do it on purpose!”

Carla furiously shook her head, flinging off the mud, and glared at Ivan.

The sensation of that softness—no, more than soft, almost yielding—still lingered in Ivan’s palm and he turned pale as he frantically waved his hands.

“…Get lost, I don’t need your help.”

Carla struggled and managed to push herself upright.

But only for a moment—that was as far as her strength allowed. She wobbled before toppling over to her left side again.

“Alright, that’s enough for now.”

Snap!

With a sharp snap of fingers, the illusion surrounding them vanished as if it had never existed.

The sky, once darkened by artillery fire, the screams and groans of the battlefield—all of it disappeared, returning them to the ordinary classroom.

The students, each in an undignified state, either awkwardly standing, slumped on the floor, or half-risen, found themselves back in reality.

And among them, Carla lay collapsed on the ground.

“Carla, let me help…”

But Carla didn’t even look at Ivan.

Without so much as a glance in his direction, she spoke while still on the floor.

“Liam, help me.”

“Oh, sure. Got it.”

Liam approached and extended a hand. Carla grasped it without hesitation.

With ease, Liam pulled her upright. Without a word, Carla released his hand and returned to her seat as if nothing had happened.

Ivan, watching the scene unfold, hesitated before awkwardly retreating to his own seat.

‘Ivan…’

Regina, too, observed the exchange, her lips curling into an ambiguous smile.

# The Academy's Prodigy Wants to Defeat the Genius - 26

“Regina, don’t you like Ivan?”

A flaming sword whizzed past with a sharp sound, skimming over the ice shield Regina had created.

Liam’s voice came from behind it, causing Regina to flinch.

“W-what? Where did that come from all of a sudden?”

“It’s obvious.”

Without continuing further, Liam withdrew the flames running along his blade and drove the sword into the ground, folding his arms as he looked at Regina.

“O-obvious…”

Regina felt her face heat up.

Her naturally flushed cheeks became even redder.

“It’s very obvious. I won’t go around telling people, but back home, I was quite popular myself.”

Liam cleared his throat before sitting down comfortably.

Regina let out a long sigh before cautiously sitting down beside him.

The so-called “independent sparring” class had been assigned, but Lorenzo had disappeared with Emil, likely for a private discussion. It wasn’t really important.

So, in reality, this was a self-study period.

Carla and Ivan had paired up—though Ivan had approached Carla first, which left Regina feeling a little disappointed. Not that she disliked Liam, but his sudden comment had caught her off guard.

“Back home, thousands of women followed me. When I left for the academy, thousands more wanted to come with me.”

“O-oh… r-really?”

Liam’s hometown was in the South.

Regina had heard that Southern men were prone to exaggeration.

This was probably one of those cases… but still.

“When it came to romance, I was the top in my hometown. So believe me when I say—Ivan definitely has feelings for you.”

“W-what?”

“It’s certain, he’s probably too shy to spar with you, which is why he avoided it.”

“T-that’s ridiculous…”

Regina knew Ivan’s personality well.

He wasn’t one to beat around the bush, always honest about his thoughts and feelings.

For him to be avoiding her made no sense.

“I’m sure of it, Regina. Guys like him are often the most clueless when it comes to showing affection.”

“Y-you think so?”

Regina found herself intrigued by Liam’s words.

It made sense in a strange way… Besides, when she had grabbed Ivan’s hand before, he had seemed flustered.

“Do you want my help, Regina?”

“Huh? R-really?”

Regina’s eyes sparkled.

The truth was—being born into a noble family, if she stayed passive, she’d inevitably be married off to someone whose face she didn’t even know. She had joined the academy, her only real path to success, with the sole goal of marrying Ivan, whom she had loved for so long.

She knew nothing about romance.

It was a one-sided first love, but at least Ivan had no other women around—only Regina. If things went smoothly and they made it into the Mage Corps together, she had vaguely hoped that it would all work out. Fortunately, despite being a noble, she was from the lowest rank, so marrying a commoner wouldn’t be too much of an issue.

But Carla’s arrival had shaken everything.

If things continued like this, she’d lose Ivan. A deep sense of crisis had taken root in Regina’s mind and yet, she had no idea what to do about it.

Moreover… the fact that Liam had figured out her feelings so quickly—his words didn’t seem like a complete lie.

“I told you. When it comes to romance, I know everything. The flame mage who melts hearts—that’s me.”

“R-really… L-Liam, then… can you help me?”

Her face was flushed and her fingers fidgeted anxiously.

She couldn’t even look Liam in the eye as she murmured her request.

Liam pounded his chest confidently.

“Of course, that’s what friends are for. If I help, Ivan is as good as your husband.”

“H-husband…”

‘Such a sweet sound…’

Regina repeated the word in her head over and over, hoping it would become reality.

“Hey! Are you going easy on me?”

Carla’s voice was sharp, and Ivan flinched, avoiding her gaze.

The truth was, he had no choice.

Even if he didn’t go full force—even if he simply fought as usual—Carla wouldn’t be able to win.

Her balance was off, making her punches unstable.

Her kicks barely reached half their usual height.

Trying to incorporate technique only caused her footwork to falter.

She had just charged at Ivan, only to trip over herself and collapse.

“Hah…”

Her sigh carried countless unspoken emotions.

Ivan thought he understood them, but he didn’t say anything.

He hesitated to help her up and so, Carla, covered in dirt, remained on the ground.

He knew why he hesitated.

It was because of that lingering, overwhelming softness from earlier.

The memory of that sensation, the warmth, the yielding flesh—

He was terrified of making another mistake.

“Give me your hand.”

Carla extended her hand and Ivan took it, pulling her up.

She dusted off her clothes, sighing deeply.

“…Let’s stop, Carla.”

“Why? Am I so pathetic that you don’t even want to bother anymore?”

“No, that’s not it… Right now, I think your priority should be figuring out how to recover your arm.”

Carla scowled.

‘Had Lorenzo told him something?

Or did he pick this up somewhere else?

Where had he gotten this idea?’

“Did Instructor Lorenzo tell you there’s a way to fix my arm?”

“No, I haven’t spoken to him about it.”

“Then how do you know? About my arm, about a way to recover it—how do you know?”

Ivan took a deep breath.

If he wasn’t careful, he’d only make Carla angrier.

“…Instructor Lorenzo spoke to you alone after sending us away. He also mentioned prosthetics. That means he must have told you something. I don’t know what, but I just want to help. That’s all.”

Carla opened her mouth as if to say something, then stopped.

“…I know this isn’t pity, I’m not that naive. But you don’t have a reason to help me, don’t give me that ‘we’re friends’ nonsense.”

“It’s not that… You told me you wanted to beat me. If that’s the case, then recovering your arm should come first. I don’t know how, but there must be a way. You need to recover if we’re ever going to have a fair match.”

“…That’s true.”

Carla was at a loss for words.

She wasn’t so stubborn that she couldn’t recognize the truth in Ivan’s words.

But something about accepting it outright felt irritating.

Admitting that she was wrong while he was right—it just didn’t sit well with her.

“I don’t want your help. But if you insist on helping, I won’t refuse.”

“…What does that even mean?”

Ivan couldn’t hide his confusion.

She didn’t want his help, but if he insisted, she wouldn’t turn it down?

“That means—”

Carla started to say something, but at that moment, the bell rang, signaling the end of class.

“Class is over? Guess that means it’s time for lunch.”

Liam’s loud voice rang out.

“That guy really came to the academy just to eat.”

“Hah, seriously.”

Carla grumbled and Ivan chuckled, nodding along. For the first time in a while, they were having a positive conversation, which put Ivan in a surprisingly good mood.

“Alright, class dismissed.”

Almost immediately after the bell rang, Lorenzo reappeared.

His timing was almost too perfect and it was a little irritating. But the students quickly quieted down when they saw Emil hesitantly following behind him.

“Emil, go back to your seat. Class is over, so everyone, go eat. Don’t skip the afternoon session. Understood?”

“Yes—”

“Alright then, class dismissed.”

With that, Lorenzo grabbed his attendance book and textbook and left the training hall. The remaining students wasted no time gathering up to head toward the cafeteria.

“Carla, I’ll help you.”

“I can walk by myself, idiot. I’m missing an arm, not a leg.”

“Oh, right.”

Ivan reached out and dusted off Carla’s shoulder.

She paused, looking at his hand, then at him.

“…Let’s just go eat, Ivan.”

“Yeah.”

“And you better serve me properly.”

Carla’s demand was so natural that Ivan couldn’t help but laugh.

Even in this situation, she was still a noble—though, oddly enough, it suited her.

“Alright, alright.”

“Let’s go.”

Carla didn’t look back as she started walking.

Ivan followed behind her as they made their way toward the cafeteria.

“Carla, Ivan!”

A voice called out, stopping them in their tracks.

Turning around, they saw Emil hesitating, his hands clasped together as if he were struggling with what to say.

“What? If you’re calling us, then speak.”

Carla’s voice carried clear irritation.

Faced with her cold demeanor, Emil smiled awkwardly.

“Well… Carla, how was the sparring today? You seemed like you were struggling.”

Carla’s face immediately twisted into a scowl.

She looked like she was about to snap.

Sensing this, Ivan gently grabbed her wrist and shook his head.

Carla was momentarily startled but quickly masked it and gave a slight nod.

“Fine, fine… Emil, I appreciate your concern, but you’re overstepping. I’m fine.”

Her words were still laced with coldness.

Emil, however, simply smiled softly.

“Still, if you ever need anything, just let me know. I want to see the strong you again, too.”

# The Academy's Prodigy Wants to Defeat the Genius - 27

Lucas rested his chin on his hand, staring out the window.

The lunch bell had rung, signaling that it was time to eat, but their lecture had yet to conclude, leaving them stuck in the classroom.

Annoyance bubbled within him as he idly gazed outside, wondering when this tedious class would finally end.

Then, a familiar figure caught his eye, walking toward the dining hall adjacent to the lecture building.

A woman, her empty sleeve fluttering in the wind—her long black hair flowing with the breeze.

Lucas’s lips curled into a smirk, his eyes narrowing.

‘Carla, isn’t it?’

Lucas and Carla—whom he had once known as Carlo—had never gotten along.

Though the heads of the Cascata and Scheiskehl families maintained an amicable relationship, the same could not be said for their respective heirs. In fact, they loathed each other.

Carlo had been the embodiment of pride, but he had also been talented, hardworking, and constantly refining himself. Meanwhile, Lucas had always relied on his family’s name, coasting on its prestige.

Carlo had despised him for being a waste of a noble title and Lucas had resented Carlo for hiding behind the guise of effort while masking his true self-righteousness.

Then, Carlo had returned to their ‘true form.’ Shortly after, they had lost an arm and not long after that, Lucas had received an intriguing proposal—an arrangement for Carla to become his wife.

Lucas had rejoiced at the news.

‘How will that arrogant woman sound when she cries in bed…’

Women existed for their husbands.

That was Lucas’s belief and the more beautiful they were, the better.

A beautiful wife elevated her husband’s prestige and Carla—she was so breathtakingly beautiful that Lucas had been momentarily stunned when he first saw her.

More than that, she was the same Carla who had once humiliated him. The thought of having her bound to him, with no choice but to submit, made him almost giddy with anticipation.

The upcoming midterms in two months couldn’t come soon enough—this boring academy life had finally found an exhilarating spark.

“Alright, that’s it for today. I apologize for keeping you past lunch, but enjoy your meal. I’ll see you all in the afternoon.”

Instructor Ashirovna gathered her materials and exited the classroom. As soon as she did, Kiara approached Lucas.

“Lucas, are you coming to eat?”

“Of course.”

His voice was uncharacteristically gentle.

So much so that Kiara instinctively took a step back, startled by the unsettling sweetness in his tone.

“Let’s go, I have a feeling lunch will be particularly enjoyable today.”

“I’ll carry it.”

No sooner had Carla received her meal tray than Ivan snatched it from her hands.

“I can handle this much.”

Carla immediately took it back.

Had there been anything on the tray, it would have surely spilled from their tug-of-war—

“I’ll do it.”

The tray was suddenly whisked away by none other than Liam.

Both Carla and Ivan looked up at him in surprise.

“Ivan, Regina is looking for you. Carla, I’ll help you. Let’s eat with Emil.”

“Regina?”

“Yes, you’d better go.”

Liam grinned as he gestured toward a table in the distance.

There, Regina sat, staring intently at her tray, her head lowered—her face flushed a deep red, as though steam might start rising from it at any moment.

“Carla…”

“Just go, are you slow or something?”

Carla frowned and Ivan had no choice but to comply.

With a nod, he turned toward the serving area to get his meal. Only after he left did Liam speak again.

“Let’s help those two with their romance, Carla are you okay with that?”

“…Why are you asking me? If they like each other, that’s all that matters.”

“It’s a guy and two girls. Naturally—”

“Don’t start with that nonsense, give me my tray.”

‘What nonsense.’

Carla had half a mind to kick Liam.

Not that it would do any good—if she lost her balance, she’d only embarrass herself further.

“You’re stubborn, Carla. Are you from the North?”

“I’m from the capital, you oaf.”

Still, Liam wasn’t entirely unpleasant.

In moments like this, he actually seemed sociable… though, personality-wise, Ivan was definitely easier to deal with.

‘Tch…’

Clicking her tongue inwardly, Carla followed Liam, who carried her tray toward their table.

There, Emil was already seated, staring at his food with a troubled expression.

“Emil are you praying over your meal?”

“Ah… Liam. Oh, Carla…”

As Carla appeared behind Liam, Emil’s expression noticeably darkened.

“What’s with that look? It’s rude to make such a face when seeing someone.”

Carla, fully aware of his reaction, frowned as well.

The meal was, as expected, heavily meat-based.

The academy, designed to train officers for the Mage Corps, naturally adhered to the philosophy that eating well meant fighting well.

“Give it here, I’ll cut it for you.”

Carla was struggling, pressing down on the meat with one hand while attempting to cut it with a knife.

Liam, unable to watch any longer, pulled the tray toward him.

“It’s not pity, you need to eat quickly so we can get out and rest. That’s why I’m helping, don’t get the wrong idea.”

“I won’t, just cut it already.”

“Like a queen, aren’t you?”

“What are you babbling about?”

As Liam bickered with Carla, Emil forced an awkward smile.

But behind that smile was something else—something dark and heavy, leaving an uneasy feeling in its wake.

“…Is it bothering you?”

Regina hesitantly asked Ivan.

He had been looking toward Carla’s table, but at Regina’s words, he turned back to her. She motioned toward Carla with her finger.

“You can’t seem to take your eyes off her. Is she really on your mind that much?”

“I wouldn’t say that… but she’s my friend. That’s all.”

“That’s exactly what it means to be on your mind.”

“Is that so?”

Regina cut a piece of meat, chewing thoughtfully before swallowing. Then, cautiously, she spoke again.

“Ivan… did you ever think about me during those ten years?”

“You?”

“Yes, while I was studying abroad.”

“Of course I did. We were friends, weren’t we? A noble who treated me really well, too.”

“T-that’s true for Carla, too, isn’t it?”

“Well, yeah, but back then, Carla was Carlo… It’s a bit different with you.”

Regina struggled to find the right words.

Just as Liam had promised, this lunch was their chance to be alone together and yet, why did this moment feel so tense?

More than that, why was she the only one feeling it?

Even more frustrating was the fact that Ivan kept glancing toward Carla.

“I… I thought about you a lot during my time abroad.”

“Did you? Why?”

“Well…”

‘Well, because I like you. Because I missed you.’

But she couldn’t say it.

Even with this perfect opportunity—being in the same class again, just the two of them having lunch—what if saying those words made things awkward?

What if Ivan started distancing himself from her?

“…Because we’re friends.”

‘Idiot, I’m such an idiot.’

Regina felt like crying.

She didn’t know what to say.

She didn’t know how to say it.

Her mind was frozen, as if encased in an icy crystal.

“Yeah, of course. I thought about you a lot, too. I missed you. I even thought about writing, but I didn’t know where to send the letters.”

Ivan laughed, lighthearted and easygoing.

Somehow, that laughter eased Regina’s nerves, if only a little.

Yes, the mood was good. She just needed to be a little braver.

“I-Ivan, tomorrow’s the weekend. Do you have any plans?”

“Ah, not really.”

“Oh, really?!”

A bright, rosy smile bloomed across her face.

A flower of youth, filled with an uncontainable joy.

“T-then…”

“But I’ll probably be going to the library with Carla.”

Thud.

A heavy stone dropped into the pit of Regina’s heart. The flower that had bloomed was now encased in ice.

“T-the library? Why?”

“Oh, well—”

At that moment, Carla’s voice rang out.

“If you’re here to pick a fight, you can leave, Lucas.”

Her voice was laced with irritation.

# The Academy's Prodigy Wants to Defeat the Genius - 28

"Why? Did I come somewhere I'm not supposed to?"

Still wearing a bright smile, Lucas von Scheiskehl set down his tray and took a seat.

Unfortunately, it was right across from Carla, leaving her with no choice but to face him.

"Just looking at your face ruins my appetite. So get lost."

"Heh, isn't it too early for that?"

"Shut up."

A chilling aura radiated from Carla and violet lightning crackled around her. The tension was palpable, as if she was about to pounce on Lucas at any moment.

However, Lucas remained unfazed, his smirk unwavering as he leaned back in his chair and casually crossed his legs.

"It's not like I'm somewhere I shouldn't be. Carla, you shouldn't be acting like this toward me already either. Am I wrong?"

"You're both wrong, idiots."

Sensing the escalating tension in Carla’s tone, Liam Foucault set down his fork and placed both hands on the table. He then turned to Carla and asked,

"Carla, duels are allowed within the academy, but—"

"Hey, you. Liam, was it?"

At the sound of Lucas’ voice, Liam turned to him. His expression remained neutral, but for someone like Liam, that neutrality was the most dangerous expression of all.

"Hah, don't do it. The name Scheiskehl—"

"Shut up. You look like a damn girl."

Emil von Aufstich interjected from the side, but Lucas' sharp retort made him flinch and retreat.

Meanwhile, Liam continued to observe Carla and Lucas in silence.

"My name is Liam Foucault. If you’re looking for a fight with Carla, you’ll have to go through me first."

His hands were massive, each one a weapon in itself. Liam focused solely on Carla’s lips, while Carla glared wordlessly at Lucas.

"Hey, Liam. Have you forgotten who I am? I am Lucas von Scheiskehl—soon to consume Cascata and rise as the first pillar of this empire."

"Hah. Hahahaha. Hahahahaha."

Suddenly, Liam burst into laughter. His laughter was so loud and confident that even the ever-relaxed Lucas seemed caught off guard.

"You’re an absolute fool. I, Liam Foucault, am not a citizen of your empire. My homeland is elsewhere. Even if I smash your face in, the empire’s laws won’t touch me. I’m a noble of my own country, after all. In fact, your nonsense just now does nothing but highlight the low standards of imperial nobility."

"Heh, you sure talk big."

And yet, Lucas had no immediate retort. Nothing Liam said was wrong. What’s more, Lucas hadn’t known that Liam was a foreign noble studying at the academy.

"Lucas, enough. Picking fights everywhere is just going to cause trouble."

The speaker was Kiara di Servitore, who had her long black hair tied back with a white ribbon. She hurriedly stepped in to stop Lucas.

She wasn’t sure why Lucas was so fixated on Carla, but to her, it felt like something beyond mere competitiveness.

"Carla, say something, at least. Are you just going to let this happen?"

"Shut up, Lucas. It’s not that I have nothing to say to you. I simply don’t want to speak to you."

"Hah!"

Lucas stood up irritably, the force of his movement knocking over his chair with a loud crash.

Even so, Carla continued to glare at him coldly.

He wasn’t worth her time.

The mere thought that there were marriage discussions between their families disgusted her. It was an embarrassment so severe she wouldn’t even speak of it.

This man—Lucas von Scheiskehl—was the worst.

"Don’t look at me like that, Carla."

"If it bothers you, why don’t you make the first move? Are you afraid of me, even with just one arm?"

As Carla sneered at him, Lucas’ smirk twisted into something more sinister.

Setting down his tray, shrugging his shoulders, he spoke.

"Fine. I’ll let it go—for now. It’s only two months, after all."

"Lucas!"

With another loud crash, Carla shot up from her seat. But Lucas was faster.

"In two months, you’ll be my wife. I’ll be waiting for the day you fail the midterm exams."

"Lucas—!"

Carla screamed in rage, lunging toward him.

That was the one thing he should not have said.

That was the one rumor that should never have spread.

She should have stopped it.

She should have.

But it was too late.

Crash!

Another chair toppled over.

A sudden gust of wind surged through the room and when Lucas finally opened his eyes, Ivan Contadino stood before him.

His face twisted into something monstrous—something akin to a demon.

"Explain! What the hell do you mean by that?"

"Hah? Oh, it’s just a commoner. Since when did a mere commoner have the right to shove their face into mine? The academy has gotten far too—"

"I said explain. Who is marrying whom?"

"I don’t see why I have to—"

"Speak."

Lucas found himself lifted off the ground, Ivan gripping him by the collar.

With his face flushed red in anger, Ivan brought himself so close to Lucas that their noses nearly touched.

"Say it now, Lucas. If you don’t, I’ll make sure you have no choice."

"Ivan! Let go!"

The shriek belonged to Regina Parma.

"Ivan, Ivan! Release him at once! Emil, step back!"

Kiara’s frantic voice followed.

The dining hall was spiraling into chaos, but Ivan didn’t care.

Gripping Lucas’ collar, his magic unchecked, Ivan raised his fist as if he was about to strike.

"Heh. If you hit me, there’ll be consequences. This isn’t even a formal duel."

"...Then I’ll just kill you. There are plenty of ways for a mage to make a living outside the academy."

His voice carried weight.

It was a deep, resonant sound, as if echoing from the depths of a cavern. Lucas felt his blood run cold.

"Ivan, if you leave the academy, come to my country. I’ll prepare a place for you."

Liam’s hearty voice rang out, only adding to Lucas’ growing unease.

He darted his eyes around the room.

Carla was biting her lip, her face pale.

Liam stood beside her, arms crossed, glaring at Lucas.

Kiara and Emil were whispering to each other, likely discussing how to de-escalate the situation.

"...So, commoner. You were Carla’s childhood friend, weren’t you? Let me say it again, nice and clearly."

At that, Carla turned around.

She took a step toward the dining hall doors as Lucas’ voice rang behind her.

"In two months, the midterm exams will be held. If Carla fails, she will withdraw from the academy and be married into the Scheiskehl family. She’ll become my wife. Now, do you understand?"

Carla’s pace quickened.

She needed to get away—far away from that voice.

That was a secret that should never have been revealed.

‘That bastard.’

That useless, incompetent fool, the disgrace of the empire’s Four Pillars—Lucas von Scheiskehl.

How could such a marriage arrangement exist?

Especially when Carla hadn’t even been born a woman?

Her hurried steps gradually slowed.

Slowed.

And slowed.

She wandered aimlessly into a secluded clearing within the academy.

At some point, she had lost her shoes—when, she didn’t know.

Barefoot, she walked across the grass.

She curled up behind a bench, hidden from sight and let out a trembling sigh.

‘...This was too cruel.’

She had sacrificed so much for power.

And now she was being stripped of everything.

‘If only I could turn back time…’

If she could undo it all—undo the sacrifice that changed her body.

If only she could.

Tears streamed down her cheeks.

She had never cried before.

But since becoming this, she had lost count of how many times she had shed tears.

There was no one to blame.

Only herself.

She had made the wrong choice.

And now, she was paying the price.



Thus, Carla wept.

Curled up behind the bench, she sobbed quietly.

"...Carla, are you done crying now?"

After crying for what felt like an eternity, until her chest felt just a little lighter, Carla turned at the sound of a voice behind her.

Standing there awkwardly was Ivan Contadino, watching her.

"What? How did you find me?"

"Ah, well... I sensed your magic..."

"...My magic is overflowing, sure, but you expanded your detection range that far?"

Unbelievable.

Like trying to dry out the sea—Ivan’s magic reserves were simply absurd.

‘Was that talent too?’

Even in this, Ivan had surpassed Carla.

"Anyway, are you alright?"

"...I'm fine. What about that trash?"

"Oh, that Lucas guy or whatever... I gave him a good, solid punch and came looking for you. Liam said he'd handle the cleanup."

"That crazy bastard..."

Carla remained crouched, unwilling to expose her disheveled state.

"...Was it true?"

"It’s true, that’s how it is. My father arranged it."

"Couldn't you refuse?"

"...Do you think that’s an option? Use your brain."

"Then what are you going to do?"

"I just have to pass the midterms."

‘Yes, what else?’

Carla let out a groan as she stood up.

That’s all there was to it.

Pass the midterms and everything would be fine.

Then it would all be over.

There was no reason to agonize over it.

She turned to Ivan.

"I'm going to the library. Don't follow me."

# The Academy's Prodigy Wants to Defeat the Genius - 29

"...You're going after class, right?"

"Don't follow me."

Carla had boldly declared that she was heading to the library, but in reality, she couldn't go.

After all, the commotion had happened during lunch and afternoon classes were still in session.

She had no choice but to return to the lecture hall.

Skipping class was an option, but she had come all the way to the Magic Academy—wasn't attending lessons important? At least when it came to magic, Carla was serious.

Weighing the choice between a library that would still be there after class and a lesson she could only attend now, she naturally leaned toward class.

"Wouldn't it be faster if I helped you look instead of you searching alone?"

"You—"

As she walked in silence, Carla suddenly stopped and turned to Ivan Contadino.

Ivan had thought that, at the very least, the distance between them had shrunk somewhat—though not completely as before, it was at least better than nothing. But when he saw Carla’s sharp glare, he flinched.

"Are you pitying me?"

"Huh? No, it's not like that."

"Then what? Why are you following me to the library? What are you trying to do? What can you even do for me? If all you’re doing is feeling sorry for me, then just stop here. This is far enough. The distance between us—this much is good. To me, you are…"

She trailed off.

Memories flashed through her mind.

Ivan, the one who saved her when she lay waiting for death with her arm severed.

Ivan, the one who cared for her while she was unconscious for two whole days.

Even just today—Ivan, grabbing Lucas' collar, enraged on her behalf.

"...Just keep this distance. Don't come any closer. You are nothing more than a rival for me to surpass. That’s all you are to me."

Ivan simply stared at her.

He had never been one for eloquence or refined speech, so he had no idea how to respond to Carla's words.

"Anyway—"

"Now, Carla della Cascata. Carla, my student?"

A sudden voice made Carla turn around.

Ivan, too, shifted his gaze behind her, and both of them, startled, quickly lowered their heads in greeting.

"Headmaster, good afternoon."

"Yes, Ivan, my student. Class will begin soon, so head to the lecture hall."

The elderly headmaster, with his silver-white hair, smiled warmly. But Carla was tense.

At some point, he had appeared behind them.

She hadn't heard him approach. She hadn’t sensed his presence.

He had simply been there, as if he had always existed in that spot.

It was enough to indicate just how formidable he was.

"Headmaster, um, about Carla—"

"I have something to discuss with Carla. I’ve already informed Instructor Lorenzo about it. Carla, shall we take a walk?"

An invitation for a stroll, from the headmaster himself.

Carla didn’t particularly like the idea of missing class, but rejecting the headmaster’s request wasn’t an option.

She nodded obediently.

"Ivan, you will soon meet someone you’ve been wanting to see, so there's no need to be impatient. Now, off you go."

At those words, Ivan hesitated before finally nodding.

There wasn’t much else he could do anyway.

"This should be a good spot. Sit down."

Following the Headmaster's invitation, Carla della Cascata sat down quietly on the bench.

A refreshing breeze swept across the hillside bench.

From here, she could take in a broad view of the Academy, stretching out below her.

"How is it? A wonderful view, isn’t it?"

"Yes, it is."

"You still speak like a man. Even though you've returned to your true form, changing speech patterns isn’t so easy, is it?"

"...No."

At the Headmaster's words, Carla nodded.

She was well aware that her way of speaking was problematic.

But what could she do?

She was originally a man. If anything, her current form felt like a disguise—like wearing the mask of Transmutation Magic.

Not that she could say that out loud.

So she just had to accept it.

"Still, you should correct it quickly. A lady speaking in a masculine tone is... less than ideal."

"...Yes."

"Do you have any idea why I asked to meet you like this?"

At the question, Carla shook her head.

She truly had no clue.

If there had been any hints, she might have been able to make an educated guess.

She had already spoken with him before and even when she had met him alongside Lord Cascata, the Headmaster had shown no particular interest in her.

"Instructor Lorenzo is quite an... easygoing man, isn't he?"

"...Pardon?"

"I'm referring to Instructor Lorenzo."

Carla was momentarily puzzled.

‘Why was his name coming up now?’

Lorenzo was just an instructor. Was he really someone significant enough for the Headmaster to remember by name and personality?

"Ah, well, I wouldn't exactly call him trustworthy..."

"When someone seems too serious, they can actually appear lighthearted instead."

"What do you mean by that?"

The Headmaster reached out and touched the sleeve of Carla’s left arm.

The sleeve that should have held her arm hung empty, fluttering in the breeze.

It was a hollow reminder of her loss.

"Instructor Lorenzo came to me with a request."

"A request?"

"To provide you with information on Alchemy Magic."

"Alchemy Magic... He requested materials?"

"Yes."

It was unexpected.

Only after everything had happened did Carla realize how offensive Lorenzo's comments about 'market value' had been to a noble.

Yet, she hadn't called him out on it, so she had let it go.

After that, she had never seen Lorenzo as someone particularly reliable—just a typical instructor passing the time.

But now, he had gone out of his way to ask the Headmaster for information on Alchemy Magic?

"Why would Instructor Lorenzo..."

"...I can't go into detail about his past. It is, after all, personal. But he cares for this academy more than anyone, cherishes its students and values peace above all else. He understands war—its horrors and the devastation it brings."

"......"

"That is why he was deeply pained by your injury, Carla. He believes that if there’s even a chance to help, you should be given that chance—even if it means accessing forbidden knowledge."

"......"

"The investigation into the accidents within the academy is still ongoing, though progress has been difficult. The unidentified man imprisoned in the underground cells refuses to speak and evidence shows that he was securely detained even when the incidents occurred. However, what happened to you is a separate matter. Wouldn’t you agree?"

"...That’s true."

The Academy had failed to prevent the attack.

Carla had lost her arm because of that attack.

These were separate issues, but at the same time, the Academy had a responsibility to both investigate the incident and compensate Carla for what she had suffered.

"Thus, Instructor Lorenzo requested that we provide you with information that could restore your arm using Alchemy Magic."

"I see."

"The logic is sound. While full restoration might not be possible, if there’s a chance of helping, we are obligated to offer that chance."

The Headmaster chuckled softly.

In truth, Carla knew very little about him.

Aside from his speech during the entrance ceremony and the one time they had spoken in Lord Cascata’s presence, she had never interacted with him before.

"Alchemy Mages are said to be incredibly rare, Carla."

At those words, Carla straightened her posture.

If the Headmaster knew something—if he had knowledge about Venere, even if it was just her own speculation—it could be a lead.

"Their true name is unknown. To be precise, there are seventy-two different names associated with them. No one knows which is real.

They have appeared throughout history, leaving traces scattered across various places.

Even the body retrieved by Ivan Contadino—we cannot determine if it belonged to the real Alchemy Mage, or just another fragment of their identity.

That is why I am giving you this. Of course, the Academy will continue its investigation as well."

The Headmaster pulled out a small book from within his robes.

Bound in brown leather, it looked old, yet well-preserved—still in good enough condition to read.

Carla’s eyes remained fixed on the journal.

Could this hold the key to regaining her arm?

Could this be the clue she was searching for?

Her eyes gleamed with unprecedented determination.

"There was someone who tracked the Alchemy Mage.

This journal documents their pursuit—up until twenty years ago.

You’ll need to retrace those steps. Normally, that would be my role as well, but... I already have far too many matters to handle."

Carla reached out and took the journal.

It was well-worn, bearing the marks of many hands.

She handled it with the care of one holding a priceless tome, resting it on her lap before opening its pages.

Each entry was meticulously dated.

"Most records of Alchemy Mages are linked to Forbidden Arts. Human transmutation is certainly something that would be considered forbidden, wouldn’t you agree?"

"Yes."

"I like your straightforward answers. In any case, I hope this proves useful to you."

"I will... I'll look into it thoroughly."

"Good… That’s why I called you here in the first place."

"I see..."

Carla closed the journal, gripping it firmly.

It wasn’t something she could simply tuck away for now.

"I truly regret what has happened to you, Carla. While it depends on your determination, I could request an exception for you in the midterm exam rules—"

"Ah, no. That won’t be necessary, I’ll take the exam. I’ll pass it on my own."

If she were to advance by exception, would her father acknowledge it?

No.

That rigid man would never accept it.

If she didn’t take the test, he would argue that she had failed by default.

"Your spirit is admirable. Then I will look forward to seeing what you achieve, Carla."