# The Academy's Prodigy Wants to Defeat the Genius - 30

Every time the sound of rattling footsteps echoed through the hall, Fabio flinched, unable to sit still.

Perhaps—just perhaps—that damned brother—no, he couldn't call him that anymore, or Enrico would scold him. That sister —no, he couldn't call her that either, or Enrico would scold him again.

Would Carla finally be returning?

To be honest, calling Fabio and Carla close would be an absolute lie.

They weren't just quarrelsome in a bickering siblings kind of way. No, they were full-blown enemies who couldn't stand each other's presence.

'...They really do look alike. It’s uncanny… '

A single photograph rested on Fabio’s desk.

The colors had faded, making it difficult to distinguish the details. But in the picture, a six-year-old boy beamed brightly, standing beside a stunningly beautiful woman who wore a gentle smile.

And in her arms, wrapped in a golden cloth, was a tiny infant.

'Mother.'

He didn't remember her face.

In that photograph, Fabio had been the swaddled infant. There was no way he could recall anything from that time.

'Mother… '

He ran his fingers over the image, whispering the name he had never spoken aloud.

Martina della Cascata —he knew only the name.

Fabio didn't remember her face.

He didn't remember her voice.

But there was one thing he knew for certain.

The more he looked at Carla , the more she resembled their mother.

The atmosphere in the Cascata estate was heavy with uneasiness.

It was bad enough that what everyone had assumed to be the heir, Carlo had turned out to be a daughter instead.

But to make matters worse, barely any time had passed before a catastrophic accident had taken her left arm.

Enrico, the head of the house, had never been the type to smile often.

But with the tension between him and Carla , which had nearly erupted into a full-blown conflict over the Scheiskehl engagement, the air had grown unbearably suffocating.

Yet, as Carla stepped through the doors, she couldn't have cared less about the mansion's mood.

Tucked in her arms was the journal given to her by the Headmaster.

It had occupied her mind so much that she had barely paid attention to class.

'There's a high chance this won't be of much help.'

At best, it would aid in tracking locations.

And if Venere truly was the Alchemy Mage, there was an equally high chance she wouldn't cooperate with Carla.

'Still, I can't just sit around doing nothing. I have to try something.'

She had to do something.

If there was even the slightest chance, she would take it.

"You—you're finally back?"

As Carla ascended the grand central staircase toward the second floor, she frowned at the sight of Fabio standing firmly on the landing.

“What is it, brat? Why are you blocking my way?”

"I—It's nothing! I just wanted to say hi!"

Fabio found it hard to look at Carla’s face.

That face—his mother's face.

If his mother had been younger, she might have looked exactly like Carla.

And that made it even harder for Fabio to meet her gaze.

“A greeting? Did you eat something bad? If you’ve got nothing else to say, move.”

Brushing past Fabio, Carla continued up the stairs.

The sound of her footsteps—steady, confident, unmistakably masculine —made Fabio grimace.

'Why does she act so much like a man when she looks just like Mother?'

He didn't like it.

Couldn't she be just a little more… feminine?

More like Mother?

Fabio watched as Carla’s figure disappeared into the hallway, unable to tear his eyes away.

It was as if he were watching his mother walk away.

"You can look. It's an old wound; it's not like it'll change anything."

"I-I'm sorry."

The maid quickly bowed her head.

But Carla didn't particularly care.

If she had to name the single most inconvenient thing about losing an arm, it would undoubtedly be changing clothes.

Taking off and putting on garments with only one arm was nearly impossible.

And the Academy’s uniform, with its abundance of buttons, made it even worse.

So every time she needed to change, she had no choice but to rely on the maids for assistance.

Naturally, this meant that the scarred stump where her left arm had been was always visible during these moments.

She understood why the maid hesitated.

'I've gotten used to this, haven't I…'

Carla was eager to read the journal, but she forced herself to be patient.

It was still too early for dinner, and the estate's staff were bustling about.

Of course, she could simply order everyone to stay out of her room, but still—

Knock, knock.

As if on cue, a knock came from the door.

“It’s Fabio. I'm coming in.”

She hadn't even answered before the door swung open.

Without hesitation, Fabio stepped inside.

Seeing Carla in the middle of changing, he barely reacted and plopped himself onto her bed.

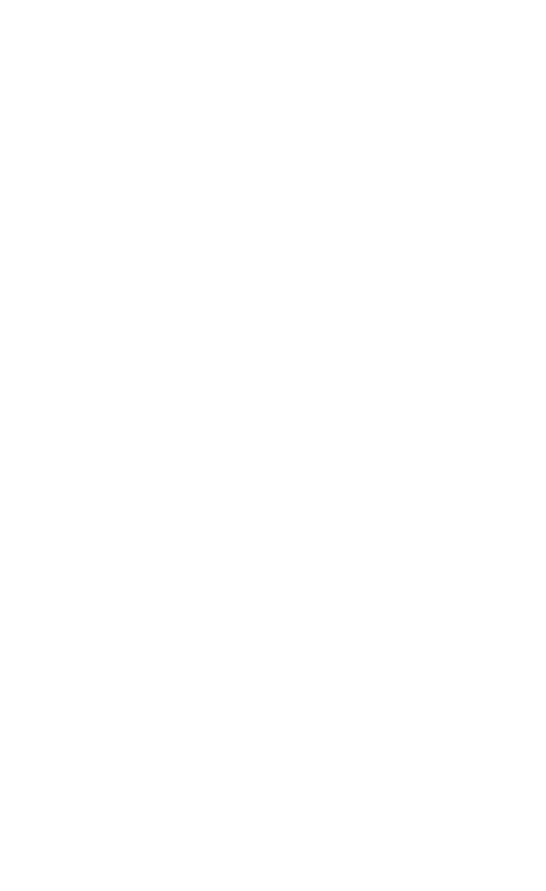
"Brat. Who taught you to barge into people's rooms without permission? Did Enrico raise you this way?"

"So what? It's not like you're embarrassed."

She was in the middle of changing into her loungewear.

Though she still had her uniform shirt on, she had been in the process of switching out her pants, meaning her underwear was exposed.

Even so, Fabio remained unfazed.



“Are you going to tell me to leave?”

“Do you have something to say?”

"Not really."

“Then get out. I don’t have time to waste on pointless things.”

By then, Carla had already finished changing into her pants.

The servants bowed quietly and exited the room, leaving only the two of them in a brief silence.

"I told you to leave if you had nothing to say. I'm busy. If you have so much free time, why don't you train your magic?"

Every word she directed at Fabio was cold, like a blade.

But Fabio was used to it—so much so that he barely paid attention to her tone.

In fact, he wasn't really listening at all.

Instead, Fabio simply stared at Carla’s face.

"Hey."

"What."

"...I won't call you sister ."

At those words, Carla scowled.

‘What the hell was this brat talking about? What nonsense was he trying to spew now?’

"What exactly are you trying to say? Either say your piece or get out, pick one."

"It's about you."

Still sitting on Carla’s bed, Fabio looked her up and down.

“If you don’t speak right now, I’m throwing you out.”

Only when Carla glared at him did Fabio hesitantly open his mouth.

"...Do you remember Mother?"

“Mother? You mean our mother?”

"Yeah. We don't have more than one, do we? My mother was your mother, too."

“Why are you suddenly asking about that?”

“Father never answers no matter how many times I ask… So I wondered if you remembered.”

Carla fell into thought.

‘Mother. Yes, Martina della Cascata.’

She didn't know what her last name had been before marriage.

In the empire, the wives took their husband's family name upon marriage, so whatever her maiden name had been, it was lost to Carla.

“She was kind. Unlike Enrico.”

“Then you must take after Father.”

“If you wanted me to insult you, you should’ve just asked upfront.”

“It’s the truth, isn’t it? Father, you and me—we’re all the furthest thing from kind.”

"...Mother was gentle and affectionate. She had a beautiful smile..."

‘And… And, and... and.’

Yet, when Carla tried to recall more, nothing came to mind.

When Martina della Cascata had been killed in an attack by enemy spies, Carla had only been six years old.

Now, over a decade has passed.

It was no surprise that Carla’s memories of her mother had faded—perhaps even disappeared entirely.

"I don't really remember anymore. It's been too long."

"...I see."

Fabio hesitated as he looked at Carla .

The more he looked, the more she resembled their mother.

Perhaps that was why—why this thought had suddenly come to him.

"Say my name."

"What?"

When Carla turned to him with a bewildered expression, Fabio repeated himself.

"Say my name."

"Are you insane?"

"Please…"

"What kind of nonsense—no, never mind. That's it? You just want me to say your name?"

At the end of the day, they were still siblings.

It wasn't a difficult request.

"Yeah."

"Fine— Fabio ."

At her words, Fabio’s face stiffened as he silently stared at her.

"There, I said it."

"Once more."

" Fabio. "

"One more time."

"...Fabio. "

"With the surname."

"Fabio della Cascata."

Even after that, Carla had to say his name at least half a dozen more times.

She didn't know why.

But she didn't complain.

She didn't snap at him.

Because looking at Fabio’s face—

It seemed like he was about to cry.

The man with one eye.

Mercurio .

He sat in silence, bound in even heavier restraints than before, his eyes closed.

It had been a long time since he had been imprisoned in the Academy’s underground detention facility.

And still, he had yet to escape.

"Hey, One-Eye."

A quiet whisper.

Mercurio opened his remaining eye and gazed past the thick iron bars at the shadow beyond.

"Still alive, huh? That's a relief."

The clothes—worn and ragged—belonged to a janitor.

As the torchlight illuminated the strands of hair cascading down, a stark white hue gleamed under its glow.

And beneath that hair, eyes burned like fire—

A crimson gaze locked onto Mercurio .

“I came to get you out, Mercurio.”

# The Academy's Prodigy Wants to Defeat the Genius - 31

"Damn, you're heavy as hell. What, was prison food that good? Look at this extra weight."

"Not the slightest bit amusing, Venere."

Carrying Mercurio on her back, Venere grumbled all the way down the underground stairwell of the Cascata estate.

"They gave me a Teleportation Scroll, but of course, it only works this far. Why are the Imperial Court Mages such cheapskates?"

"The Great Magic Barrier is in place, isn’t it? You knew that already, so why complain?"

Getting Mercurio out of the Academy’s underground prison had been the easy part.

But the Teleportation Scroll had only transported them to the landing before the estate's underground chamber, meaning they had to go the rest of the way on foot.

To make matters worse, Mercurio’s wrists and ankles were fractured, leaving him unable to walk. Venere had no choice but to carry him.

"We're here... ngh, [Unlock]."

Readjusting Mercurio on her back, Venere uttered the command.

The stone gate sealing the underground chamber swung open—unexpectedly quiet for something so massive.

Inside, two torches flickered, their light casting just enough illumination to make out silhouettes.

It was a small chamber, not particularly spacious. Against one of the walls sat a single worn-out chair, bearing the weight of its occupant.

As Venere finally set Mercurio down on another chair in the center of the room, she groaned, stretching her back.

The hooded man seated in the shadows slowly spoke.

"Mercurio, you've been through a lot."

"Ah, well. I underestimated them and got my ass handed to me. Your nephew or niece should I say has quite the strong grip."

His tone was casual, but the reality was far from it.

Fractured wrists and ankles—those were no small injuries.

"Take this."

The hooded man slowly removed his cloak, stepping into the dim torchlight.

With neatly combed black hair, he carried the presence of an experienced noble—Lord Cascata, Imperial Court Mage of the Royal Palace.

Standing before Mercurio, Lord Cascata handed him a small bottle.

The foul stench coming from it was enough to make Venere wrinkle her nose, waving her hand as if to dispel the air.

"You’ll recover quickly, your teeth seem damaged as well. You need to heal soon."

"That’s true enough. Venere, help me. My hands are useless right now."

The stench from the bottle was unbearable.

"Ugh... damn it, fine. Fine, I’ll do it."

Every fiber of Venere’s body screamed against approaching it, but refusal wasn't an option.

Scowling, she took the bottle from Lord Cascata.

"Open your mouth, Mercurio."

Mercurio complied without complaint.

They said medicine that worked best was often the most bitter.

Still, there had to be limits to how unbearably foul something could taste.

Practically shoving the bottle into Mercurio’s mouth, Venere forced the liquid down his throat.

His Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed, his face twisting in disgust.

Once the contents were gone, Venere swiftly snatched the cap from Lord Cascata's hands and sealed the bottle shut.

"Now, let’s talk business."

Watching the scene unfold, Lord Cascata returned to his seat. Crossing one leg over the other, he turned his sharp gaze toward Venere.

She averted her eyes, shifting uncomfortably.

"...Look, Lord Cascata, I get that you care about your niece, but—"

"I told you not to touch her, didn’t I? You’re not going to claim poor reception again, are you?"

"...I apologize."

Sometimes, a few simple words could be more terrifying than outright scolding.

Venere knew this well.

And now that she was standing before Lord Cascata in person, she wasn’t foolish enough to push back.

She knew very well that if he truly wished, he could erase someone like her with ease.

More than that—

Her heart, the key to her Human Transmutation, was in his hands.

That alone ensured her obedience.

"Venere, don’t forget—the only reason you’re still alive is because of Human Transmutation and don’t forget whose hands your life is in."

"...Yes."

"My life, your lives—we all exist for the Empire. Mercurio, am I wrong?"

Flexing his fingers now that the pain had subsided, Mercurio gave a small nod.

"You’re absolutely right. I’ll be more careful from now on."

"Good, good... We’ve confirmed that his resonance level is still quite low.”

“Resonance can be increased. We’ll handle the rest later."

Lord Cascata recalled his earlier meeting with Ivan Contadino.

For now, he was still nothing more than a commoner.

Nothing about him stood out.

If his resonance level had increased significantly, there would have been clear signs.

But there weren’t.

That meant his resonance was still too weak.

"We’ll observe for now. Venere—"

His gaze shifted back to her.

Feeling his eyes on her, Venere flinched and instinctively lowered her head.

"Prepare my niece’s arm in advance. Once everything is over, we’ll reattach it immediately. Her role will be crucial in boosting the resonance level, so it’s best to leave her arm missing for now."

"Y-Yes… Understood."

"And Mercurio—take this."

Reaching into his pocket, Lord Cascata produced a small wooden box.

Beneath the torchlight, the aged wooden case was revealed—worn with time, its brown paint peeling away to expose the natural grain beneath.

"That’s…"

"Come take it, swap your eye with this."

Though his legs were still weak, Mercurio pushed himself up and approached.

He took the wooden box and carefully lifted the lid.

Inside, nestled within the case—

Was a single eye.

"This… isn’t this the Eye of the Demon?"

"It is. Take it, infiltrate the Academy and work from the shadows to accelerate the resonance level. The sooner that brat awakens, the sooner we can eliminate him."

"...Understood. I’ll do as instructed."

Mercurio took a small, deep breath as he accepted the wooden case.

Lifting the eyepatch that covered one of his eyes, he revealed a hollow, sunken eyelid where nothing remained.

Though wrinkled and grimy, Mercurio pulled up the lid with one hand while the other grasped the so-called Eye of the Demon, pressing it into the empty socket.

"Kuhhh..."

A groan of agony escaped his lips as he collapsed, trembling violently. Watching him shudder on the floor, Venere involuntarily trembled as well, turning to Lord Cascata with hesitation.

"Um... Lord Cascata."

"Hm?"

‘Was it wise to ask?’ Venere hesitated.

Every instinct screamed at her to stay silent, warning that speaking such thoughts aloud was a mistake. But the sensation had been too strong to ignore—she needed to ask.

In the end, curiosity won over caution.

"I have a question."

"What is it?"

"Earlier, you said your niece would help accelerate the resonance level. But aside from that... there's something personal I was wondering about."

Lord Cascata gave no immediate response.

But his silence was not a refusal—Venere understood that much. So, after much internal struggle, she finally spoke.

"Your niece... she bears an uncanny resemblance to Martina della Cascata—urk?!"

The moment Lord Cascata's face twisted in fury, Venere gasped, clawing at her throat.

An unseen force had seized her by the neck, lifting her off the ground. She thrashed desperately, but Lord Cascata’s gaze bore into her with a terrifying intensity.

Electricity crackled in the air.

Blue lightning flared around him like an ominous blaze, forming into a dozen or so orbs the size of a grown man’s head.

The spheres of lightning swirled around Venere, each one burning dangerously close, ready to incinerate her at a moment’s notice.

"How dare you utter that name? Martina’s name is not for the likes of you to speak. Do you want me to make sure you never speak again?"

"N-no, I—I'm sorry..."

Her breath hitched as the spheres of lightning circled just before her face, spinning like the embodiment of death itself.

It was only now that Venere realized her mistake. She should never have spoken those words.

"Do not speak Martina’s name carelessly. She is... she is..."

Lord Cascata abruptly fell silent.

The invisible grip strangling Venere vanished, as did the crackling orbs of lightning. Finally freed, she collapsed onto the floor, gasping for air, coughing as she struggled to steady herself.

"If you ever speak that name again, I will kill you. Know your place, you who meddle in forbidden arts."

"Y-yes... I was wrong..."

Pale-faced and shaking, Venere silently vowed to never make that mistake again.

Martina della Cascata.

She knew that name was Lord Cascata's greatest taboo.

Yet, she had spoken it aloud—and barely escaped with her life.

She took a deep, shuddering breath, grateful that she had survived.

"My niece’s arm will remain as it is for now. As I said, this will aid in accelerating his resonance. Venere, I will assign you a separate task. You will report to me later."

Venere, still kneeling on the floor, looked up at Lord Cascata with fearful eyes and managed a weak nod.

That was all she could do.

# The Academy's Prodigy Wants to Defeat the Genius - 32

Despite the commotion that had occurred, the Academy was moving into the weekend.

The incident—though too great to be called mere commotion—had disrupted things, but the academic schedule had to proceed. Thus, the Academy was beginning to return to its usual atmosphere.

As soon as the sun rose on Saturday morning, Ivan was already up, washed and dressed as neatly as possible—by his standards, that meant putting on his Academy uniform—as he waited for news.

'Albina Auntie.'

Lorenzo had once told him that she wasn’t old enough to be called an auntie, but since childhood, Ivan had always addressed her that way and since Albina never seemed to mind, the habit stuck.

'Finally, I can meet her. No matter what, she’s my benefactor... I should be mindful of that.'

Because of what had happened at the Academy, Albina was currently awaiting disciplinary action and Ivan hadn’t been able to see her for a few days.

As he thought of her, Ivan reached for the small pendant hanging around his neck, staring at it.

—Wear this at all times, Ivan. It’ll help you immensely. You must always keep it on, understand?

It was the very necklace Albina had given him with firm insistence.

Ivan knew what this necklace was, though he had no idea how Albina had acquired it. But thanks to it, he had managed to remain undiscovered all this time.

In that regard, Albina had been a benefactor to him in more ways than one—

A knock on the door interrupted his thoughts.

“Ivan, are you in there?”

"Ah, yes! Instructor Lorenzo!"

“Let’s go. It’s time for the visit.”

Since he had already been waiting, Ivan immediately opened the door. Lorenzo stood there, his unkempt hair sticking up in all directions, his expression indifferent as he glanced at Ivan.

"You must really want to see Albina."

"She’s my benefactor."

"Well, can’t argue with that. Let’s go."

Without waiting for a response, Lorenzo turned away.

Having spent the past few days around him, Ivan had gotten a sense of Lorenzo’s personality.

So, without hesitation, he simply followed behind him.

On their way to the Central Hall, where Albina was being held, neither of them spoke.

Lorenzo walked ahead, while Ivan followed a step behind.

"You must have known her for quite a while."

Lorenzo’s voice suddenly broke the silence, snapping Ivan out of his thoughts.

"Yes, since I was about eleven. Almost ten years now."

"That long? Then... ten years ago, that was before Albina even met her husband, wasn’t it?"

"Yes, that’s right. I’ve known her longer than Jarkan."

"Jarkan... that’s Albina’s husband, right? Yeah, that’s quite a while."

As they walked, Lorenzo pulled out a mana cigarette, lighting it with a small flicker of flame at his fingertips. He exhaled a long breath of smoke.

"As for Albina... I’m doing my best. Even if it’s a disciplinary matter, I’m working to make sure she doesn’t get dismissed. So don’t worry too much."

"Alright."

Ivan quietly watched Lorenzo’s back as they walked.

He had thought Lorenzo was just another indifferent adult—

A man who found everything bothersome, who only did things because he was forced to.

But now, he wondered.

Was there something more? Something that younger people like him simply didn’t understand yet?

"This is the place. Go in. You won’t have much time, so if you have something to say, get to it quickly."

Lorenzo spoke as he pulled out a key and unlocked the door. Ivan nodded at him and cautiously stepped inside, wrinkling his nose at the musty scent of dust.

"Ivan?"

The voice that followed the sound of the door closing was familiar—one he had heard countless times before, and one he had been longing to hear these past few days.

"Albina Auntie!"

"Shh. Your voice is too loud. Come sit over here."

Seated with her back to the small window where the sunlight streamed in, Albina smiled.

"Come now, have a seat. Looks like Lorenzo pulled some strings to get you this visit."

Albina looked surprisingly well.

Ivan had worried that she might be suffering under disciplinary review, but seeing her looking well put his mind at ease.

"I’m doing fine, Ivan. I can tell you’ve been worrying about me, but you don’t have to. This isn’t your fault."

Albina reached out and gently stroked Ivan’s hair as he sat down.

The soft smile on her lips and the warmth in her gaze reminded him of a mother’s affection.

"You don’t need to worry about me. I’m fine, not being able to see Jarkan is the only real problem."

"But if I had just taken down that intruder sooner, this wouldn’t have happened. I’m only at the Academy because of you… and now you’re in trouble because of me. I’m really sorry…"

"Oh, Ivan. There’s no need for that, why would this be your fault? When accidents happen, it’s part of a supervisor’s duty to take responsibility. I knew that from the start."

"Still…"

"Why would a student be responsible? You’re the victim in all of this."

"……"

Albina chuckled softly. Ivan had always been a kind child—just as he had been nine years ago.

Before Albina had graduated and joined the military, she had briefly worked at the Academy as a researcher.

Even back then, Cascata was known for producing high-quality potions. Albina had frequently traveled there to make purchases.

It was during one of those trips that she met Jarkan—her future husband—and a young boy working as an errand boy at the potion shop: Ivan.

One day, Albina had accidentally dropped a potion she was packaging, but before it could shatter, Ivan had instinctively caught it using Wind Magic.

Immediately recognizing his talent, Albina took an interest in him.

After visiting several times and getting to know him, she learned that Ivan had lost his parents in an accident and could no longer remain in Cascata.

Taking it upon herself, she became his guardian and arranged for him to enter the Academy.

"You’re doing well. Carla may act harshly, but you’re holding up. Carla, too, must be struggling. You should look out for her more than me."

"Carla…"

Carla had continued attending the Academy, but that was all.

During breaks, she would vanish somewhere and if Ivan ever seemed like he was about to approach, she would disappear before he could. The moment classes ended, she would rush home, making it impossible for him to get close to her.

"Why aren’t you saying anything? Did something happen between you two?"

"Ah, no. Nothing like that."

"Really? That’s good, then."

"Honestly, I’m more worried about you right now."

"Lorenzo is working on it. He may not seem like it, but he does care about you all."

"I think so too, but I don’t know if the others feel the same."

"It’ll be fine, everything will work out. More importantly, you’re still wearing the necklace I gave you, right?"

"Yes, here…"

Proudly, Ivan pulled the necklace from his shirt and showed it to her. Albina finally seemed satisfied, smiling as she stroked his hair again.

"Good, always wear it. Understand?"

"Yes, I always keep it on."

"That’s right… That’s how it should be."

Just then, a knock sounded at the door, followed by the sound of someone clearing their throat.

It was Lorenzo, signaling that the visit was over.

Ivan stood up reluctantly.

"I’ll visit again."

"By then, my fate will likely be decided. But don’t worry—it won’t be anything too severe. Lorenzo will let you know when the decision is made."

"…Alright."

With a heavy heart, Ivan stepped out of the room.

The door closed slowly behind him.

Albina watched it shut, her warm smile fading, leaving the space shrouded in darkness.

'…Even if he wears the necklace, it's only a matter of time before he realizes the truth. I have to find a way to completely eliminate his second personality…'

If he ever learned that he had killed his stepfather—his only father figure—it would be disastrous.

Judging by his demeanor, he still didn’t seem to be aware of his split personality.

The suppression necklace was working—for now—but how long it would hold was uncertain.

Finding a way to erase Ivan’s other self completely.

That had become Albina’s greatest priority.

"…It’s nothing but a record of movements."

Carla flipped through the final pages of the journal, only to find that all that remained was the brown leather cover.

She let out a sigh, closing her eyes.

She had suspected it, but she hadn’t expected it to be only a record of movements.

To make matters worse, the last recorded location was somewhere Carla had never even heard of.

If it was in the Imperial borderlands, or worse, enemy territory, then that was a problem.

As a student of the Academy, she didn’t have the freedom to travel as she pleased.

"Is there really no way…"

The midterms weren’t far off. Nearly two weeks had passed already, leaving her with only a month and a half.

'If I don’t figure something out soon…'

If things remained as they were, she would be left with no choice but to—no, no.

That couldn’t happen.

That must not happen.

Feeling the fatigue creeping up on her, Carla rubbed her eyes and let out a big yawn. Stretching her arms, she thought about taking a break.

Knock, knock.

"Who is it?"

“It’s me.”

"…Come in."

It was Fabio.

For once, he didn’t have that usual smug look on his face. Instead, he seemed to be watching Carla carefully.

Ever since she had called his name a few times a few days ago, Fabio had been acting… strangely friendly. It was odd, but he was her brother. When he acted this way, it was harder to hate him.

"What is it?"

"Huh?"

"You must have a reason for coming. Why are you just standing there staring at me?"

"Ah… well, Father asked me to tell you something."

"If he had a message, he could’ve sent a servant. Why you?"

"…Can’t I come?"

"It’s not that. Just tell me already."

Something about him seemed off.

Carla narrowed her eyes. Fabio was clearly hesitating, as if wary of her reaction.

"Father said to get dressed properly before dinner."

"Why?"

Carla’s expression darkened.

Something felt off about this.

"Lucas von Scheiskehl will be joining us for dinner tonight."

Carla clenched her teeth, shutting her eyes tightly.

Why was it that bad feelings always turned out to be right?

# The Academy's Prodigy Wants to Defeat the Genius - 33

[TL: If this series on [Novelupdates](https://www.novelupdates.com/series/the-academys-prodigy-wants-to-defeat-the-genius/) can get to 100 votes and minimum 4.4 rating I’ll increase release schedule (more chapters).]

Bang!

The door burst open as if it were about to be shattered.

The chamber of the Head of House Cascata—a room that no one could enter without the permission of its master.

Yet Carla stormed in without anyone’s approval, her anger barely contained.

At his desk, Enrico della Cascata, head of the house and Carla’s father, remained focused on his documents, not even glancing at her until she was on the verge of exploding.

"Do you have something to say?"

"Hah."

Carla let out a hollow laugh, glaring at Enrico.

Their eyes met, tension crackling between them like lightning.

"...I’d like to know why that damned bastard is suddenly coming to dinner tonight."

"It’s good to have time to get acquainted, don’t you think? I understand your relationship with him isn’t the best."

"And knowing that—"

Rumble!

A surge of lightning-charged mana flared from Carla. The study, reinforced with protective wards, remained intact, but the guards outside were likely struggling against the magical storm she had unleashed.

"Knowing that, you didn’t even ask for my opinion?!"

"Would you have agreed if I had asked?"

"Of course not!"

"Then that’s that. Even a three-year-old could tell you won’t pass the midterms. Two months of pointless delay should be enough."

Enrico set his quill in the inkwell and clasped his hands together.

His gaze locked onto Carla—unyielding, unwavering. He believed he had made the right choice.

He was certain of it.

"What if I pass the midterms with flying colors?"

"Do you even know what the exam entails? Do you truly believe, with only one arm, that you can pass?"

Carla fell silent.

The Imperial Central Magic Academy’s midterms—especially for first-years—were infamous.

The official reasoning was that it was to help students identify their weaknesses and grow stronger, but in truth, the test was brutal.

"...I can pass."

"You’ve lived twenty years as a man. Now, you expect me to believe that after a single month in a woman’s body, with one arm, you’ll pass? Ridiculous."

Enrico smiled coldly, his piercing gaze unfaltering, easily overpowering Carla’s defiance.

"I’ve already spoken to the Academy’s headmaster. Your assigned partner for the midterm will be Lucas von Scheiskehl. Do you think he’ll cooperate with you?"

"...What do you even gain from this? What is so important that you’re willing to go this far?"

Enrico slowly stood.

Even his footsteps were cold.

His polished shoes echoed as he approached Carla—pausing for a moment, then circling around her.

"Daughters have always been rare in our family. That made political expansion difficult. But now, I have a daughter. A daughter with a very fiery temper."

"…Yes, very different from my mother."

"Hmph."

A cold scoff.

The reason behind it was painfully obvious.

"Aren’t you ashamed to even mention your mother, Carla? If you had inherited even half of her grace—no, forget it. Regardless, since you have such a strong personality, marrying you into House Scheiskehl should be easy. You’ll have them under your thumb in no time."

Carla couldn’t argue against that.

Lucas was an idiot—a pathetic, sniveling fool who had never been able to land a hit on her in their countless fights.

She could dominate him without issue.

"The Empire is supported by four pillars."

Cascata.

Scheiskehl.

Aufstich.

Briccone.

"But four pillars are too many. Three will suffice."

Carla’s glare intensified.

The meaning behind his words was crystal clear.

"Scheiskehl has grown too arrogant, Carla. With the right leverage—at the right moment—this is an opportunity I cannot pass up."

"You insane—"

Carla couldn’t tear her eyes away from him.

She understood exactly what he was implying—but she couldn’t believe it.

"That is your role. You will be the foundation. You understand now, don’t you? Even Fabio must have figured it out. Now go. Go and dress appropriately for dinner."

In the end, Carla left the study without managing to lodge a proper complaint.

By the time she returned to her quarters, preparations had already begun.

In the adjoining private bath, the maids were frantically filling the tub with warm water, setting out scented oils and luxurious bath products.

The atmosphere was tense.

"My lady, please, allow us to escort you."

The head maid’s face was stiff.

The first reason was the lack of time. The second—now that Carla needed to be bathed, the maids had to prepare themselves as well.

Carla clenched her fists.

Tonight was going to be hell.

By Enrico’s command, Carla was required to wait at the estate’s main gate for Lucas’s arrival.

For the first time in her life, she wore a dress.

The airy space beneath the skirt felt uncomfortably exposed and the open neckline left her feeling bizarrely vulnerable.

Her black hair was braided into an intricate updo, supposedly the latest fashion in the Empire, but she found it utterly displeasing.

Elbow-length white gloves, a necklace adorned with gemstones and dangling earrings completed the ensemble.

From head to toe, everything was foreign.

From head to toe, everything was irritating.

From head to toe, everything made her seethe.

Yet, suppressing it all, Carla stood rigidly at the main gate, staring toward the entrance.

Finally, the stone gates creaked open.

At the same time, the magic lanterns flared to life, burning through the encroaching twilight, revealing a carriage rolling toward the estate.

The crest of House Scheiskehl was emblazoned on its side.

The carriage neither rushed nor dawdled as it made its way through the garden, approaching the front entrance.

'Damn it…'

Enrico had commanded her to smile, but that was far too much to ask. Maintaining a neutral expression instead of outright scowling was already the limit of her patience.

Carla glared at the carriage as it came to a stop before her.

However, her expression faltered when the carriage door opened and its first occupant stepped out.

"...You?"

A girl with long black hair.

She descended from the footman’s seat and immediately bowed deeply to Carla.

"Lady Cascata, I am Kiara. I bear the name of di Servitore, though it is unworthy of mention."

"…I thought the name sounded familiar. So, it was you."

"Yes."

It was Kiara.

The girl who had attempted to stop Lucas when he provoked Carla.

A student from the Western Division—not very talkative and unfamiliar to Carla due to the lack of interaction between the Eastern and Western Divisions.

"I shall offer my proper greetings later. For now, I must assist the young master."

Without waiting for a response, Kiara turned her back.

She was, after all, merely a servant.

From her perspective, her first duty was to Lucas—not Carla.

It was rude, perhaps, but Carla let it slide.

Because the moment Kiara opened the carriage door, revealing Lucas’s smirking face, Carla’s irritation flared anew.

"It’s been a while, Lady Cascata. Being invited to dinner… well, that put me in quite the good mood."

Even with his face smeared in that sleazy grin, he was still disgusting.

The moment she saw his expression, Carla had to fight the urge to punch him.

But Enrico wouldn’t let that slide and right now, appeasing her father was more important.

"Now then—shall we go?"

Lucas extended his hand with a smug smile.

Carla stared at it.

If she took that hand, there would be no turning back.

If she took that hand and entered the mansion alongside Lucas, the servants would assume she was his future wife.

'...Not yet. Enrico and you, you both think I won’t pass the midterms. But things won’t go the way you expect.'

With that, Carla turned on her heel.

Without another word, she strode into the mansion ahead of him.

Lucas was undoubtedly fuming behind her.

But that only made her smile.

Anger suited him better.

Frustration, resentment, and rage—only those emotions fit Lucas.

As Carla walked, she embraced the thought.

"Hah… you’ve got some bite. That makes things all the more exciting."

Carla closed her eyes and let out a slow breath.

Disgusting bastard.

Infuriating bastard.

And, above all—

That damned bastard.

[TL: If this series on [Novelupdates](https://www.novelupdates.com/series/the-academys-prodigy-wants-to-defeat-the-genius/) can get to 100 votes and minimum 4.4 rating I’ll increase release schedule (more chapters).]

# The Academy's Prodigy Wants to Defeat the Genius - 34

House Cascata was not only honored as the First Pillar of the Empire, but was also renowned for its abundant water resources—so much so that it was called the Domain of Waterfalls.

Thanks to this, potions produced in Cascata were of exceptional quality, generating a staggering amount of revenue for the house.

"Cascata potions are the best, aren’t they?"

"They’re famous, after all."

On the carriage route connecting the Academy to the capital at regular intervals, Ivan and Regina sat together in a carriage bound for Cascata.

'Buy potions, have a nice meal somewhere... Thank you, Liam...'

Liam’s advice had been simple—

—The age of ladies waiting patiently is over. Go first and ask him on a date.

Whether it would work remained to be seen, but at the very least, she was now sitting beside Ivan, heading toward Cascata. That was already a victory.

"I was worried since I don’t know much about potions, but thank goodness you’re here, Ivan."

With a playful grin, Regina snuggled up beside him, gazing up at his face.

Next week’s class would cover potion applications, making this the perfect excuse and since Ivan had worked in a potion shop, it was all the more convenient.

"I needed to buy some anyway, so this works out."

"Mmh. I’ll buy yours, too! This is my idea, after all."

"That’s not necessary. I have enough money."

Ivan smiled at her, his expression bright and carefree.

And just like that, Regina felt her face heating up. Flustered, she covered her cheeks with her palms and lowered her gaze.

'Oh no... he’s too handsome...'

"I should probably buy some for Carla, too."

Her smile vanished instantly.

Carla.

Carla.

Lately, Ivan had been mentioning her name more and more often—and Regina knew it wasn’t just in her imagination.

"Uh, um... hey, Ivan?"

"Hm?"

Had she asked him this before?

Did Ivan answer back then?

Hesitation only led to more hesitation.

Ivan, Ivan...

"…What do you think of Carla?"

"What do you mean? She’s my friend."

That wasn’t the answer she wanted.

That wasn’t what she was asking.

"I mean... Carla is, um, really pretty, right?"

"Yeah, she is. I was honestly shocked at how beautiful she was. Seriously, it surprised me."

"R-really?"

Regina’s heart sank.

There was no denying it—Carla was a far greater beauty than her.

It was undeniable.

But still… she had known Ivan for years. That had to count for something, right?

But then… Carla had known him for just as long.

What else did she have?

'What do I do? What should I do? Should I have kept my mouth shut?'

She should have said nothing.

She should have just kept quiet.

But it was too late for regrets.

"Regina, are you okay? Your face is red. You’re not coming down with something, are you?"

Something cool pressed against her forehead.

Snapping out of her thoughts, she found Ivan gazing at her with concern, his hand on her forehead.

"I-I’m fine! Really! I’m not sick or anything!"

"That’s a relief, but we should get ready to get off soon. We’re near Cascata Market now. Speaking of which, the market isn’t too far from the estate… Do you think we’ll run into Carla?"

Ivan grinned, oblivious to her turmoil.

Regina awkwardly laughed, pressing her hand against her forehead—the very spot Ivan’s touch had lingered.

His calloused hands weren’t soft by any means.

But somehow, she liked that.

It was manly.

It was Ivan.

"We’re here. Let’s go, Regina."

"Y-yeah!"

The carriage came to a halt at the station.

The door opened and Ivan instinctively offered his hand as he stepped down.

Regina took it, smiling brightly.

The sunset dyed the western sky in hues of crimson and gold.

And as dinner approached, she knew this was the perfect excuse to stay by his side a little longer.

True to its name, the Cascata estate was adorned with magic stones throughout, bathed in a soft golden glow.

The Cascata family dining hall was grand and magnificent.

A massive crystal chandelier hung from the high ceiling, casting dazzling light onto the dining table. The beams of light intertwined with the subtly shimmering silverware, creating a spectacle reminiscent of glistening jewels.

The table was set with a lavish feast.

Ripe pomegranates gleamed like rubies and plump grapes exuded a fresh aroma.

On a blue plate rested a perfectly grilled steak, accompanied by crisp vegetables and fragrant herbs.

Particularly, in front of Carla sat a precious wine sent from the Scheiskehl family. The deep ruby-colored wine, poured into an elegant crystal glass, radiated an exquisite glow, its rich scent teasing Carla’s senses.

Yet, Carla paid no attention to the extravagant display before her.

Her gaze was fixed beyond the window.

Beyond her sight—the crimson sunset was slowly disappearing beyond the horizon.

The fiery western sky was undoubtedly beautiful, but as Carla glanced around the room, a question arose regarding an absent presence.

“Where is Fabio?”

“I had him dine separately. This is not an occasion for Fabio to attend.”

Enrico responded curtly, raising his glass.

Following suit, both Lucas and Carla lifted their glasses as well.

“This wine was brought by Lucas von Scheiskehl. Be sure to extend my gratitude to the Duke of Scheiskehl.”

“Yes, I will do so.”

The wine server stepped forward, filling each glass.

The deep red wine poured smoothly, its alluring aroma reminiscent of crimson decadence.

Carla forced a smile.

The twisted smirk at the corner of her lips barely concealed the distaste she felt and the cold hostility in her gaze flickered between Lucas and Enrico.

Then, her attention shifted to the figure standing behind Lucas.

Kiara stood quietly, eyes lowered, positioned behind Lucas as though she belonged there, a mere shadow at his back.

She paid no heed to Carla’s gaze, her presence indifferent.

“Now then, let’s drink.”

Extending his glass forward in a mere gesture of a toast, Enrico took a sip before setting it down.

Lucas and Carla followed suit.

As Carla ran her fingers smoothly along the rim of her glass, she took slow, deliberate breaths.

Enrico remained expressionless—yet the chill in his demeanor was unmistakable.

As the head of the Cascata family, he made all decisions, dictated all judgments and in deciding to isolate his daughter—his child who was once his son—he showed no hint of emotion.

His mere presence weighed heavily upon the room.

“My, my, how marvelous. I’ve always heard that the waters of Cascata are renowned, but even the taste of the water itself is exceptional.”

Lucas took a sip of his wine, followed by a taste of the lemon-infused aperitif.

After setting both glasses down, he shrugged dramatically.

There wasn’t a single drink on the table that was merely water, but perhaps there was simply nothing else to praise.

“And to think, I also have the pleasure of gazing upon the beautiful Lady Cascata. What a truly delightful evening this is.”

The peculiar rise in his intonation, the unmistakable hint of mockery in his tone, made Carla’s brow twitch.

“……”

She did not respond, merely taking another sip of wine.

As she emptied her glass, the server promptly refilled it.

“If you’re so grateful, then just quietly eat and leave.”

“Carla, mind your manners.”

Even as Enrico chastised her, Carla merely scoffed.

“Why should I care? This has nothing to do with me.”

“Oh? Is that so?”

Lucas remained ostentatious.

This time, he leaned forward, clasping his hands together as he peered at Carla with a smirk.

“Such words wound me, Lady Cascata. The two of us are to be married soon, are we not? Surely you understand why I am here. I merely agreed to this arrangement as per the esteemed Lord Cascata’s wishes, so shouldn’t we make an effort to get along?”

“Get along?”

Carla’s eyes flared as she fixed Lucas with a glare.

“You and I, get along?”

“But of course. We are to be husband and wife—shouldn’t that be natural?”

Hah—a dry chuckle escaped Carla’s lips.

Seeing this, Lucas’s smirk wavered slightly.

“There is no way I will ever be your wife. Not even the slightest chance, you are nothing more than a pawn in my father’s schemes.”

Lucas’s expression stiffened.

He was not unaware—no, as a noble heir, he was required to have at least that much awareness.

Still, Carla’s beauty was undeniable, enough to make Lucas covet her. Even if he had to make some concessions, she was a prize he wanted for himself.

“My lor—”

Lucas turned to Enrico, attempting to shift the conversation.

Yet, before he could even finish his sentence, he paused, stunned.

For Enrico—was smiling.

“…Why are you smiling?”

Carla, too, questioned him, her expression tense.

There was nothing amusing about this situation, yet he was sitting there, calmly smiling.

“Cascata is a great house, Scheiskehl is as well. I understand that your circumstances differ. But tonight, Carla and Lucas, understand that your relationship is not solely my decision. Scheiskehl shares my vision.”

Enrico took another sip, finishing his wine before continuing.

“This has already been decided. Lucas, you will respect Carla. Carla, you will do the same. The futures of both our families depend on this, respect is essential.”

His words remained as cold and calculated as ever.

And in that moment, Carla understood.

This dinner was nothing more than a formality. Her feelings—her revulsion toward Lucas, her defiance against her father—none of it mattered in the slightest.

“Of course, my lord. Tonight shall be a most enjoyable evening. As you say, mutual respect is paramount.”

Carla clenched her fists, trembling.

Yet, she had no power here—there was nothing she could do.

All she could do was sit silently and eat.

That was her only form of resistance.

# The Academy's Prodigy Wants to Defeat the Genius - 35

The meal ended in silence.

During dessert, just as Enrico left the table, citing some business to attend to, Carla stepped out onto the balcony, seeking the cool night air.

She felt suffocated, as though she might choke under the weight of her frustration. Lifting her gaze to the night sky, she exhaled a deep sigh.

"You'll catch a cold standing out here like this, Lady Cascata."

A drawling voice.

Even without turning around, Carla knew exactly who it was. She let out another sigh.

Without waiting for an invitation, Lucas moved to stand beside her.

Carla kept her eyes fixed on the sky, while Lucas, uninterested in the stars, leaned casually on the balcony railing, fixing his smirking gaze on her.

"Come now, Lady Cascata. Since we've decided to follow the elders' wishes, don't you think we should spend some time together?"

"Disgusting bastard."

"That’s no way to talk, now, is it?"

"I don’t care."

"You'll start caring."

"Not a chance."

"It’s inevitable."

Unlike his usual self, Lucas was relentless.

Carla felt irritation swell inside her, a deep and simmering frustration. She wanted to strike that smug expression off his face, clenching her fist as she suppressed the impulse.

Her right arm was still intact.

If she hit him hard enough now—

But just as she considered it, a gust of wind sent the sleeve of her dress fluttering against her face.

The fabric was so light, so fragile, billowing helplessly in the breeze.

That was enough to drag Carla's thoughts back to reality.

If she hit him, could she even win?

And what about the consequences?

She couldn't channel magic externally.

She was a martial mage—her body was her magic and her magic was her body. In her current state, unable to use her trained techniques, even Lucas might be a difficult opponent.

"Come on now, let’s take a walk together. Maybe talk a little? That might help, don’t you think?"

A slithering touch wrapped around her waist. A touch laced with an unmistakable, loathsome desire.

Carla instinctively recoiled. Sensing her reaction, Lucas smiled with satisfaction and tightened his grip.

"Stop running away."

"...Do you really think you have the right to touch me like this?"

"Why wouldn’t I? You’re just a daughter of Cascata and I am a son of Scheiskehl. There's no need to compare our worth."

Disgusting.

Beyond irritating, his words were downright enraging.

"You don’t need to get so worked up, Carla. Magic doesn’t matter. Just toss it aside. Becoming the mistress of the Scheiskehl family—that’s what’s important. There’s nothing wrong with that."

Magic.

To Carla, magic was something that could never be dismissed as trivial.

She had devoted her entire life to it.

She had sought strength so that she could protect those she cared about, even if she never voiced it aloud.

And this bastard dared to dismiss her entire existence as meaningless?

He was denying everything she had ever stood for.

"Lucas… Lucas von Scheiskehl."

"Hmm? What is it?"

"You really are an irredeemable piece of trash."

A crackling burst of lightning surged through Carla's fist as she swung.

Her punch struck Lucas square in the face, snapping his head to the side. She aimed to follow up with a left hook to his stomach—but her missing arm stopped her.

Instead, she drove the heel of her shoe into his gut.

"Kuhuaaaack!"

With a strangled scream, Lucas tumbled backward, rolling across the balcony floor before crashing into the railing.

The force of the kick had been enough to send Carla off balance as well. She fell, rolling twice across the ground before coming to a stop.

"Young Master!"

A sharp cry rang out as Kiara rushed forward.

She cast a brief, horrified glance at Carla before darting past her to tend to Lucas.

"My Lady!"

A swarm of attendants rushed to Carla’s side.

Two maids hurriedly helped her to her feet, brushing the dust from her dress, their movements flustered.

"Move."

Carla kicked off her broken-heeled shoe and strode away from the balcony.

The cold marble floor sent a sharp pain through her bare feet, but she didn’t care.

If anything, the pain felt exhilarating.

As she descended the central staircase, she caught a glimpse of the view outside.

The garden bathed in moonlight, the gentle murmur of the artificial waterfall, the night sky blanketed in a sea of stars…

"Damn it…"

Clenching her teeth, Carla bolted down the stairs.

She reached the entrance, shoved the doors open and sprinted across the garden toward the main gate.

The guards at the gate, startled by the sight of her disheveled appearance, hesitated.

"Open the gate! Now!"

They exchanged uncertain glances before, overwhelmed by the intensity in her gaze, they hurriedly obeyed.

Carla ran out into the night.

The cold air filled her lungs, each breath sharp and invigorating.

She had escaped.

She didn’t know where she was going. She didn’t know what she would do next.

But for now, she didn’t want to think about anything.

She just wanted to revel in this feeling—this sense of freedom.

Her body ached, her feet stung, but her mind felt clear, her rage cooling into something steady and sharp.

Yes, this was who she was.

She wasn’t meant to bow her head and obey.

She was Carlo.

Carlo della Cascata.

She finally understood.

There had never been a reason for her to lower herself.

If she had no arm, she would adapt.

There was no reason to wallow in helplessness.

Even without an arm—

Magic would make her whole again.

Magic would see her through.

Carla ran for a long time.

Even as her breath came in ragged gasps, her chest feeling as though it might burst, even as sweat drenched her entire body and her dress became crumpled and disheveled beyond recognition, she kept running.

The scenery blurred as it rushed past her.

But she didn’t care.

The only thing that mattered was moving forward, running toward freedom.

How long had she been running?

She couldn’t go any farther.

If she pushed herself even a little more, she would truly collapse.

Only then did Carla finally stop, gasping for air.

‘...Where is this?’

Looking around, she found herself in an unfamiliar yet oddly recognizable place.

Despite the late hour, the market was brightly illuminated, the lively chatter of people filled the air and the scent of food teased her nose…

Only then did Carla realize that she had somehow ended up in the market district of Cascata’s territory.

‘The market. I ran all the way here…’

She let out a long breath, trying to steady her breathing.

At least, thanks to her well-trained body, she was able to recover quickly despite how far she had run.

That was a small relief.

‘…Is there anywhere I can get some water?’

Carla scanned her surroundings.

A tavern, or perhaps a restaurant.

The taverns were already loud with the drunken revelry of rowdy patrons—not an option.

She turned instead toward a restaurant with bright lanterns hanging outside, still open for business.

She had nothing on her at the moment, but in the Cascata territory, her face alone was as good as any identification.

With no hesitation, Carla pushed open the restaurant door and stepped inside.

“Welcome… ah.”

A man who seemed to be an employee greeted her.

Her once-elegant dress had lost its luster, battered by her rough journey.

The neatly pinned-up hair had come completely undone, cascading wildly around her shoulders. A thoroughly disheveled sight, though she was unaware of it herself.

“A glass of water.”

Carla strode past the employee and unceremoniously dropped into an empty seat.

“Uh, miss. But here, you have to order something…”

“What?”

Carla furrowed her brows, fixing the employee with a sharp glare. Was he saying she couldn’t even have a glass of water without ordering?

“Then bring me anything. Just give me some water first.”

Ordering something was no issue.

She had naturally told him to bring her anything along with the water, but the employee didn’t move from his spot.

“What are you doing? I told you to bring anything. The most expensive thing on the menu, if that’s what it takes. Just get me water first.”

“…Excuse me, miss. Do you have money?”

“What?”

Carla’s eyes widened in disbelief as she stared at the man.

Did he dare to ask her about money?

Never in her life had she faced such a ridiculous situation. But, unaware of just how much of a mess she looked, she didn’t understand his caution.

“You… don’t you know who I am?”

“My apologies, miss, but… who might you be?”

Her appearance was, admittedly, quite a disaster. Hair in disarray, covered in sweat and dust.

Yet, there was an unmistakable air of nobility about her.

The employee had his suspicions—perhaps she was from a wealthy background. But appearances could be deceiving, plenty of people walked around in fine clothes without being of noble birth.

“I am Carla. Carla della Cascata, you don’t recognize me?”

“C-C-Carla, the young lady of the Cascata family?”

Only after seeing the employee’s eyes widen in shock did she feel satisfied.

“Now, go and bring anything and get me water first. I’m thirsty.”

“Ah, yes… right away!”

If she was lying, she’d face the consequences, not him.

Judging that it was better to err on the side of caution, the employee hurried off toward the kitchen. Watching him disappear, Carla casually fanned herself, glancing around the restaurant.

And then—she saw him.

A man craning his neck, staring at her with wide eyes.

“Oh, Carla! Lady Carla!”

It was Ivan.

Ivan Contadino waved at her before rushing over, quickly bowing his head in greeting.

“It is an honor to see you here, my lady. What brings you to such a place…”

Looking like that—was what Ivan wanted to ask.

But he wisely kept that part to himself.

# The Academy's Prodigy Wants to Defeat the Genius - 36

"Drop the pretentious formalities. Act like you're at the academy."

Carla wasn't particularly fond of Ivan. No, it wasn't exactly Ivan himself that she disliked—it was more the fact that she had to run into him in this situation that put her in a foul mood.

"A-are you okay Lady Carla…"

"Don't make me repeat myself."

"Then... alright. Carla, what brings you here?"

Instead of answering, Carla let out a sigh.

Storming out of the mansion had felt liberating, but explaining why she did it? That wasn’t happening.

And it wasn’t like she owed this guy the truth, anyway.

"You don’t need to know. Just something that happened. Anyway, give me a glass of water."

"Ah, yeah. Come over here first."

Carla followed Ivan as he led the way. When Regina greeted her with an awkward smile and a nod, Carla simply gave a brief nod in return and took the glass Ivan handed her, downing the water in one go.

"Phew, that hit the spot. I’m gonna sit down for a bit."

"Of course, take your time."

Of all places, Carla chose to sit right between Ivan and Regina. Since the table was round, it wasn't like she was literally wedging herself between them, but the placement still made it feel like an intrusion.

When Carla glanced up, Ivan was already looking at her. His eyes were as gentle as ever.

"Carla, it’s dangerous to be out alone this late... and with your arm in that condition."

"I'm fine. I can take care of myself."

She said it with confidence, but deep down, Carla found it ironic.

‘Take care of myself? Yeah, sure. If knocking down some weakling like Lucas only to trip and fall myself counts as taking care of myself. What a joke.’

"Still, can’t you at least tell us what’s going on? If there’s anything we can do to help—"

"It’s not something you can help with, so just drop it. Too much curiosity is just annoying."

"But we’re friends, Carla. You show up like this, looking all battered and you expect us to just ignore it?"

"Yeah, I mean... Ivan’s right. We’re just worried."

Carla didn’t appreciate Regina chiming in. With a sigh, she poured herself another glass of water and drank before exhaling sharply.

"Both of you, stop worrying. I—"

She suddenly couldn't stand Ivan’s expression.

‘Worry? What gives him the right to worry about me? Because he’s better than me? Because I seem pathetic to him?’

"...Even like this, I can handle things on my own."

"That’s not what I meant, Carla. You’re acting different than usual—"

"Different than usual? You’re hilarious, Ivan."

This wasn’t how this was supposed to go.

But Ivan’s eyes, his naive expression, his voice dripping with kindness—

It all grated on Carla’s nerves.

"You always talk like that, like you know me so well. What was I like before, huh? You know what’s funny? You’re not acting like yourself either. Since when did you care about me? Since when did you feel the need to act all concerned? Or is this just another way to stroke your own ego?"

Even as she lashed out, Carla couldn't quite understand herself. Her emotions felt untethered, slipping from her grasp. It was like instinct had taken over, drowning out reason.

"That’s not it, Carla. That’s not what I meant—"

"Forget it… You’ve always been like this. Always better than me, always ahead of me. Always pretending not to notice, pretending to be so kind and innocent! Looking down on me all the while!"

Her sudden outburst silenced the entire dining hall.

Her flushed face only made her beauty more striking, unintentionally drawing more attention to the scene.

"No matter what I did, you were always better. That’s why you’re worried, isn’t it? Afraid that I—the second place finisher—won’t be able to keep playing my role beneath you?!"

"Carla!"

Regina shot to her feet, alarmed, trying to stop her.

"No, Carla. That’s not true. I never thought of you as being beneath me. Not once."

"Easy to say! But your attitude says it all! You pity me! You look down on me! ...And that’s what I hate the most!"

"Carla, calm down. You’re strong, I know that better than anyone. I know how hard you’ve worked."

‘Hard work, huh.’

Carla had never felt so disillusioned with that phrase.

After all that effort, what had she gained? She had done everything she could to claw her way forward, to touch the untouchable—

And yet, if this was the result, then the saying ‘hard work never betrays’ was the biggest lie of all.

"Those words just make me feel worse. Strong? Me? Sure, you think so. You probably want to add, ‘but I’m still stronger,’ don’t you?!"

Fueled by inexplicable rage, Carla glared at Ivan.

And Ivan, staring at her, was left speechless.

‘So this was how Carla felt.’

This was why she kept pushing him away.

Understanding that, Ivan couldn’t help but feel a deep sadness.

His own obliviousness had made him blind to the pain Carla had been carrying.

"...That’s not it, Carla. I’ve always thought of you as a friend. It was never about who was better or stronger. That never mattered to me, I just saw you as a friend."

He meant it. Every word of it.

But somehow, somewhere, something had gone wrong. His sincerity hadn’t reached Carla.

And perhaps, that was all there was to it.

Because Carla, meeting his gaze, trembled with anger and humiliation.

"...You’re a monster."

Leaving those words behind, Carla turned and bolted from the dining hall.

"Carla!"

The door slammed open, then shut with an echoing bang, leaving an uneasy silence in its wake.

"Ivan, don’t."

Regina caught Ivan’s arm just as he was about to go after Carla.

"Right now, she needs to be alone. Chasing after her won’t make her listen. It’s better to give her space."

Ivan stared at Regina.

But Carla’s expression—her trembling voice, her barely contained fury—lingered in his mind.

"No! I can’t just leave her like this. Right now, she looks unstable. And more than that..."

The tattered dress exposing bruised skin.

The disheveled hair, the exhaustion lining her face, the way she struggled to even use magic—

"Carla is in danger."

"Ivan, she’s just upset and... and..."

Regina hesitated, her fingers tightening around his sleeve. Her lips quivered, uncertain, before she finally steeled herself.

"...Can’t you just stay with me tonight?"

Ivan hesitated.

For a moment—a brief moment—he wavered.

Regina thought she had a chance.

For her, those words had taken immense courage.

But after a deep breath, Ivan made his decision.

"I’ll be back soon. Just wait for me, Regina."

He didn’t give her the answer she wanted.

"Ah... Ivan, Ivan!"

Regina reached out, knowing full well her hand wouldn’t catch him.

Still, she stretched it forward.

Even after Ivan’s figure disappeared, Regina stood frozen, staring in the direction he had gone.

Her hands, clasped against her chest, trembled.

Finding Carla’s location wasn’t difficult for Ivan.

With his magic, he was able to pinpoint her quickly, leading him to the fountain near the market square.

"...Carla."

"Why are you here?"

Her voice was cold.

Ivan hesitated, unsure of how to respond.

Should he say he was worried about her?

That he was afraid to leave her alone?

No matter how he phrased it, it would still boil down to the same thing—he was worried.

"Are you afraid I’ll mess up again? That way, you’ll get another chance to ‘rescue’ me? Should I go ahead and lose my right arm too?"

Carla’s sarcasm left Ivan speechless. Even if he insisted that wasn’t his intention, she wouldn’t believe him.

But his only reason for coming really was concern.

"Can’t you just leave me alone? Why do you keep making me feel so pathetic..."

Seated on the bench, Carla lowered her head, her voice unsteady, tinged with emotion.

"Ivan. I just wanted to beat you. That’s all I wanted. To win against you. To be first. But instead, why... why does it feel like this."

Ivan didn’t reply.

Under the moonlight, her trembling shoulders were clearly visible.

"You have no idea how hard it was, always having you ahead of me. No matter how hard I tried, no matter how much I struggled, you were always just there, effortlessly ahead."

"...I never thought of you as being behind me. If anything, I admired how brightly you shone."

"Don’t make me laugh, Ivan."

"I mean it. Let me sit for a moment."

Ivan carefully sat down beside Carla—or at least, he tried to. That’s when he noticed her shoulders shaking.

The night breeze rustled her empty left sleeve.

Despite the gloves, her dress still looked too thin for the cool air.

Ivan removed his uniform jacket.

It was almost summer, but the night air was still chilly.

"...What are you doing?"

"You look cold."

As he draped his jacket over her shoulders, Carla shot him a glare.

‘Damn him.’

The man who was always in front of her.

And yet, doing things like this—things that made it impossible to simply hate him.

"Even in moments like this, you’re infuriating."

"I’d rather you call it kindness."

"You’re such a bastard."

"That’s fine, we’re friends. Friends can call each other names."

Sniff.

Carla wiped her nose.

"I know how hard you worked. Anyone who’s seen your skill would know. I never once looked down on you. That’s the truth."

"Don’t make me laugh."

"I mean it. If I had, would I have gone out of my way to greet you all the time? I really did want to get along with you."

Carla fell silent at that.

‘...Well, that much was true.’

"I won’t ask what happened. You don’t seem like you want to talk about it. But I am worried about you. I know Lord Cascata wouldn’t do anything to hurt you, but if this is about... that marriage proposal... If you don’t want it—"

"If I don’t, what can you do about it?"

"I mean... probably nothing..."

Ivan immediately deflated.

Carla, watching him, couldn’t help but laugh. The sheer absurdity of it all was hilarious.

"Oh, you’re laughing, Carla."

"Don’t you dare laugh, you bastard. Because of you, I... Ah-choo!"

A loud sneeze burst out.

Ivan handed her a handkerchief and she took it without complaint.

"You’re going to catch a cold. Shouldn’t you go back to the mansion?"

"...Not going back."

"Then what do you plan to do?"

Carla wiped her nose with Ivan’s handkerchief and stood up, still gripping his jacket tightly around her shoulders.

"...I’ll go to the academy. There should be an empty room there, that’s probably the best option for now."

# The Academy's Prodigy Wants to Defeat the Genius - 37

"It seems Carla was quite emotional. You should understand. A man should have the generosity to be magnanimous."

Lucas finally looked human again after receiving emergency healing from Cascata’s mages.

If this was meant as an apology, Enrico didn’t show any sign of it.

In fact, he didn’t even bother to apologize—nobles, after all, rarely did. And for a grand noble like Cascata, apologies were even more unnecessary.

If there was anyone he would bow his head to, it would be the Emperor himself. Certainly not to someone as insignificant as Lucas.

‘So if I don’t understand, that makes me unmanly, huh?’

A cunning old fox, indeed. Lucas grumbled internally but put on a bright smile.

"Your daughter is quite spirited. I will make sure to teach her properly after our marriage."

"See to it. She lost her mother early and never had a proper education in etiquette. I trust you understand. Now, be on your way."

Enrico cast Lucas a fleeting glance before turning away.

He didn’t care how Lucas got home. He wasn’t even remotely interested in him.

It was a silent dismissal.

Lucas watched Enrico’s retreating figure for a moment before turning away himself.

His arm, shoulder, back and even his rear—there wasn’t a single part of his body that didn’t ache. But the worst was undoubtedly his face.

"I can’t believe a woman’s punches hurt that much. It doesn’t make sense."

"Young Master, are you alright?"

Climbing into the waiting carriage at the mansion’s entrance, Lucas grumbled.

Kiara’s voice carried concern, but Lucas only scowled, offering no real response.

"Alright? What does it matter? Once we’re married... tch. Damn girl, just as arrogant as her father."

"I see."

Kiara’s face darkened.

She had served Lucas for a long time, yet she still couldn’t get used to his crude words.

Kiara’s family, the Servitore, was a branch of Lucas’s house, the Scheiskehl.

As the third daughter of the Servitore family, Kiara had been betrothed to Lucas as a concubine. But with Lucas attending the academy, their marriage had been postponed.

In other words, once Lucas graduated from the academy and enlisted, he and Kiara would be wed. That was her predetermined future.

And yet, the man she was to marry was so vulgar and tactless. Kiara couldn't help but feel conflicted.

"As long as I get the marriage done, that’s all that matters. If I handle Fabio right, I can take over Cascata entirely."

Kiara listened to Lucas but inwardly shook her head.

The Lucas she knew was anything but clever. He lacked wit and his so-called schemes were laughably simplistic. The idea that Cascata would fall for such an obvious ploy was unthinkable.

"Scheiskehl and Cascata combined—if I control both, I’ll have the empire’s two strongest pillars in my hands. Hahaha..."

Kiara said nothing.

"Are you sure you’ll be alright?"

Regina’s worried voice met Ivan’s reassuring smile.

But her gaze drifted from Ivan to the carriage where Carla was already seated.

Carla, still draped in Ivan’s uniform jacket.

Hearing that Carla wanted to return to the academy, Regina had wanted to go with them.

If not for her plans to stay at a relative’s house that evening, she would have insisted on accompanying them.

Technically, there was no real issue.

Both Carla and Ivan were academy students.

They had dormitories there, so returning shouldn’t be a problem.

But Regina couldn’t shake the uneasy feeling that clung to her.

"Regina, don’t worry. I’ll come meet you at the station tomorrow afternoon. Just get some rest, alright?"

Ivan’s gentle words pushed away the creeping anxiety, and she forced a smile.

"Okay. You have to be there tomorrow, alright? I’ll bring the potions with me."

"Yeah, I promise. So don’t worry so much."

"...Alright."

Regina wanted to hold onto Ivan’s hand. Just as her fingers brushed the back of his—

"Are you leaving or what? What, is this a farewell before a war? You two look so sentimental I could cry."

Carla’s mocking voice shattered the moment between them. Ivan quickly pulled away, while Regina’s hand, suddenly without a destination, hesitated in the air before falling back to her side.

Ivan boarded the carriage, giving Regina one last warm smile before the door shut.

The carriage, bearing Cascata’s insignia, slowly departed from the station.

Regina stood there, watching.

She didn’t move. Not even when the carriage disappeared into the darkness.

"Aren’t you dating Regina?"

Carla yawned lazily before asking Ivan.

Seeing Carla’s open mouth right in front of him, Ivan instinctively turned red and shook his head.

"No, someone as good as Regina… I wouldn’t know how to date her anyway."

"Hah… I don’t think Regina sees it that way."

‘Is this guy clueless?

Even a glance at Regina’s eyes would make it obvious.

Was he living in a different world?

Carla, who had calmed down considerably, stared at Ivan before clicking her tongue and turning away.

"Are you cold?"

"No, why? Do you want your coat back?"

"No, it’s fine. Maybe I’m only warm because of it. I’m not cold at all."

Carla adjusted the uniform jacket draped over her left side. But with only her right hand, it was difficult—she tugged at it awkwardly, trying to pull it forward from under her chin, then over her back, struggling all the while.

"Here, let me do it."

Watching her fumble, Ivan stood up and adjusted the jacket over her shoulders. Then—

"Ah, don’t misunderstand. It’s not out of pity or anything. I just wanted to help."

"Who said anything? Why are you making yourself sound weird?"

'Weird?'

But it wasn’t a big deal.

Ivan brushed it off and leaned back against the carriage seat.

"You should get some sleep."

Carla, resting her chin on her hand as she gazed out the window, spoke casually. Ivan stretched and shook his head.

"Nah, how could I sleep when I’m riding in such a fancy carriage?"

"Hah. That’s rich, coming from someone who talks so casually to a noble. You even call me by name, but the carriage gets special treatment?"

"Well… that’s because you told me to."

"So if I told you to start using honorifics and formal speech, would you?"

"Of course, Lady Cascata."

"Forget it. Drop it."

Ivan smirked playfully at her response.

"You’re funny."

That was the last thing said.

Silence settled between them, the only sound the faint creaking of the carriage wheels. Then, a soft, rhythmic breathing reached Ivan’s ears.

Carla had dozed off.

Perhaps the plush seats had relaxed her, but she now slept peacefully, her expression serene.

'Her eyelashes are really long.'

Ivan observed her.

She had a distinctly feminine face.

Long eyelashes, a well-defined nose.

Though not as delicate as Regina’s, her vibrant, slightly flushed cheeks and lips carried a certain charm.

Her eyes, slightly upturned, gave her a fierce look, but knowing her personality, it suited her.

'At least we’re getting along better now. That’s a relief.'

Carla, once as cold as the winter wind.

It was surprising to realize her harshness had stemmed from an inferiority complex toward him.

It had never been necessary—she never needed to feel that way.

Carla’s peaceful sleeping face.

Her chest rising and falling with each breath… her soft lips slightly parted, her warm breath escaping in quiet sighs, her slender neck leading to smooth, milky skin—

'Not yet.'

In the swaying carriage, Ivan found himself standing, his hand reaching toward Carla’s throat.

Impulse.

Desire.

The urge to strangle her, to hear a pained gasp from those crimson lips, to see fear and terror bloom in her violet eyes, to listen as her cold voice trembled, begging him for mercy—

'Not yet. Not yet. It’s not time yet.'

Ivan violently shook his head and sat back down. The surging impulses, the craving for control, returned every time he looked at Carla.

He clutched the pendant around his neck, gripping it tightly and thought of Albina.

—Ivan, when you don’t know what you’re feeling, just hold this pendant and breathe deeply. It will help.

'…I don’t know where you got this, but it’s useful…'

Albina probably assumed Ivan didn’t understand himself.

But he did.

He had remembered everything from his past life. He just chose to keep it hidden.

The pendant only served to further mask his power—nothing more. The only real use it had was making it slightly easier to control his emotions.

Closing his eyes, Ivan clenched the pendant and focused on his breathing.

After repeating the process several times, he finally calmed down—just as he realized they had passed the academy gates and were approaching the dormitory.

"No empty rooms?"

Carla’s irritated voice made the dorm matron grimace.

There were rooms.

They just weren’t ready for use.

Letting the young lady of Cascata stay in an unprepared, dusty room? Unthinkable.

"So what, you expect me to sleep on the streets? How does a dormitory not have a single available room?"

"Well, Carla, it’s just… none of the rooms have been cleaned. The janitor disappeared, so we’re in a bit of a crisis right now."

"Ugh, this is ridiculous."

Carla scowled, arms crossed. What was she supposed to do now? Sleeping in the lobby wasn’t exactly an option.

"Hey, Ivan."

"Huh?"

"Your room has a bed, right?"

"I-It does… obviously."

"Then you sleep on the floor. I’ll take the bed."

"…Wait, hold on, Carla. You’re staying in my room?"

"Why? Got a problem with that?"

"It’s not that I don’t want to, it’s just…"

This made no sense.

Ivan had no idea how things had escalated to this point.

# The Academy's Prodigy Wants to Defeat the Genius - 38

"So you’re saying I should sleep in the lobby?"

"No, that’s not what I meant… Never mind, I’ll sleep in the lobby instead."

Carla folded her arms and shot Ivan an unimpressed look.

Seeing her expression, Ivan hesitated, confusion written all over his face. Carla sighed and spoke.

"So, you want everyone to think I kicked you out of your own room and made you sleep in the lobby?"

Well… when she put it that way.

"T-Then maybe Regina’s room—"

"You want me to sleep in an empty room with no owner?"

"M-Maybe another…"

There were no other girls’ rooms he could think of.

"At least people know we’re friends and besides, everyone knows you’re not bold enough to try anything."

"O-Oh, right…"

There was no way out.

Ivan realized there was no escaping this situation anymore.

"So, let’s get my room ready as soon as possible. It’ll be done by tomorrow night, right?"

"I’ll do my best, Carla," the dorm matron assured her.

Only after getting confirmation did Carla spin on her heels.

As she walked toward the staircase, she suddenly turned back to Ivan and called out.

"Are you coming?"

"Oh—y-yeah, I’m coming."

Ivan glanced at the dorm matron as if pleading for help, but she merely looked away.

"Not bad, it’s pretty spacious. This will do."

That was Carla’s first impression upon entering Ivan’s room.

Ivan, on the other hand, was dumbfounded.

‘A livable space? This room alone is bigger than my entire house. If this is just “livable,” then what’s her standard for a proper house… Actually, I don’t even want to know.’

"Hey, I need a bath."

Without waiting for a response, Carla pushed open a door leading to the sitting area, flopped onto the couch, and leaned her head back.

"What are you doing?"

"Huh?"

"Untie my hair. My arm’s like this."

She gestured slightly with her left shoulder—her missing arm.

Indeed, with only one hand, she wouldn’t be able to undo her intricate hairstyle.

"W-Wait, you’re going to bathe?"

"Of course. How else am I supposed to sleep like this?"

Carla shrugged.

She had been wearing the same dress from the evening banquet, after all.

She had run through the streets in it, gathering dirt and dust, not to mention the sweat. Sleeping like this wasn’t exactly an option.

"Hurry up and untie it. You’re good at stuff like this. I remember you used to do Regina’s hair when you were kids."

At this point, Ivan had no excuse to refuse.

He had often been responsible for fixing her hair. He was quite skilled at braiding and unbraiding.

Sighing inwardly, he stepped closer.

Carla’s hair, intricately woven, had already started coming loose. The moment Ivan slipped his fingers in, it unraveled like a waterfall.

Black, silky strands cascaded down, so soft they brushed over his hand like fine silk.

Thick, smooth, and lustrous—her hair felt luxurious, the kind that would make noble ladies envious.

Each time his fingers moved, her pale, slender neck was revealed.

Short baby hairs curled lightly at the nape of her neck.

A delicate, slender neckline.

Flawless, smooth skin.

The curve of her shoulders flowed into the graceful lines of her back…

"Are you done?"

"…Ah, yeah."

"Alright, thanks. Relax while I bathe."

Carla stood up abruptly.

She acted as though she owned the place now, but strangely, it didn’t feel unnatural.

"Where’s the bathroom?"

"Oh, over there."

Ivan pointed to a door.

The bathroom was extravagant by his standards, equipped with both a bathtub and a separate shower.

"What are you doing?"

"Huh?"

"Show me the way."

Now it really felt like she owned the room.

Sighing, Ivan led the way, and Carla followed, looking unimpressed.

"Take your time."

"Where are you going?"

"Huh?"

Carla turned her back to him and pointed at her dress, struggling to reach the buttons.

"Undo these. I can’t reach them on my own."

Ivan’s mind went blank.

She was asking him to unbutton her dress.

"I can’t undress without undoing the buttons, can I?"

"W-Well, I mean, that’s true, but…"

His hands trembled as they reached for the buttons.

Each button undone revealed more of her skin.

As expected of a noble lady, her complexion was as pure as fresh snow, unmarred by any scars.

Meanwhile, his own hands were rough, calloused, and littered with scars.

It felt as though his unworthy hands were leaving marks on pristine, untouched snow.

Rustle.

"Done?"

"Y-Yeah."

Clutching the front of her dress tightly to keep it from slipping, Carla stepped into the bathroom.

Just before the door closed completely, she peeked out again.

"Should I leave the door open? Or do you want to join me?"

"N-No! Absolutely not! Please don’t!"

Ivan practically screamed, making Carla snicker.

"Why are you so flustered? You used to help me with stuff like this when we were kids."

"T-That was when I thought you were a boy…"

Carla’s expression froze momentarily before she forced a grin.

"Right, back then, huh? Got it."

Thunk.

The door finally shut.

Ivan let out a deep, exhausted sigh.

'What a day…'

From visiting Albina in the morning to spending time with Regina in the afternoon and now this—what a long day indeed.

Time passed as he stared blankly out the window at the night sky, until—

"Hey, Ivan!"

"Huh?!"

Startled, Ivan shot up.

Was something wrong?

"Bring me some underwear and fresh clothes!"

"…What?!"

"I need underwear and clothes! I don’t have anything to change into!"

"U-U-Underwear?!"

Oh, no.

But it was already too late.

Ivan rushed to the bathroom door, calling out in panic.

"U-Underwear… M-Mine are all men’s! And the only extra clothes I have are just… a shirt…"

"I don’t care, just bring them! Or I’ll walk out like this!"

That couldn’t happen.

Ivan scrambled to the wardrobe.

He opened the drawer where his neatly folded underwear was stored.

All men’s underwear.

It wasn’t ideal, but it was the best he could do. There were no conveniently placed spare women’s clothes.

"T-This is the cleanest one… and for clothes… this…"

There was no other choice.

A clean set of underwear.

A white shirt and a pair of fitted trousers.

Reluctantly, he gathered them and approached the bathroom door, knocking hesitantly.

"H-Hey, here are your—"

Before he could place them down, the door creaked open slightly, revealing a hazy silhouette behind the steam.

With her missing arm, Carla naturally had to stand facing the door to take the clothes.

Through the mist, her figure was barely visible—but visible enough.



"Give it here and wait there. You have to dry my hair."

Ivan couldn’t respond.

The moment Carla stepped out, he instinctively lowered his head, unable to look at her directly—or properly, for that matter.

"Hurry up and hand it over. Are you giving it or not?"

"A-Ah, yeah… here."

Underwear, a shirt, and pants.

Carla snatched them from his hands and shut the door. Only then did Ivan let out a long, exhausted sigh.

‘Today is way too much…’

And she had told him to wait.

Because he had to dry her hair…

‘Was this ordeal never going to end?’

Just as Ivan sank deeper into his thoughts, the door creaked open.

"C-Carla?! What about the pants?!"

Carla stepped out, wearing the white shirt and holding the pants in one hand. Her expression was indifferent.

"They’re too big. They just slide right off. Wearing them or not makes no difference and this? It’s just like wearing shorts, so it’s fine. Now come dry my hair, I can’t do it myself."

She wiggled her empty sleeve slightly, emphasizing the obvious.

Ivan couldn’t bring himself to look directly at her as she walked toward the couch.

It was too much.

"Get up here, idiot. Who said you actually had to sleep on the floor?"

"H-How can we sleep together?"

"The bed is small, but I’m not heartless enough to kick you onto the floor without a blanket."

Carla had grumbled earlier that the bed was half the size of the one in her room back at the Cascata estate. But now she had claimed her spot.

The real issue? There was only one set of bedding.

Since this was a single-person dorm, the idea of spare bedding had never been necessary.

"If you sleep without a blanket in this weather, you’ll catch a cold and I don’t want you blaming me for it. So get up here and sleep."

"I-I won’t blame you! I won’t catch a cold!"

"Oh? Is that because you remember the last time I got sick?"

Carla squinted at him.

Ivan thought to protest—but, honestly, it wasn’t an unfair point.

"That’s not it…"

"Then stop arguing, idiot. Get up here."

"But still… It’ll be cramped."

"It’s fine, I’m small. Besides, when else will you ever get the chance to sleep next to a noble? Consider it an honor."

Ivan sighed and climbed into bed.

Carla yanked the blanket over herself with a smirk.

In contrast, Ivan exhaled another long breath.

Well, at this point, there wasn’t much of a choice.

He grabbed a rolled-up towel to use as a pillow and settled onto the bed. The mattress dipped slightly as Carla shifted beside him.

"Get some sleep. You had a long day."

She grinned.

‘Something about that smile was so unmistakably Carla,’ Ivan thought.

A brief silence followed.

‘Had she already fallen asleep?’

Ivan glanced at her, only to find her staring back at him.

"You know, now that I think about it."

"Hm?"

Caught off guard, Ivan instinctively responded.

"When we were kids, we used to play like this all the time."

Carla adjusted the blanket and muttered softly.

"I used to mess with you a lot back then. But now, I feel like I can’t, because it’d seem weird."

Ivan listened for a moment before replying.

"It’s fine. It doesn’t bother me and I doubt anyone would think it’s weird."

Carla didn’t answer right away, but beneath the covers, a small smile appeared.

"Good night, Carla."

"Yeah. Good night, idiot."

It was going to be a long night.

A very, very long night.

And it truly was.

# The Academy's Prodigy Wants to Defeat the Genius - 39

Indeed, it was a long night.

Ivan tossed and turned, unable to sleep.

Carla lay beside him, breathing softly in deep slumber, yet the actual owner of the room was restless, his mind refusing to settle.

He lay on his back, then turned to his side, then the other, then faced Carla—only to immediately flip onto his back again.

‘…Sigh.’

Maybe he should drink some water.

Careful not to wake Carla, Ivan slipped out of bed.

A pitcher sat atop the nightstand.

He poured himself a glass and still holding it, turned his gaze toward Carla.

Silver moonlight streamed through the uncovered window, casting a cold glow over her empty sleeve.

‘Is there really no way to fix it?’

Ivan’s knowledge was limited.

He had learned everything he could about magic from Albina, absorbing all kinds of information, yet he knew little about the privileges and resources available to the upper class.

‘There must be something I can do.’

He sat on the edge of the bed, absentmindedly toying with Carla’s empty sleeve. Once, a wrist would have emerged from there, fingers slipping past the cuff—but now, nothing.

‘Carla…’

Moonlight had a strange magic to it.

Even the plainest woman could look ethereal beneath its glow.

And Carla, already beautiful, seemed even more so.

As if drawn by an unseen force, Ivan’s hand slowly reached out.

When his fingers brushed against her cheek, he felt warmth, smoothness.

The curve of her nose, the soft flush of her cheeks, her lips, her jawline, her slender throat…

Something deep inside him stirred—an uneasy mix of anxiety and something darker, something smoldering like a hidden ember.

‘…Carla.’

A voice whispered from within.

By the time Ivan realized it, his hand was on her throat.

“Hah.”

Startled as if waking from a dream, he snatched his hand away.

‘What… What’s wrong with me?’

Somehow, without thinking, he had nearly wrapped his fingers around Carla’s neck.

Had he squeezed even slightly, she might have struggled to breathe.

Ivan clutched his own hands, exhaling shakily.

The carriage ride and now this…

Why did he feel this way whenever he looked at Carla? For a moment, it was as if he weren’t in control, as if something else guided his movements, compelling him to hurt her—

‘It’s just in my head…’

Shaking off the thoughts, Ivan crawled back into bed.

Tomorrow was another school day and uncomfortable as this was, he needed sleep.

As expected, when Ivan awoke to the morning light, Carla was still asleep.

It wasn’t full daylight yet—just the first soft rays of dawn creeping over the mountains. But Ivan was always up at this hour.

It was too early to head to the academy.

Still, he stretched, shaking off the stiffness from having slept awkwardly at the edge of the bed, then changed his clothes.

‘Alright, let’s get going.’

Slapping his cheeks lightly, he stepped out of the room.

Every morning, Ivan’s routine was the same—ten laps around the academy’s training field.

It was a large field and after ten laps, he would be drenched in sweat, but it was the best way to wake himself up.

"Oh, Ivan!"

Just as he was catching his breath, a familiar voice called out.

"Ah, Emil. Morning. You’re up early."

Emil von Aufstich—a young man with chestnut-colored hair and a boyish face, someone Ivan had grown close to since their first meeting.

With a broad grin, Emil jogged over.

"Yeah, I just woke up early. What were you up to?"

"Me? Just warming up with a run."

"Wow, you’re really diligent, huh?"

"Not really. You’re giving me too much credit."

Ivan waved off the praise, feeling awkward.

After all, Emil was from one of the four great noble houses.

It still felt strange that someone of his status was so casual with a commoner like Ivan.

"Want to grab breakfast together?"

It wasn’t a bad suggestion.

The dining hall opened early and he and Emil had run into each other there several times before.

But Ivan couldn’t accept the offer.

Because, in his room, there was an unexpected guest.

One who had stolen his bed and was still sleeping soundly.

"I don’t think I can. You go ahead, Emil."

"Why? Something going on?"

"Uh, well… I should probably go with Carla."

"Carla? She’s in the dorms?"

Emil’s eyes widened.

Ivan realized his mistake—but it was too late.

"Yeah, she stayed over last night because of… some stuff."

"Oh… I see. Alright then, I’ll go ahead. See you later, enjoy your day off."

Emil waved and walked off with a bright smile.

Watching him go, Ivan sighed before heading back to the dormitory.

"Unbelievable."

Seeing Carla half-draped over the edge of the bed, Ivan sighed again.

Last night, when she had walked around half-dressed after her bath, he had been mortified.

But now, with her shirt riding up, exposing her pale stomach, and her shorts bunched awkwardly, she just looked… like a dried fish on a clothesline.

"Carla, wake up. It’s morning. Time for breakfast. Carla, Carla!"

Even after shaking her multiple times, she didn’t stir.

Her chest rose and fell evenly, proving that she was, in fact, still deep asleep.

"Carla!"

Ivan yanked the blanket off Carla with a sharp tug, finally rousing her from sleep.

"Wake up, it’s morning. Let’s go get breakfast."

"Bring it here… I’ll eat in bed today…"

"Bring it? This isn’t your mansion, this is my room."

Carla blinked a few times, then again, as if her brain was rebooting. Finally, after another moment of staring blankly, she sat up—

"Help me up."

Because of her missing arm, she struggled to push herself upright, so Ivan reached out and supported her. Only then did she let out a jaw-cracking yawn.

"Ah, right. I should wash up, get my clothes ready."

And with that, she disappeared into the bathroom.

Ivan, meanwhile, was left dumbfounded.

"…What clothes? You don’t have any clothes here."

Since Carla didn’t have a change of clothes, the only solution was to borrow a spare female uniform from the dorm matron.

The matron, already feeling guilty for not preparing proper accommodations for the young lady of the Cascata family, quickly provided a clean uniform upon Ivan’s request. He managed to have it ready before Carla finished her bath.

"It’s a bit tight around the chest."

‘Well, that’s because you’re…’

Ivan wanted to say, but some instinct warned him against it.

Something about it felt like a line he shouldn’t cross.

‘Maybe it’s because I originally thought she was a guy… I don’t know where to draw the line with jokes.’

Assuming they would now head to the dining hall, Ivan stood by the door, waiting.

Instead, Carla walked toward the sitting area.

"Where are you going?"

"Where are you going? Come here and brush my hair."

"Why should I—"

"Because you’re good at it and besides, for a commoner, it’s a great honor to style a noble’s hair."

Carla smirked, shaking her head slightly for emphasis.

‘Unbelievable.’

With a deep sigh, Ivan grabbed a brush.

"Can’t say I feel honored."

"Just do a good job."

Even as he grumbled, Ivan carefully combed through her hair. It was so smooth and fine that the brush glided effortlessly through it, without a single snag.

"This brush is too stiff. Got a wider-toothed one?"

"…Why would I? Owning a brush at all is already impressive for me."

"Ugh. Fine, whatever. Still, you’re surprisingly good at this—for a commoner."

Carla grinned as she inspected his work.

Ivan could tell.

That was a smile of satisfaction.

"Not sure if that was a compliment."

"Of course, it was. Isn’t it obvious?"

"…Sure... I’ll take it that way."

Apparently content with his answer, Carla sprang to her feet.

She seemed much more composed, much more at ease than last night.

And that was a good thing, Ivan thought as he followed her out to breakfast.

The moment they entered the dining hall, a voice greeted them.

"Well, well, if it isn’t Carla von Scha—oh, no, that’s not right. Carla della Cascata. I must say, I’m deeply indebted to you after yesterday."

Carla’s face twisted the moment she saw him.

Lucas, on the other hand, was all smiles, utterly unfazed by her expression.

"Didn’t get enough of a beating yesterday? Want another?"

"I must say, the sight of you falling over was quite memorable. Carla della Cascata, it must have been quite the revelation—realizing you’re weaker than me."

Lucas grinned mockingly and took a step closer.

"Yes, I’ve come to terms with it. Carla della Cascata, I now understand that I’m stronger than you."

He smirked, stepping even closer.

Carla bit her lip, trying to swallow her fury.

But before she could respond, Ivan moved in front of her.

"That’s enough, Lucas."