# The Academy's Prodigy Wants to Defeat the Genius - 40

No matter how arrogant a woman may be, marriage changes everything.

Lucas knew this well.

That was why he longed for his marriage to Carla—even more so because of her beauty.

She was the kind of woman that made men turn their heads, her elegance undeniable, her figure a testament to femininity.

To have that in his grasp, to know that future was all but assured, made waiting two mere months bearable.

"Hey, commoner. Enough playing childhood friends, I am soon to be Carla’s husband."

Lucas tapped Ivan’s shoulder dismissively—or at least, he tried to.

But before his hand could make contact, Ivan’s fingers clamped around his wrist, holding him in place without the slightest movement.

"Not yet and it’s not going to happen."

He didn’t know the full story.

But he knew Carla wouldn’t want that future.

"You have no say in this. This is a marriage between two of the Empire’s great houses—Cascata and Scheiskel."

"There’s a condition, isn’t there? And it hasn’t been met yet."

"It’s a meaningless condition, it will happen regardless."

"That remains to be seen."

Lucas tried to pull his wrist free.

But Ivan’s grip was like an iron vice, tightening until a dull ache began to throb at the joint.

"Let go."

"Pull away if you can."

Carla’s gaze shifted.

She had been glaring at Lucas, but now her attention was on Ivan.

‘That voice… Not the playful, lighthearted tone from this morning, but something cold—frigid.’

"Commoner. I won’t tolerate further insolence. Step aside, I have business with Carla."

"That won’t happen, this is the Academy. Your status as a noble means nothing here. You have no authority over me."

Carla wasn’t even looking at Lucas anymore.

All she could focus on was Ivan’s back.

"Ivan… Move."

Her voice was strained, as if forcing herself to say it.

Even speaking to him now took effort—

But she managed it.

Ivan turned to her.

His eyes were the same.

Carla exhaled, relieved.

"Lucas."

She stepped forward, addressing him directly now.

"I may have fallen yesterday, but you ended up on the ground too. Kiara saw it."

At her words, Kiara quickly averted her gaze.

"I will not marry you, Lucas. You can dream all you want. It will never happen."

Her voice was quiet, calmer than usual. Likely because Ivan’s presence behind her made standing firm much easier.

Lucas scowled, frustration clear on his face.

Like a child throwing a tantrum because his plans weren’t going his way.

The sight amused Carla.

In that moment, an idea came to her—

A way to land a blow so deep, so irreversible, that neither Lucas nor Enrico would ever recover from it.

She smiled.

Yes.

This would do.

Stepping closer, she leaned in, whispering into his ear just loud enough for him alone to hear—

"That commoner? He was the first man to spend the night with me."

"…What."

Lucas’ eyes widened in fury.

In the Empire, a woman’s most prized virtue was purity.

A wife was expected to belong to her husband alone. Though Carla’s words held a significant misunderstanding, Lucas only saw them as absolute truth.

"Y-You—what did you just say?!"

Carla walked past him.

Lucas, now blinded with rage, reached for her shoulder—

"Now, now. Let’s not make a mess."

Just before his hand could grasp her, a massive hand seized his wrist.

"Starting a fight this early in the morning will just kick up dust. If you really want a brawl, at least eat first and digest. I’ll even be your opponent."

Carla turned.

Liam was standing there.

His already intimidating face twisted further as he stared Lucas down.

"Look, Carla might have a temper, but she’s still my classmate. If you want to pick a fight, you can go through me first."

Lucas glared at him.

Liam Foucault…

"…Carla, the head of Cascata won’t overlook this."

"Oh, that’s great news. Make sure he doesn’t. Pass that message along, will you? Let’s go, Ivan. Liam, you too."

A satisfied smirk curled on Carla’s lips.

She led the way into the dining hall.

Before following, Liam paused, turning back to Lucas with a grin.

"Hey—Lucas, was it?"

"What?!"

Lucas snapped, his anger barely contained.

Liam smirked.

"Don’t push your luck. Keep running your mouth and you might find yourself missing a few limbs. Got it?"

"You—you damn—"

Grinding his teeth, Lucas seethed as Liam strolled after Carla.

"What do you want, commoner?"

Standing in his way was Ivan.

His cold, piercing gaze bore into Lucas.

"…You should be careful with your games, mongrel."

Lucas couldn’t believe what he had just heard.

It was the first time in his life he had been insulted like that—

Mongrel.

"You—you dare—?! A lowly commoner—?!"

Ivan moved.

His hand shot forward, gripping Lucas’ collar and yanking him forward, until their faces were nearly touching.

Cold, blue eyes locked onto his.

A chilling aura seeped from Ivan’s body, coiling around Lucas like a constricting snake.

"To me, all of you are nothing but mongrels. I’ll let it slide for Carla’s sake—this time. But there won’t be a second. Got that?"

Ivan bared his teeth in a grin.

A flash of sharp canines.

Lucas broke into a cold sweat, unable to speak.

But it didn’t last—

Summoning every ounce of pride, Lucas forced a sneer onto his lips.

"A commoner dares to talk big just because this is the Academy. Your place won’t change, don’t think this is over."

But his voice trembled.

Ivan noticed.

His grin widened.

Lucas froze.

"Do your best, mongrel."

With a dismissive pat on his shoulder, Ivan turned away, following Carla into the dining hall.

As he walked, the icy smile faded—

Returning to the warm, familiar expression he always wore.

"It’s almost certain."

Behind the dining hall.

A man in a shabby janitor’s uniform crouched low, muttering to himself.

A few steps away, a woman with black hair and burning red eyes leaned against the wall.

"So that girl is the reason for the resonance increase?"

"Yes."

"Come on, Mercurio… Are you really saying the resonance is rising just because of some girl?"

"Didn’t the Lord say so himself? He suspected she might be the key."

"The Lord is always so— No, never mind. So basically, when she gets emotional, his true nature comes out?"

"That’s right."

"Then we need to report this to Lord Cascata."

At her words, Mercurio ran a hand through his hair in frustration.

The strands that had concealed one of his eyes shifted, revealing an unsightly, bloodshot gaze with bulging veins.

"You know we can’t just report a problem without a solution, Venere. We need to figure out how to raise the resonance—how to keep her close to him."

"Hmm…"

Venere stroked her chin in thought.

She didn’t have an immediate solution either, but then—

"Ah. So all we need to do is make sure emotions run high, right?"

"Yes."

"What else makes emotions run high between a man and a woman?"

"I wouldn’t know."

"Come on, when it comes to making emotions run high between a man and a woman, there’s only one thing."

Mercurio turned his head to look at her.

Venere formed a circle with her thumb and forefinger, then slid the index finger of her other hand back and forth through the opening.

"This."

Mercurio grimaced at the sight.

"…Stop spouting nonsense."

"It’s not nonsense! Nothing stirs emotions like this. It’s foolproof, you wouldn’t know because you’ve never been in a relationship."

"…You talk as if you have."

Venere shut her mouth.

# The Academy's Prodigy Wants to Defeat the Genius - 41

The dining hall was gradually filling up as breakfast time went into full swing.

Having arrived after Lucas and his little spectacle, Carla and Ivan had hoped to sit with Liam or Emil, but unfortunately, there were no available seats.

In the end, they had to split up—Carla and Ivan together, while Liam and Emil sat elsewhere.

‘Perhaps that was for the best,’ Carla thought.

"You mixed it well."

"It’s just salad. Just eat."

Carla picked up her fork and looked at the bowl Ivan had prepared.

Breakfast was light, mostly fiber-rich vegetables—just the way Carla insisted on having it. Salad with a variety of dressings, an odd quirk of hers.

"Why do you have to drizzle this over everything?"

"Because your commoner palate doesn’t get it, idiot. The acidity from the lemon—"

Ivan, barely paying attention, sucked his fingers clean.

"Ugh, sour…"

"Why are you sucking your fingers? That’s so uncivilized."

"I wanted to know what it tasted like."

"You couldn’t just… taste the salad?"

Carla had to have lemon juice on her salad.

She insisted that the fresh acidity elevated the flavor and despite her current state, she stubbornly stuck to it—so Ivan had squeezed the lemon for her.

"By the way, Carla."

Carla chewed on her salad, glancing at him as if to say, What?

Ivan hesitated, wondering if now was the right time to ask—

"…When are you going back to the estate?"

"Mmm."

She chewed, swallowed, then answered.

"I’m not."

"…You’re staying in the dorms?"

Truth be told, Ivan was exhausted after just one night with Carla.

He’d never spent this much time this close to a girl in his life—not unless he counted his younger sister.

And even then, that was different.

"No."

"…Then?"

"I’ll keep staying in your room."

Ivan was at a loss for words.

He blinked at Carla, his mouth hanging slightly open, unsure if he had misheard her.

"First, as you saw earlier, I can’t go back to the estate with that vermin around. Second, I need someone to help me with daily tasks and third…"

She hesitated, clearing her throat a few times before speaking.

"…Like it or not, you’re the only one I trust here."

"What about Regina—?"

"Are you stupid? Do you think she, a noble, would happily become my attendant like you?"

With one eye half-open in an unimpressed glare, Carla shut down the suggestion before he could even finish.

And to be fair—she had a point.

"Which is why staying with you is the best option. Besides, you don’t even see me as a woman."

Carla had once been Carlo and she still rejected the idea of being treated as a woman.

But everyone—her father Enrico, her uncle Carlo, Lucas—saw her only as a woman. Even if it was her own doing, she hated it.

"I-I guess that’s true."

"Then it’s settled. I’ll maintain boundaries, don’t worry."

With Carla throwing words at him faster than he could process them, Ivan had no way to counter.

There was nothing he could say—not anything that would actually change her mind, anyway.

"If you’re done eating, let’s go."

"Huh? You still have half your salad left."

Carla’s bowl was still half full, whereas Ivan had already cleaned his plate.

"Who finishes every last bite? Nobles don’t do that, leaving food behind is proper etiquette. Let’s go—I need to buy clothes."

Ivan thought that was the most ridiculous etiquette he had ever heard.

Clothes were the most urgent matter.

As she rode in the carriage toward the Academy’s shopping district, Carla thought back on the earlier events.

‘That was so satisfying.’

Lucas’s twisted, furious expression—what a sight.

She had merely shared a bed with Ivan. That was all, yet a single well-placed phrase had sent Lucas spiraling.

‘Men really are all the same. Always thinking in one direction.

…Then again, I was the same when I was a man.’

As she mused, the carriage finally arrived at the shopping district.

The moment it stopped, the hood was pulled back and passengers began to disembark. Carla stepped down with them.

"That was the worst ride."

"It’s just a carriage. What did you expect?"

"How do people even ride these things? My backside is going to be ruined."

"You're a noblewoman. Maybe avoid saying things like that in public?"

"There’s hardly anyone listening."

Ivan glanced around.

Not only was the area far from empty, but it was bustling with people. Judging by their modest clothing, most of them were common folk working in the shopping district. In other words, Carla didn’t even consider these people worth acknowledging.

"…You really are something else."

"What now?"

"Do commoners not count as people to you?"

"Of course they do. They’re just people who have no influence, that’s all."

She hadn’t changed at all.

As a child—when Ivan had still known her as Carlo—she had been exactly like this.

As the eldest son of a grand noble family, her pride had been sky-high. Even though they called each other friends, she had treated Ivan more like a servant.

Back then, Ivan hadn’t really cared. But now, at twenty, he couldn’t help but feel that this attitude would become a problem. Not that he could do much about it.

"Lead the way, Ivan. I need a uniform."

"Huh? You want me to show you around?"

"Obviously."

Carla looked at him like he had just asked the stupidest question in the world.

The problem was, this was Ivan’s first time in the shopping district too. He had no idea where anything was.

But neither did Carla.

"I’ve never been here before either, how would I know where to go?"

"You should’ve done your research. Preparation is a virtue commoners are supposed to have."

Carla grinned and strode ahead.

Or at least, she tried.

Despite her best efforts, Carla couldn’t find a clothing store she liked.

That was to be expected—she had never bought clothes from a shop before.

Back at the capital, all her clothing was tailor-made. The only ready-made clothes she had ever received were her Academy uniforms.

It was inevitable, then, that she would fail to find a suitable store. Eventually, she and Ivan settled on the most respectable-looking one they could find.

"I can’t believe I’m buying clothes from here…"

"It’s a good store, Carla. Don’t be like that, you’re making me embarrassed just standing next to you. I’m a commoner too, remember?"

Still grumbling in front of the shop, Carla glanced at Ivan.

"Even so, you’re at least—hm. Never mind, let’s just go in. While we’re at it, you should get a spare uniform too."

"Huh? I don’t really need—hey, wait, I’m coming!"

Ignoring him completely, Carla marched inside.

By the time Ivan caught up, she was already standing before the shop’s manager.

"Carla della Cascata."

"Ah, the Lady of Cascata."

The manager was quick on the uptake.

And being situated within the Academy, he was quick on rumors too.

Even though he had never seen her before, the moment he noticed the empty left sleeve of her uniform, he knew she was the real Carla della Cascata.

"I need Academy uniforms. Two for me, two for him. One off-the-rack, one custom-made. Deliver them as soon as possible. Can you do it?"

"Carla, I really don’t need another—"

"Be quiet and accept it."

As Carla and Ivan bickered, the manager quickly calculated his options.

This shop usually didn’t offer deliveries. Clients were expected to pick up their orders once they were ready.

But telling a grand noblewoman to come fetch her own clothes was an excellent way to lose her business entirely.

"Of course, Lady Cascata. We can have them delivered to your estate. It isn’t far."

"Not the estate, send them to the dormitory. Under Ivan Contadino’s name."

"Ivan Contadino… Ah, so to your attendant?"

Carla suddenly went silent.

The manager and Ivan both turned to look at her, puzzled.

Her face hardened in an instant, her expression turning cold.

"Ivan. We’re leaving, let’s find another shop."

"Huh? Carla, what—?"

Still scowling, Carla answered.

"A merchant without tact is not a real merchant. You’re a commoner, not my servant. There’s a difference. That was insulting, we’re leaving."

Without giving them time to react, she turned and strode toward the door.

"Carla, wait. Isn’t that an overreaction? Maybe it was just a misunderstanding."

Ivan hurried after her, glancing back at the manager awkwardly.

She shook her head.

"One mistake tells you everything you need to know."

Ivan stared at her for a moment before sighing and shrugging.

Ignoring the manager, who looked ready to cry, he muttered, "…Sometimes, I have no idea how to keep up with you."

Carla’s expression finally relaxed.

Then she smirked, playful once more.

"That’s why you need to get used to it. If you want an easier life, you should adapt to me."

# The Academy's Prodigy Wants to Defeat the Genius - 42

‘Wouldn't it have been easier working at the potion shop instead?’

Back then, as long as he did what he was told, he could get through the work and at least there was an end to it.

Although he wasn’t carrying any physical burden now, the heavy atmosphere weighed down on his shoulders, making it feel as though he were.

"I think we’ve bought just about everything we need."

"Ah, oh, really?"

Only then did Ivan feel like he could breathe again.

Was it because Carla was a noble? Or was it just because she was a lady? Ivan couldn’t quite figure it out.

For example, when she looked at blouses, to him, they all looked exactly the same. But Carla would hold up two identical ones and demand he choose which was better.

They looked the same, so what was he supposed to choose?

And even if he picked one at random, she would then ask why he chose it, forcing him to come up with a reason on the spot.

"You really have no eye for details, do you?"

"I really don’t."

"Let’s just drop it."

Carla didn’t consider herself picky at all.

After all, she was a noble.

For nobles, choosing clothing had to be meticulous from start to finish. A single flaw in one’s outfit could spread through high society like wildfire.

It was simply unavoidable. Even so, she might have taken it to the extreme, but she never once thought there was anything wrong with that.

"What’s next?"

"I was thinking we should rest for a bit. My legs are getting tired."

"Right?"

The sun had already passed its peak, meaning they had been walking around for quite some time.

As Carla sat on a bench near a fountain, massaging her thighs, Ivan stood still, lost in thought.

"Why aren’t you sitting? Aren’t your legs tired?"

"Huh? Oh, it’s not that…"

He must have been deep in thought because Carla’s voice snapped him out of his daze. He quickly walked over and sat beside her.

"I feel like I’m forgetting something."

"You forgot to eat."

"That too, but I feel like I forgot something really important."

"If it was really important, you wouldn’t have forgotten it. If you did, then it wasn’t that important."

Carla said this while pulling her legs up onto the bench.

Then, she lightly tapped Ivan’s shoulder and nodded toward the ground.

"What?"

"Massage my legs."

Ivan stared at her, dumbfounded.

Meanwhile, Carla gazed back at him with innocent eyes, as if she didn’t understand why he was so shocked.

"Why?"

"…No, I mean, you’re a noblewoman. Isn’t it inappropriate to ask a man to massage your legs?"

"First, I know you don’t see me as a woman. Second, my arms are like this."

Carla motioned toward her left arm.

The empty sleeve flapped in the wind.

"…You were the one who asked for a massage."

With a resigned sigh, Ivan crouched down in front of the bench.

Only then did he properly see Carla’s legs.

They were well-toned, befitting a martial artist.

Smooth like any noblewoman’s, yet firm and brimming with strength. Her thighs were well-developed, a testament to her training. From her calves to her thighs, her muscles were defined but not overly bulky, maintaining an unmistakable femininity.

Hesitating slightly, Ivan reached out and gently pressed her calf.

He started by lightly kneading it, gradually increasing the pressure.

"Ah, that… that feels good…"

Carla let out a long sigh, her voice filled with satisfaction.

Ivan, relieved by her reaction, carefully massaged her calves, his hands moving with deliberate care.

"Hng…"

Her legs weren’t just soft; they had a firmness that made them pleasant to touch.

As Ivan continued, he found himself admiring the curves of her legs—the defined yet graceful thighs, the slightly flushed knees and the slender ankles that led down to her small feet, which fit neatly in his palm.

Her toes curled slightly every time he pressed down, making it oddly satisfying to touch.

The smooth skin beneath his palms.

The way her flesh resisted slightly before yielding under his touch.

Everywhere he massaged, her skin turned a light shade of pink.

"Haa… Hoo…"

Each movement of his hands elicited soft, melting sighs from Carla.

But Ivan didn’t even hear her. He was too lost in the texture of her skin, absorbed in the simple act of massaging her legs.

"Haah, really… You’re surprisingly good at this. Is it because you’re a commoner?"

Carla cracked open one eye, looking down at him.

"How does a commoner get this good? Were you a caretaker as a child?"

Ivan tilted his head.

"I just got used to it. I had a younger sister."

Carla fell silent for a moment.

"Still, I didn’t expect you to be this good… I’m impressed."

Instead of responding, Ivan continued kneading her calf.

Her legs were truly pleasant to touch.

Flawless, soft and leaving behind a faint, rosy imprint wherever he pressed.

Before he knew it, he had become absorbed in massaging her legs.

At first, he had only meant to relieve her muscle tension, but by now, he was enjoying it just as much.

"Excuse me. Excuse me."

Ivan finally snapped out of his daze when someone tapped his shoulder.

Turning to the side, he saw a plump woman with a stern expression glaring at him.

"Uh, what is it?"

"Young man."

"Yes?"

"I don’t mean to intrude, but don’t you think this kind of public display is inappropriate for broad daylight?"

"…Excuse me?"

‘What was she talking about?’

Completely confused, Ivan looked at her, waiting for clarification. Instead of answering, she simply scowled and pointed at Carla.

"…Ah."

So that’s how this looked.

Only then did Ivan realize what was going on.



Carla had completely melted.

Slumped against the bench as if she were about to sink into it, her flushed face resembled a field bathed in the sunset before an autumn harvest.

Her arms hung limply at her sides and with her eyes closed, she let out deep, heated sighs. To any observer, she looked less like someone who had just received a massage and more like someone who had indulged in an intimate affair.

"I-I'm sorry."

"If you're in such a hurry, there's an inn down that alley. I tried to be understanding since you're young, but this is too much."

"N-no, it wasn’t like that… I’m really sorry."

"Everyone’s staring, just take your girlfriend and go."

Only then did Ivan look around.

People had stopped in their tracks, openly watching them. The men, in particular, were fixated on Carla.

Completely defenseless, slumped over with her face flushed and breathing heavily—her appearance was powerful enough to turn heads, even from Ivan’s perspective.

"Carla, Carla! Snap out of it!"

"Mmm, huh? Why’d you stop… Keep going…"

"No, this isn’t the time for that. Get up, Carla."

"If not now, then when…"

"Just pull yourself together…"

Carla was still dazed, while the surrounding crowd—mostly women—glared daggers at them.

With no other choice, Ivan hoisted Carla onto his back.

She was light due to her missing arm, but still, carrying her, he quickly fled the plaza.

Though they had shopped plenty, almost everything had been delivered to the dormitory, leaving them unburdened. That was a relief, at least.

Ivan carried Carla to a secluded table and set her down.

The weight of her chest pressing against his back, the soft sensation of her hips brushing his palms, the warm breath tickling his ear…

'Why is she so sensitive?'

It was baffling.

Carla was still out of it.

Did his massage really feel that good? Ivan glanced down at his hands in confusion.

Even though he had massaged his younger sister countless times, he had never gotten such a reaction before.

Carla’s response was undeniably strange.

Ivan found himself staring at her unconsciously.

Her trembling lashes remained shut tight.

Her arms lay limp, leaving her utterly defenseless.

Her legs were slightly parted, revealing long, pristine skin beneath her skirt.

'…What am I thinking? Carla is just a friend, a friend I need to help.'

But his heart said otherwise.

He couldn’t tear his eyes away. His gaze was locked on Carla’s vulnerable form, unable to look anywhere else.

—Strangle her.

'…Huh?'

An unfamiliar voice.

Cold, dark, as if echoing from the depths of an abyss.

—Wrap your hands around her throat and whisper in her ear.

—Mock her for relying on a mere commoner.

—Tell her that without you, she’s nothing—just a noble with one arm.

—Give back the humiliation and disgrace you endured.

The voice was monotonous yet resounding, like an echo reverberating through his skull, pressing against his nerves.

Ivan’s fingers trembled.

He felt an inexplicable urge to clench his hands.

'Why… Why am I thinking this?'

But his body didn’t listen.

Slowly, without hesitation, his hand reached for Carla’s throat.

A shudder ran through Ivan.

He knew he shouldn’t, yet the impulse consumed him.

As if drawn by an invisible force, his fingers inched toward Carla’s pale neck.

In that unknown madness—

“Ivan, Ivan—”

"…What are you doing?"

A voice, low and subdued.

Husky yet clear.

But fragile, quivering.

Carla had opened her eyes at some point.

Her gaze locked onto Ivan and in those faintly trembling eyes, there was a flicker of fear.

# The Academy's Prodigy Wants to Defeat the Genius - 43

The carriage was filled with a heavy silence.

On the way there, they had sat close together, but on the way back to the academy, they sat apart, stealing cautious glances at each other.

Neither spoke first.

Carla couldn't believe Ivan's excuse that there had been something on her neck.

And Ivan couldn't understand what that impulse had been, nor what it meant.

With unspoken thoughts weighing on them, the two sat in the swaying carriage, facing opposite directions in an awkward atmosphere.

'What exactly was Ivan doing?'

The thought suddenly gnawed at Carla.

The real reason she was sitting so far from him now wasn’t anything else—it was fear.

The expression and gaze she had seen when she woke up.

It was the same kind that had left deep scars in her childhood, the very embodiment of terror she had spent years trying to escape.

‘Had all that effort truly been meaningless?’

Carla cautiously turned to look at Ivan.

Sitting by the window, staring outside, he looked just like the Ivan she knew—

Clatter!

With a loud noise, the carriage jolted.

The sudden movement made the seats shake and Carla tilted to the left.

Instinctively, she reached out her left arm—

But all it did was slice through empty air.

The arm that should have braced against the seat, supporting her weight, had long been lost to her.

'Ah…'

The carriage floor loomed closer.

Carla squeezed her eyes shut, bracing for impact, hoping she wouldn’t get seriously hurt—

But instead of pain, she felt something soft against her face.

The touch of smooth fabric.

And a familiar scent washing over her.

"Carla, are you okay?"

A gentle voice made her instinctively look up.

First, she saw the academy uniform and as her gaze traveled upward, she met Ivan’s worried face.

"Are you okay? Did you get hurt?"

"Wh-when did you…"

"When? Just now."

Ivan smiled.

Looking down at Carla, who was nestled in his arms, he smiled.

Strangely, at that moment, Carla felt that Ivan was still Ivan.

‘Ivan being Ivan’—it was a ridiculous thought. But that’s what she thought nonetheless.

The Ivan she had always known was this Ivan.

The source of her inescapable inferiority complex.

Yet, in this moment, he was the one providing her with comfort.

"Are you hurt anywhere?"

"…I’m fine. Let go of me."

But she couldn’t stay like this forever.

And without both arms, she couldn’t even push him away.

"Okay, lean on me for a bit."

Ivan helped her sit up properly and then sat beside her.

The carriage still swayed and slowly, Carla leaned against Ivan.

Inside the jolting carriage, silence remained.

The other passengers, having finished their business, were resting with their heads propped against the windows, dozing off. The only ones still awake were Ivan and Carla.

"…Thanks, for earlier."

Carla spoke quietly.

If she didn’t say it now, she might never get the chance.

"Hm? For what?"

"Just now, if you hadn’t caught me, I would’ve been hurt pretty badly."

Ivan scratched his head with an awkward smile.

"Ah, that? That’s just something anyone would do, I didn’t want you to get hurt."

Carla fell silent for a moment and turned her head slightly.

"…You don’t want to get hurt either. So why go that far?"

"Carla."

Ivan’s voice grew softer.

"I just want you to be okay. Isn't that reason enough?"

"That’s all?"

"That’s all. Do I need another reason?"

Ivan smiled warmly.

Carla didn’t reply.

She simply stayed there, leaning slightly against Ivan, gazing out the carriage window.

"…You were with Carla?"

Looking at Regina’s stunned expression, Ivan suddenly realized what had been bothering him, the source of his lingering unease.

—You have to meet me tomorrow, okay? I'll bring the potions with me.

—Yeah, I got it. So don’t worry too much.

Regina had told him to be there.

Ivan had promised he would come.

But now Regina was standing here, waiting for him.

And Ivan had completely forgotten about it.

"Regina, I—"

"You were so busy with Carla that you forgot all about me, didn’t you?"

The bundle in her arms was likely filled with the potions they had bought together.

Holding it tightly as if it were something precious, Regina bit her lip, her shoulders trembling.

Her eyes wavered and tears welled up, soon overflowing and trailing down her cheeks.

"Regina, that’s not—"

"Don't even try. You were with Carla and forgot all about me!"

Regina stepped forward and shoved the bundle into Ivan’s arms.

Caught off guard, Ivan instinctively clutched it, reaching out to stop her, but she turned away before he could react and ran off without looking back.

"R-Regina!"

Carla let out a deep sigh.

‘Was he seriously this dense?’

At this point, it was more absurd that he hadn’t figured it out yet.

With no choice, Carla walked up to Ivan.

"Give that to me and go after her."

"A-are you sure?"

"Forget about me, just hand it over and go after Regina."

Carla took the bundle from Ivan’s arms as if snatching it away.

Even with just one arm, it wasn’t too heavy to carry.

"Hurry up, Regina was crying. Go and calm her down."

"T-thanks! I’ll go now!"

"And while you’re at it, have dinner with her!"

As Ivan dashed off, Carla shouted after him.

Whether he heard her or not, she didn’t particularly care.

'I guess I'll be eating dinner alone.'

Holding the bundle, Carla slowly made her way to the dormitory.

She couldn't walk quickly—her body’s balance was off, making it difficult to pick up speed.

'If I run into that worm, it'll be a disaster.'

That would be the worst possible situation.

Right now, both of her arms were effectively sealed away.

"C-Carla…"

A hesitant voice made Carla tilt her head slightly in its direction.

The long golden hair was reminiscent of Lucas, but the nervous fidgeting of his hands was unmistakably Emil.

"Emil?"

"Y-yeah, you’re coming back from somewhere?"

"Yeah, something like that. Actually, this is perfect timing. Can you help me?"

Carla lifted the bundle slightly as she spoke.

It wasn’t unbearably heavy, but carrying it all the way to the dormitory with just one arm was proving to be a bit of a struggle.

"Of course! I’ll carry it!"

Emil quickly rushed over and took the bundle from Carla.

As they walked side by side, Carla noticed how short Emil was.

At first, she thought they were about the same height, but looking closer, he seemed even smaller than her.

"Emil, your surname is Aufstich, right?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah. Aufstich…"

"Aufstich…"

The Aufstich family was renowned for summoning magic.

Not just summoning—some had even advanced their craft to the level of divine descent magic, allowing them to manifest deities themselves.

Of course, the price for such magic was immense, making it something rarely used.

Perhaps because of this cost, the head of the family tended to pass away earlier than those of other noble houses.

"Instructor Lorenzo told you that you should start learning descent magic as soon as possible."

"He did…"

"How’s that going?"

At Carla’s question, Emil’s face turned red and he fell silent.

That alone was enough of an answer, so Carla didn’t press further.

Being born into a prestigious magic family didn’t necessarily mean one was talented in magic.

In fact, there were plenty of cases where they weren’t.

Perhaps Carla herself was an exception for mastering thunder magic so diligently.

"Well… it’s just… you know. By the way, how’s your arm?"

"My arm?"

‘So, he wanted to change the subject.’

Carla immediately caught on but didn’t call him out on it.

Magic was always like that.

It rarely worked as one wished—it was frustrating, something Carla understood well.

"My arm… well, it’s not fine, but it is what it is."

"Have you gotten used to it?"

"There's nothing to get used to."

Exactly—there was nothing to get used to.

Just seeing her empty left sleeve flutter in the wind was enough to remind her, whether she liked it or not.

"Wait a second, Carla."

Emil suddenly stopped walking and set the bundle down.

Carla halted as well, watching him curiously as he reached for her empty sleeve.

"What are you doing?"

"It keeps flapping in the wind… It must be annoying. Can I adjust it for you?"

"…I don’t know what you’re planning, but go ahead."

Carla decided to observe what he was trying to do.

Instead of anything complex, Emil simply folded the excess fabric over itself several times before tying it into a neat knot.

With the added weight, the sleeve no longer fluttered in the wind.

"It kept catching the wind and people were staring… I thought it might make you uncomfortable. This way, it won’t bother you as much."

Emil spoke carefully, his expression uncertain, like a nervous puppy waiting for approval.

"I just thought… maybe if it was tied up, you wouldn’t have to think about it so much. Does it feel okay?"

Carla looked at him for a moment.

‘Why was he being so cautious about something so small?’

Then, she glanced down at the knotted sleeve.

It added some weight—not much, but enough to feel different.

After all, how long had it been since she lost her arm? The sensation of even a slight weight there felt foreign.

Still, it was much better than having it constantly flapping in the wind.

"Yeah, this is much better. Thanks, Emil."

"It’s nothing. I’m just glad you’re okay with it."

A sheepish grin spread across Emil’s face, the setting sun casting a warm glow behind him.

"You’re more thoughtful than I expected."

"Nah… I just figured, we’re classmates. We have to look out for each other."

Emil smiled awkwardly.

‘Classmates.

Classmates…’

It was a strangely unfamiliar word.

Carla mouthed the word a few times.

Yet, it still didn’t feel natural.

# The Academy's Prodigy Wants to Defeat the Genius - 44

"Regina!"

Catching up to Regina wasn’t difficult for Ivan.

It didn’t take long before he reached her and grabbed her arm, stopping her in her tracks.

"Regina, I’m sorry. I’m really sorry!"

Anyone looking at the situation could tell that Ivan was at fault.

Regina had asked him to meet her and he had promised he would.

Even though circumstances had come up, they weren’t urgent enough to justify breaking his promise. More importantly, Ivan had completely forgotten about it.

So, there was no doubt—this was his mistake.

"Regina, I’m truly sorry. Please look at me, okay?"

Despite Ivan’s desperate plea, Regina didn’t turn around.

She stood there, facing away, with his hand still gripping her wrist.

Growing anxious, Ivan moved in front of her, looking into her face.

"…Don’t look at me, idiot."

"I’m sorry, Regina. Okay?"

Tears trickled down Regina’s cheeks.

In truth, she had been waiting for him at the station for a long time.

She had repeatedly looked toward the dormitory, hoping he would arrive.

She had clutched the bundle of potions meant for him, holding it close as if it were the most precious thing in the world.

And yet, the only sight that greeted her was Ivan stepping off a carriage—with Carla.

"Do you know… how long I waited for you?"

Ivan was at a loss for words.

He didn’t know what to say.

"I kept waiting, wondering when you’d come…"

Regina wiped her tears with her sleeve.

Ivan let go of her hand, standing there helplessly, unable to say anything.

"…I’m sorry, Regina. I really… I’m really sorry."

All he could do was apologize.

He had no idea how to make it up to her or what to say to comfort her.

Regina sniffled and wiped the last of her tears away, but she couldn’t bring herself to smile.

She wanted to be angry—she had planned to be furious when he finally showed up.

She wanted to scold him for making her wait so long, to demand why he was late.

Slapping him might be too much, but at the very least, she had wanted to express her frustration.

Yet, seeing Ivan so desperate, all that anger seemed to fade like dust blown away by the wind.

"What were you doing with Carla?"

Of all the things to say, that was what came out.

Regina sighed at herself—but it was the question that bothered her the most.

Why had they arrived together?

"W-well…"

Ivan hesitated, fumbling for words, which only irritated Regina further.

Her puffed-out cheeks reflected her growing frustration.

"…Were you on a date?"

"N-no! It wasn’t like that! A date? That’s ridiculous—"

"Then why were you together? That carriage was coming from the commercial district."

"Well, Carla didn’t have a uniform, so we went to buy one and some… undergarments…"

"…What?"

Regina’s eyes widened in shock.

‘Why didn’t Carla have a uniform? And why did she need to buy undergarments?’

"So tell me—why did she need to buy those? And more importantly, why were you there with her?"

"Ah, well… because Carla ran away from home. You already know that."

"Yeah and? She said she’d be staying at the dormitory. You and Carla left first."

A hint of coldness seeped into Regina’s voice.

Ivan realized he might have said something wrong, but instinctively knew he absolutely shouldn’t mention that Carla was staying in his room.

"Since Carla’s staying at the dorm, she didn’t have any clothes or necessities. So I went with her. You know how Carla is—she doesn’t really have friends. Since her arm makes things difficult, I figured I’d help."

"Ah… so that’s how it was."

Regina finally seemed convinced.

But something still felt off.

She couldn’t shake the feeling that Ivan was keeping something from her.

Something about this just didn’t sit right.

Even so, she forced herself to brush it aside, stepping beside Ivan.

"Let’s just go, did you eat lunch with Carla?"

"Now that you mention it, I didn’t."

Only then did Ivan realize how hungry he was.

As soon as he thought about it, an intense hunger gnawed at him and he instinctively rubbed his stomach with a sigh.

"Well, whatever. Let’s just go. The cafeteria will be serving dinner soon. Eat with me, okay? That’s not too much to ask, is it?"

"Of course not. Why would it be?"

At last, Regina smiled.

Relief washed over her—finally, she could spend time with Ivan.

"Carla didn’t eat either, should we ask her to come?"

“...”

Regina’s smile instantly vanished.

"…Actually, now that I think about it, I did mess up, so you and I should eat together."

Regina’s bright smile returned.

Ivan, however, found himself unable to smile back.

"…Even a southern bumpkin dares to look down on me. Tch."

Lucas clicked his tongue harshly as he stared out the window.

Who was he, if not the eldest son of the Scheiskehl family, the second pillar of the empire?

Though the Cascata family was a formidable wall in his way, once he married Carla and dealt with Fabio, Cascata would eventually be his as well.

The man who would control both pillars of the empire found the current situation utterly distasteful.

"That commoner is just as infuriating."

To think he had the audacity to call him a mongrel.

Unforgivable.

Yet at that moment, that mere commoner—Ivan—had carried an overwhelming presence, one that even Lucas couldn’t ignore.

His aura, his momentum, even the pressure he exuded.

But for Lucas to acknowledge feeling intimidated by a lowly commoner? Impossible.

Knock, knock.

"Who is it?"

“Here to clean the room.”

A low male voice.

Irritated, Lucas snapped back.

"What kind of nonsense is this? Do you have any idea what time it is? I don’t need any cleaning, so get lost!"

“Ahh, I see, yes. In that case, I’ll be coming in.”

"I said get the hell—what?"

Lucas glared at the door in disbelief.

He had clearly told them to leave, yet the door opened and a man stepped inside.

Lucas scowled and barked again.

"The patriarch of Scheiskehl is a far more dignified man. Restrain."

Lucas tried to shout, but his voice stopped short.

It wasn’t just him—the entire surrounding space seemed to be weighed down by an invisible force.

Realizing the danger, Lucas swiftly formed a hand sign.

If he could channel his mana, he could form magic bullets at his fingertips—

But nothing happened.

"W-what is this?!"

Panic set in as he tried again.

Yet the mana that should have flowed from his fingers was trapped, as if blocked by some unseen force.

"Oh my, does our pampered young master not know this spell?"

The scruffy-looking janitor closed the door behind him, flashing a twisted smile.

His left eye was pitch black, like a polished glass bead, while his right eye—partially obscured by his messy hair—gleamed with an eerie red light.

"…Who the hell are you?"

"No need for you to know."

"You’re using dark magic… Kiara!"

Lucas shouted Kiara’s name.

As his attendant and protector, Kiara was admitted to the academy alongside him. She would surely have a way to counter such sorcery.

But the man remained completely unfazed.

Instead, he folded his arms and smirked mockingly.

"Why don’t you take a look around?"

Lucas frowned in confusion.

Kiara’s room was right next door.

She should have heard him and responded immediately.

But there was nothing. No reaction at all.

Which meant his voice had never reached her.

"…What did you do?"

Lucas’s voice trembled.

The golden glow of the late afternoon sun had bathed his room in warm, orange hues.

But now, the space had warped into a putrid, muddy brown.

The air itself seemed thick and suffocating, like a bog ready to swallow him whole.

Lucas instinctively understood.

No matter how much he struggled—

He couldn’t win against this man.

And then—

The door to his room suddenly burst open.

Standing there was the one person he had been desperately calling for.

Her long black hair was tied up neatly with a white ribbon—Kiara.

"Young master!"

"Ki-Kiara! Why are you so late?! You useless woman, deal with—! That… that…"

Lucas’s words trailed off.

Kiara, who had rushed in looking frantic, now shut the door behind her with an unsettling calm.

She stepped forward leisurely.

With her first step, her black hair gradually paled into an ashen white.

With her second step, her blue eyes darkened into a glowing crimson, burning like fire.

By the time she reached Lucas, she was no longer Kiara—

She was a woman with ghostly white hair and malevolent red eyes.

"See, One-Eye? You scared him too much, this one’s got more spine than that other girl."

Lucas flinched violently.

The pale-haired, red-eyed woman smirked and ran her fingers along his cheek.

"Don’t be so afraid, kid. We’re not here to kill you."

She turned to the man with the mismatched eyes.

With a small sigh, he answered.

"Venere, don’t play around too much. If the brat doesn’t accept our proposal, this will all be for nothing."

Venere shrugged.

"Oh, please. He won’t refuse, you need to start reading people better, Mercurio. There’s no way this brat will turn us down. Right, kid?"

Venere’s question hung in the air, but Lucas had no answer.

# The Academy's Prodigy Wants to Defeat the Genius - 45

"Did everyone have a good weekend?"

The lecture hall, welcoming the start of a new week, held five students gathered together.

As soon as he entered, Lorenzo let out a jaw-cracking yawn, making him look far from the image of a disciplined instructor.

Carla didn’t particularly appreciate his lax demeanor, but given how much she owed him, she couldn’t bring herself to entirely dislike him either.

"If anything significant had happened, I’m sure I would’ve heard about it. No one seems injured, so I don’t see a reason to ask. Anyway, I have an announcement for you all."

"An announcement?"

Regina inquired, and Lorenzo nodded.

Picking up a marker, he turned and casually scrawled across the large board hanging on the wall.

Exchange Battle

"I assume everyone here can read. In two weeks, we’ll be holding an Exchange Battle."

"What exactly does that entail?"

It was Ivan who spoke up, raising his hand politely.

Lorenzo smirked and answered.

"It means exactly what it says. You all know that our academy has four years, right?"

The academy followed a four-year system.

Students entered as first-years and graduated as fourth-years. With only two classes per grade, each consisting of five students, the total student body was small—merely thirty in attendance at any given time.

Fourth-years, however, were already deployed for field experience in preparation for their careers, so in practice, only the first through third years remained on campus.

"Each year is divided into Eastern and Western divisions. The Exchange Battle is a mock battle between the two sides."

"A mock battle…"

"Yeah, a mock battle."

Lorenzo clenched both fists and then slowly knocked them together, making a thud sound with his mouth.

"Basically, it’s a fight. A fight where you stake the honor of your division."

"An Exchange Battle…"

Liam stroked his chin.

The clear excitement on his face revealed his thirst for combat.

There was a saying that southern folk were generally relaxed, but seeing Liam’s eagerness, Carla wondered if he had some northern blood in him.

Lorenzo nodded at Liam’s reaction.

"Sounds interesting. This kind of thing is my specialty."

Regina, however, looked slightly tense.

"If it’s the Western division… then Kiara will be participating."

Kiara di Servitore, a water mage.

Her magic was similar yet fundamentally different from Regina’s.

Carla clenched her fist silently.

‘I can’t afford to be useless in this. I need to be able to hold my own.’

Unaware of Carla’s thoughts, Lorenzo continued his explanation.

"You all are a bunch of talented kids, aren’t you? It’s been a month since you entered the academy. Likewise, it’s been a month since the upperclassmen moved up a grade. This battle is a chance to see how much everyone has improved."

"Instructor."

Carla raised her hand.

Lorenzo paused and gestured for her to speak.

Clearing her throat, she asked, "Will we be matched against opponents with similar fighting styles?"

She had no intention of avoiding a fight.

If anything, her combative spirit was second to none. However, right now, she was unable to wield her magic properly.

For a close-combat mage, missing a limb was a significant disadvantage. Among the Western division, Wilhelm von Mittenburg was the one most similar to her.

"Hmm…"

Lorenzo scratched the back of his head, looking troubled.

Regina, sitting in the front, instinctively leaned back a little, though it seemed Lorenzo didn’t notice.

"Not necessarily."

"Excuse me?"

Ivan and the others were also surprised.

A battle like this, which wasn’t even listed in the curriculum, suddenly being added—it didn’t make sense.

"There’s no guarantee in war that you’ll always fight someone with the same combat style. The matchups will depend on how the pairings are arranged."

"So… it’s possible that we could end up fighting someone with a completely opposite combat style?"

"That’s right, let me break it down further."

Lorenzo turned back to the board and began writing again.

Eastern Division:

* Carla della Cascata
* Ivan Contadino
* Liam Foucault
* Emil von Aufstich
* Regina Parma

Western Division:

* Lucas von Scheiskehl
* Wilhelm von Mittenburg
* Kiara di Servitore
* Michele Briccone
* Sophia von der Zauber

"Each team has five members. The first round will be a Captain’s Match."

Each side would fight in a set order. The winner would continue until defeated, cycling through opponents one by one.

"The order is simple—first is the vanguard, then the second, middle, vice-captain and captain. The match continues until the last one standing."

"I understand the format, but if this is the first round, does that mean there’s a second round?"

As expected, Carla was sharp.

While the others had overlooked it, she immediately caught on.

Lorenzo grinned.

"That’s right. The second round is a team battle and the third is a scavenger hunt."

"A team battle must mean all five members fight at once. What about the scavenger hunt?"

"That’s straightforward. You’ll be placed in a designated area and must retrieve a specified item."

"…I see."

Carla’s expression darkened.

She had thought she had until the midterms—less than six weeks away—to prove herself.

But now, an even earlier test had appeared.

If she failed the midterms, Enrico would pull her out of the academy, no matter what it took.

She would be sent straight to the Scheiskehl family, and her name would become Carla von Scheiskehl.

She’d rather die than let that happen.

Yet no matter how much she thought about it, she couldn’t shake the unease in her chest.

Clenching her remaining hand into a fist, she could feel her mana surging like a raging storm.

Her mana reserves were immense—far greater than most.

But without the ability to release it and with her combat style reliant on her body as a weapon, she was at a severe disadvantage.

‘I can’t afford to be depressed.’

Carla steeled herself and pressed her lips together firmly.

"Well, there’s still some time left, so make sure you all train properly. The instructors won’t be intervening, so it’s up to you. Now then, let’s start today’s lesson."

Pushing aside unnecessary thoughts, Carla focused on Lorenzo once more.

Worrying wouldn’t bring her a solution right now.

For now, the only thing she could do was pay attention and prepare.

Her heart felt heavy and with it, her appetite vanished.

Liam had barely waited for the lunch break to begin before inviting Carla to join him for a meal, but she shook her head.

"I’m not hungry. You guys go ahead."

"You’ll need to eat something if you want to stay focused in the afternoon classes. Carla, are you sure?"

Ivan asked with genuine concern, but Carla shot him a sharp look.

It wasn’t like Ivan had done anything wrong—he was simply and sincerely, worried about her.

But Carla saw Regina standing behind him, fidgeting anxiously.

"…I’m fine, go eat with Regina. I’ll head back to the dorm and rest for a bit."

"Oh… okay."

Carla quietly stood and walked past Ivan.

As she did, she caught a glimpse of his worried gaze.

She had seen it and Ivan had seen her expression in return, but she didn’t want to think about it.

Ivan had done nothing wrong.

It was entirely her own problem.

The distance from the lecture hall to the dormitory wasn’t far.

A few students were already eating in the first-floor cafeteria, but no one paid Carla any attention anymore.

Swinging her neatly tied-up sleeve—just as Emil had secured it for her—she walked straight to Ivan’s room, her destination as natural as breathing.

It was now the third day she had been staying there.

She was getting used to it.

The essentials she had ordered on Saturday had arrived the previous day, allowing her to settle in more comfortably.

And so, without hesitation, Carla opened the door and flopped onto the bed as if it were her own.

‘Maybe I should’ve brought the journal. I remember most of its contents, but still…’

The journal’s author had theorized that alchemic mages always kept spare bodies at their disposal, stored in what could be considered a warehouse.

It even mentioned the name of the location.

The problem was that Carla had never heard of the place before.

Even with the detailed descriptions of the surrounding geography, she couldn’t place it.

And with the war ongoing, who knew if that terrain even still existed?

‘Should I ask Instructor Lorenzo? Or the headmaster?’

The academy had been investigating, but given the lack of updates, it seemed they hadn’t found anything useful.

Not that catching the culprit would bring her arm back.

‘What should I do?’

Carla wriggled in frustration.

She flailed around on the bed, her movements so erratic that the weight of her bound-up left sleeve swung directly into her face.

"Ow…"

With a small yelp, she bolted upright—only to see Ivan standing there.

"…Carla?"

"…What are you doing here?"

Ivan stood awkwardly at the doorway, holding a tray of food.

Despite this being his room, he somehow looked like a guest.

"I thought you should eat something, so I brought food."

"You’re really nosy…"

But the smell hit her—pasta, it seemed.

Perhaps because of that, her appetite stirred ever so slightly.

"…Fine, give it here. Since you went through the effort, I’ll eat it."

"And a ‘thank you’?"

"Just hand it over. Why would I thank you for serving me?"

Despite her words, Carla was grateful.

She had always thought Ivan looked down on her, but she was slowly realizing that he was simply a good person at heart.

"You’re always the same… Come sit at the table. If you eat on the bed, it’ll smell."

"Since when do commoners care about that?"

"I’m just thinking about the noble lady’s comfort."

Ivan’s response made Carla grin as she climbed off the bed.

Clang!

A sharp metallic clatter rang through the room.

Both Carla and Ivan instinctively turned toward the doorway.

And there, standing frozen, was someone watching them.

A girl, her face drained of color, staring at them in shock.

"…Regina?"

Regina’s pale face and wide eyes met theirs.

# The Academy's Prodigy Wants to Defeat the Genius - 46

Regina hadn’t come to Ivan’s room for any particular reason.

To her, Ivan was someone she harbored a one-sided crush on, but that didn’t mean she could treat Carla like a stranger.

Even though she’d thought of Carla as “Carlo” back then, the fact remained that they were childhood friends who had grown up together—so Regina had simply intended to go find Carla with Ivan.

‘Now that I think about it… I don’t even know where Carla’s room is. Maybe Ivan’s already there?’

Unaware that Carla was staying with Ivan, Regina stopped by his room just in case.

If Ivan was there, she thought she could go to Carla with him.

But then—

“Ivan, wait.”

Setting down his tray on the table, Ivan hurried toward Regina.

That moment felt strangely slow to her—like time itself was dragging, everything moving in sluggish motion.

A flustered Ivan.

And behind him, a startled-looking Carla.

Regina couldn’t make sense of what she was seeing.

“Carla, why… why are you here? This is Ivan’s room… isn’t it?”

Regina asked with a trembling voice.

Logically speaking, maybe it wasn’t a big deal.

In fact, it probably wasn’t a big deal at all.

Just as Regina was friends with Ivan, so was Carla—maybe she was just visiting, or maybe she was just staying for a little while.

But then why? Why?

Why would Carla be getting up from Ivan’s bed? And why was Ivan acting like that was completely normal? Why? Was there some other explanation?

Nothing about this made sense. Regina looked between the two of them with shaken eyes. Ivan had stepped in front of her—Regina thought it almost looked like he was trying to block Carla from view—and hurriedly began explaining something.

But nothing registered in her ears. No matter what Ivan said, she couldn’t really hear it. She wasn’t even sure what he was saying. Her unfocused gaze slowly drifted up to Ivan.

“Ugh, you’re so frustrating. Hey, Ivan.”

Unable to watch any longer, Carla stepped forward. She pushed Ivan aside and stood before Regina.

“I don’t have a dorm room, so I’m staying here. Isn’t that enough of an explanation?”

“But, but still. Carla, this is Ivan’s room.”

“Yeah, it’s Ivan’s room. But right now, I’m the one staying here. Is that a problem?”

Regina was at a loss for words.

Because what Carla had just said could be interpreted in so many ways.

Was Carla staying here while Ivan was using another room?

Was Ivan living here, and Carla just crashing temporarily?

Or—were they living here together?

“You’re staying here… That is, um…”

Regina couldn’t finish the sentence.

Her rational mind told her to find out the truth, to be clear about the situation—but emotionally, she couldn’t handle it.

‘What if it’s the third one?

What if Carla and Ivan are actually staying together?’

“Let’s not do this out here. Come inside, don’t make a scene here.”

The dorm was small—rumors would spread quickly.

And it housed students from first to third years.

If something got out, it would spiral out of control in no time.

Ivan grabbed Regina’s hand and pulled her inside.

Pale as a sheet, Regina let herself be dragged in like a paper doll, and Ivan quickly shut the door behind them, exhaling a long sigh.

Things had just gotten a lot more complicated.

“Regina, Carla’s staying in my room because of some circumstances. I already explained everything to the dorm supervisor…”

Regina sat on the couch, staring blankly at Ivan.

It was unclear if she was even listening to what he was saying.

“Regina, are you listening to him?”

Carla, who had been watching silently, finally asked. Regina’s gaze slowly shifted from Ivan to Carla.

“…Why?”

“Why what?”

Carla folded her arms—well, she supported her chest with her right arm at least.

“Why… why are you staying with Ivan? He’s a guy, and you’re a girl, Carla… And in two months, you’re supposed to be going to Scheiskel…”

“Hey.”

It was obvious what Regina had been about to say.

Two months from now—no, more like a month and a half.

That was when the midterms would be held.

If Carla went into that exam in her current condition and didn’t pass, her future was all but set. Regina knew it. Carla knew it. Ivan, Liam, and Emil knew it. Probably every student in the dormitory knew it.

“Regina, I get what you're thinking. But understanding and approving are two different things. You should think carefully before you speak.”

Carla’s words were sharp, each one like a blade cutting into Regina.

“…My arm is like this. You can see that.”

Carla gave her left arm a little shake—but it wasn’t really a shake. Her shoulder just sort of dangled awkwardly.

“I can’t live alone. I’m not going back to the estate, so someone has to help me. I physically can’t live on my own. So who in this dorm could realistically help me?”

Regina said nothing.

Why Carla wouldn’t return to the estate… Regina knew better than to ask, not after what she’d seen that night.

“At least let me…”

“You’re a noble too, Regina. Maybe not a high noble like me, but still. You should have some pride, shouldn’t you? Unless you plan to drop out and become a handmaid for the Cascata household, what you’re saying makes no sense. Liam? He’s a noble in his own country too. Emil? Even worse. That leaves Ivan.”

“B-But that still doesn’t mean you have to share a room…”

“Regina.”

Carla ran a frustrated hand through her hair, her irritation evident even in that small gesture. Regina felt a surge of self-loathing—how could she be so shaken by such a simple movement?

“Carla, let me say it.”

“What.”

“You’re being too forceful.”

“You little—”

Carla flared up, ready to retort, but Ivan shook his head firmly. She fell silent, though her scowl made it clear she was far from calm.

“Regina… I know exactly what you’re thinking.”

Ivan knelt on the floor beside her and looked up.

Regina stared down at him.

“I really do. I know what you're worried about. You're afraid that… because of me, Carla’s reputation as a noble might be tarnished.”

‘Is this guy for real?’

Carla, watching from behind, was speechless.

‘How on earth did he come to that conclusion? How could someone be this dense?’

She suddenly felt bad for Regina.

‘Falling for an idiot like this… At least I would never—

…Never what?’

A chill ran down Carla’s spine. What was she about to say? Just having a thought like that was disturbing. That kind of thinking belonged to pampered noble ladies from high society—those who sat around waiting to be married off for politics.

‘Absolutely not. Never.’

Marriage had nothing to do with her. Even the engagement talk with Scheiskel would disappear if she passed the midterm. That had to happen.

“There’s absolutely nothing romantic going on. If I ever tried anything, Lord Cascata would probably kill me himself.”

Regina sniffled.

Her overheated mind was beginning to cool down—rational thought slowly returning.

‘Was there really nothing going on?’

She asked herself.

Ivan always spoke sincerely, but that sincerity was so simple it often confused people.

‘He’s saying it’s nothing to worry about… Then why do I still feel so uneasy?’

Regina repeated Ivan’s words in her mind, trying to calm herself.

‘No… I’m just being oversensitive. Ivan isn’t like that.’

Regina’s anxious heart.

Ivan, oblivious to how she felt, continued trying to reassure her.

“So really, what you’re worried about—it’s not going to happen. You don’t have to worry, Regina. I know my place.”

“Really?”

Regina mulled over Ivan’s words as she asked again.

His eyes looked sincere, but the vague discomfort in her chest refused to go away.

‘Was there really nothing going on? Am I the only one overthinking this?’

Regina nodded, though a tightness lingered in the corner of her heart.

Still, knowing Ivan’s usual nature, it wasn’t likely he was lying. For now, she accepted what he said.

Maybe she was misunderstanding things, but in the end, his words meant what they meant—if Ivan and Carla had really done something improper, it would certainly damage Carla’s reputation. In that sense, what Ivan said made logical sense.

“…Really?”

“Really, I’m just helping out a friend who’s unwell, nothing more, nothing less. Isn’t that right, Carla?”

Ivan suddenly tossed the question to Carla.

Carla gave a dry chuckle before answering.

“Yeah, there’s absolutely nothing like that going on. Not even close. A romantic relationship? Impossible. So stop worrying, Regina. Your love life is perfectly safe.”

“Love life…”

Regina’s cheeks flushed as she shook her head.

‘Love life… It’s not even like that. But then why can’t I stop thinking about it?’

She glanced sideways at Ivan.

‘Is Ivan really not bothered by any of this?’

Still feeling unsettled, Regina turned her head away.

“Don’t say things like that again, Carla.”

“Alright, alright, I got it.”

Seeing Regina blush so easily, Carla silently swore to herself that she would never, ever let herself become like that.

“I don’t really get what you two are going on about, but anyway, Regina, I do understand what you’re worried about.”

Ivan looked at her seriously as he continued.

“I promise. I don’t have any feelings for Carla beyond friendship. I’m just helping her. That’s all I’m doing—making sure nothing gets out of hand.”

He turned and looked at Carla.

“And Carla, don’t be so forceful. You know what Regina’s worried about.”

At Ivan’s words, Carla sighed and looked away.

‘Forceful? What did I even say that was so forceful?’

But seeing Ivan’s expression, she stayed quiet for a moment.

‘Maybe I really was being a bit too sharp.’

She pouted slightly and mumbled under her breath.

“…Fine. I’ll be more careful next time.”

# The Academy's Prodigy Wants to Defeat the Genius - 47

Pasta was undoubtedly a food crafted by the gods.

That was the thought that crossed Carla’s mind as she twirled the noodles around her fork and slurped them up.

Or maybe she should just be grateful it was her left arm that had gone missing, not the right.

“Carla, it’s splattering.”

“Let it.”

Sure, handing her a napkin was nice and all—but couldn’t he at least unfold it first?

Receiving a neatly folded napkin made it almost impossible to open one-handed.

She’d gotten more used to living with one arm, but these things were still a pain.

Carla awkwardly unfolded the napkin by giving it a few flaps and then placed it over her lap.

Even while doing so, she glanced sidelong at Regina.

Regina’s gaze was fixed on Ivan.

Even after all that had just happened, she couldn’t take her eyes off him. Carla couldn’t understand what on earth was so captivating about him.

“…When are you two finally gonna start dating?”

At Carla’s sudden question, Ivan choked on his pasta mid-bite and started coughing, while Regina stiffened like a statue before her face went bright red.

“Th-that’s not it. Carla, if someone hears you say that, it’ll be a huge problem. I’m just a commoner—Regina’s a noble, a real noble.”

“No, Ivan. Don’t say things like that. So what if I’m technically a noble? It’s all in name only. Being a commoner isn’t the issue… probably. And well, we’re not, not yet…”

Both Ivan and Regina were denying it—but oddly enough, for completely different reasons.

Carla snorted at the two of them. Honestly, it was just a matter of time at this point.

“If you’re done eating, let’s clean up and go. We’ve got afternoon classes.”

Carla set her fork on the plate and stood up.

She picked up her uniform jacket, which had been carelessly tossed on the bed, and held it out toward Ivan.

“Help me put it on.”

“Yeah, just a sec.”

“I’ll do it.”

Just as Ivan was about to set his plate down, Regina swooped in and took the jacket from Carla’s hands.

The way she briskly opened it up screamed I’ll do it, and—well, that didn’t sit too well with Carla.

Not that she could openly object, though… So, with no choice, Carla let Regina help her into the jacket.

“We can’t be late, let’s go.”

“Yeah, let’s.”

​

The three of them stepped out of the dorm and, coincidentally, ran into others heading toward the lecture hall.

That slicked-back blond hair, that smug, sneering expression—

No matter how many times she saw him, there wasn’t a single redeeming feature about him: Lucas.

“You sure are diligent about attending class. Not that it’ll do you any good.”

Carla didn’t bother responding to Lucas’s snide remark. She didn’t feel the need—but someone else stepped in front of her.

“If you’re planning on picking a fight with Carla again, you’ll have to go through me. Lucas, someone like you—I can take you.”

“Heh. Don’t make me laugh, commoner. I’m not here to start trouble… And Carla, keep this in mind. If it turns out you’re not truly pure, neither the Cascata family nor that commoner will walk away unscathed.”

“And if we don’t? What are you gonna do about it? My family? My father’s just fine, thanks. What could you possibly do? You’re hilarious, you know that?”

Carla shot him a cold glare, mocking him with all the venom she could muster. Honestly, wasn’t it about time this guy gave it a rest? If she let him go on, it would never end.

Ivan frowned as he looked at Lucas.

To Ivan, Carla was still his friend—someone who had stayed in his memory for ten whole years.

Insulting Carla wasn’t all that different from insulting Ivan himself.

“That’s enough, Lucas. Want to do what Carla did? Settle things right here with a proper brawl?”

“I’ll pass. I’ve got a bigger show lined up.”

Just as expected—or rather, just as they said—when someone provoked Carla, Ivan’s demeanor changed in an instant.

Seeing that shift, Lucas became certain: what those lowlifes who had visited his room said was true.

‘At first, I thought they were just lunatics…’

​

“I’m here to make you an offer, young master. And I don’t think it’s one you’ll dislike.”

With white hair and red eyes—features rare even in the Empire—she leaned in and spoke in a hushed tone to Lucas.

Given the already tense and shady atmosphere in the room, Lucas had been on edge, but the moment this beautiful woman began exuding an alluring presence and sidled up to him seductively, that tension slowly began to melt away.

“W-What kind of offer?”

“Now, now… First, my name is Venere. I’m the one who blew off the arm of that girl you’re so obsessed with—Carla della Cascata.”

“What?”

Lucas was momentarily speechless—that name, Carla della Cascata, spoken aloud here of all places.

As much as he didn’t want to admit it, Carla was stronger than him—by a lot. If this woman was the one who had taken her arm, and if she turned against him now, he’d never make it out of this room alive.

“Don’t be so tense, young master. Didn’t I say? I’m here to make you an offer. Is it because of Mercurio over there? Or is something else bothering you?”

Lucas slowly shook his head.

Right—he was the heir to Scheiskel. If someone like her had come to him, and if she was the one who crippled Carla’s arm, then surely she was one of the enemies of Cascata.

“…Fine. Let’s hear this offer of yours.”

He believed the negotiation power was in his hands—and that belief calmed his nerves. The arrogance of the privileged began to rise within him.

“Good, good… That’s the right attitude, young master. After all, this is a win-win offer…”

Venere slowly climbed onto Lucas’s lap, wrapping her arm around his neck. In a brazenly lascivious posture, she whispered softly into his ear.

“In about two weeks… there’s that exchange match, right?”

“Is there?”

“….”

Venere was caught off guard.

She hadn’t expected the student to be unaware of the academic schedule—especially when someone from outside the academy knew it.

And he said it so shamelessly, as if there was nothing odd about not knowing.

“…Y-Yeah, there will be one. You’ll see if you check the calendar.”

“Anyway, so?”

Lucas, with his hand now resting on the waist of the beauty sitting on his lap, asked with a sly tone. The feel of her skin beneath his fingers was tantalizing.

“That’s when you crush Carla. The duels, the team battle, the exploration round—we’ll make sure you get matched with her in the duel. Just crush her.”

“You think she’ll even participate? She’s a cripple.”

“….”

Once again, Venere was left speechless. Wasn’t Carla supposed to be his future wife? How could he talk about her like that?

“S-She’ll definitely show up. That girl’s got a nasty competitive streak, doesn’t she?”

“She does. And with her arm like that, I’d obviously win.”

“Exactly… As for the team battle, it’ll be hard for us to intervene, but during the exploration match—we’ll help you.”

“You’ll help me? How?”

“You don’t need to know that yet. We’ll make sure you and Carla are left alone in the exploration zone. Then, bam—make her yours. Men value purity above all, right?”

Lucas scowled at those words.

That very phrase had already been used by Carla to get under his skin before.

“…That bitch, I heard she gave her virginity to some commoner.”

“And you believed that? It’s obvious she just said that to mess with your head. Either way, whether she’s a virgin or not—if she isn’t, you can file a complaint with Cascata. And if she is, then you’re her first.”

Not that it was wrong, per se.

Lucas let out a thoughtful hum. Venere’s logic had no real holes.

“What exactly do you people want from me?”

“...”

Lucas narrowed his eyes and asked.

“So what do you gain? Are you expecting something once I take over Cascata?”

“….”

Once again, Venere was left momentarily speechless.

Where was this confidence coming from? Right now, the House of Cascata was at its peak thanks to the overwhelming power of Enrico della Cascata. And yet this fool genuinely thought he’d take control of it someday?

Still, she had to keep talking.

With a soft smile, Venere answered smoothly.

“Young master, we just want to restore order. The Cascatas have held too much power for too long. If you could share just a bit of that power with us, we’d gain something, and you’d gain something even greater. Isn’t that a fair deal for both sides?”

Lucas listened and became convinced.

These people clearly believed that once he married Carla, he would inherit Cascata, and they were simply trying to get in early and secure a spot.

“Right and if you’re looking to become one of my concubines, you can say so now. I don’t mind.”

Lucas’s hand began to drift lower. Venere shuddered at the disgusting sensation of his touch and quickly slid off his lap.

“Then let’s consider this deal struck. Oh—and obviously, this stays between us. If you tell anyone, the deal’s off. Immediately.”

“Of course.”

Lucas answered without hesitation, but Venere couldn’t shake her unease.

‘Could this idiot really pull it off?’

Even after she and Mercurio left, Lucas wore a self-satisfied grin.

Thinking all too simply that these people were just lining up behind the next great power.

​

‘Can’t say I trust those people completely, but since they’re offering help, I might as well use them. I’ll know soon enough anyway.’

Thinking that, Lucas made his way to the lecture hall.

After all, he still needed to graduate from the academy.

# The Academy's Prodigy Wants to Defeat the Genius - 48

"Hey, Ivan."

Carla’s voice always had a certain clarity to it.

Despite being husky and a bit low-pitched, despite lacking even a trace of the girlish sweetness that Regina’s voice had.

Maybe that was why Ivan couldn’t respond right away when he heard it.

He simply turned his head to look at her.

“What’s with you? Why aren’t you answering? Staring at someone doesn’t count as a reply, you know.”

Only when he saw Carla’s sulky face did Ivan nod.

“Yeah. What is it?”

“Your answer’s kind of lame… anyway, I was hoping you could help me with something.”

“Help? With what?”

“Sigh—this really isn’t something I want to be saying to you…”

Carla scratched under her ear.

It looked like she was really reluctant to bring it up, but Ivan simply waited in silence, watching her.

“…The exchange match. I think I need to train a bit for it.”

Ivan had no idea how much Carla had agonized over just saying that.

She’d been practicing nonstop in the academy’s training rooms.

Effort, patience, discipline—those were her strengths.

But in the end, she’d come to realize she couldn’t do it all alone. That’s why she came to Ivan.

“Training? That’s not a problem. How can I help?”

“Just be my opponent. Even though my arm’s like this…”

Carla moved her left shoulder.

Just like Emil had done, the empty sleeve of her uniform swung loosely, along with the emptiness of the space where her arm should have been.

“…I still have plenty of mana. But it’s a bit much to ask anyone else to spar with me right now.”

“If that’s all, I’d be happy to. I’ll help with anything you need.”

“…Ugh.”

Carla found it hard to look at Ivan’s smile.

That smile, that look—it always clashed so completely with her own temperament, it was downright uncomfortable.

Ivan treated her with sincere friendship, but Carla still hadn’t shaken her inferiority complex toward him, which only made it worse.

​

The academy’s training rooms were built in all kinds of sizes.

Some students specialized in dueling magic, others in area-of-effect spells, so there were rooms tailored for each type.

Among them, Ivan chose a medium-sized room, hung the "In Use" sign, and opened the door.

“What’s with the gawking? First time in a training room?”

“No, not really. It’s just… big.”

“This is medium-sized. There are even bigger ones for AOE spellcasters. You put up the sign?”

“Yeah, I did.”

“Good.”

Carla walked inside, casually taking off her coat and hanging it up, like she was used to the routine.

With the sign in place, no one else would come in. From now on, it was just Ivan and Carla in this room.

“So, what should I do?”

“Be a scarecrow.”

“…A scarecrow?”

Carla was already summoning her mana.

A swirl of violet energy wrapped around her body—signature of lightning magic.

Crackle-crackle—lightning sparked, her hair whipping up in a rising spiral.

Violet magic surged from beneath her, bathing her entire body in light.

Even her face was tinted purple, the sheer force of it radiating a brutal kind of intensity.

Seeing it, Ivan grew tense.

He’d seen her obliterate a slime in one hit—there was no doubt her fists packed serious power.

“[Wind Armor].”

A sharp gust swirled up around Ivan’s body.

Rather than flying outward, the wind wrapped tightly around him, forming a barrier of wind—a suit of armor made of air.

“Just stand there.”

Carla’s voice was firm.

That was when Ivan finally realized what she meant by “scarecrow.”

“[True Thunder].”

The moment she chanted, Carla’s form seemed to vanish.

A flash of violet light streaked toward Ivan’s face—but before it could hit, it faltered and crashed into the floor just in front of him.

Thud!

“Carla!”

Startled, Ivan rushed over and helped her up from the ground.

She didn’t seem hurt, but she let out a long, ragged breath as she pushed herself up with difficulty.

“Carla, are you okay?”

“…I’m fine. Let’s go again.”

That’s when Ivan understood what her problem was.

She couldn’t keep her balance…

Lightning magic relied on amplifying physical speed to its limits. That meant extreme movement.

But Carla, in her current state, couldn’t keep her balance at that speed. She couldn’t control it.

“I’ll try again.”

Ivan nodded at her calmly.

Carla took a deep breath and steadied herself.

She backed up about ten steps and summoned her mana again.

The pressure of her magic was overwhelming—if even one hit from that struck a vital point, it would be lethal. But that’s assuming she could land a hit… which, right now, was unlikely.

“[Sky Thunder].”

Her body blurred once more.

She extended one leg and brought it down like an axe—so forcefully that Ivan instinctively stepped half a pace aside.

With no follow-up strike, her kick slammed into the floor, sending a heavy shockwave through the room.

“[Flash Strike]!”

Using the leg she’d slammed down as a pivot, she spun into a wide kick.

But the moment her body turned—

Crash!

Carla tumbled to the ground again, more ungracefully this time.

“Carla!”

Hearing Ivan’s voice, Carla tried to push herself up from the floor—but her hand flailed in empty air.

She tried to get up using only her right arm, but lost her balance and collapsed again.

'She can’t even stand…'

A sigh escaped her lips.

​

About an hour and a half had passed.

In that time, Ivan hadn’t really done anything.

He hadn’t moved much from where he stood.

And he never struck back at Carla.

He just stood there, still.

And now, he was looking down at Carla, who was lying on the ground with her eyes closed, wearing a complicated expression on his face.

“…This all feels completely pointless.”

Carla covered her face with one hand as she spoke.

Her strength had drained away so much that it was hard to believe she was the same person who had, for over an hour, relentlessly launched herself at Ivan again and again, rolling across the floor with every fall but never giving up.

Even after pushing her stamina to the edge, she hadn’t landed a direct hit—not even a single effective blow.

That simple fact now pressed down on Carla like an unbearable weight.

“…What should I do? Am I really finished now?”

The words slipped from Carla’s lips before she realized it.

She had never imagined she’d speak such weakness in front of Ivan. And yet, here it was. Why had that moment come so quickly?

Her body trembled. She couldn’t even hold her stance, let alone balance when moving.

Her specialties—speed and agility—were gone.

And with them, the destructive force that used to accompany every strike. Not a single one of those strengths remained. This was just another hour spent confirming that.

“I’m really done now. It’s over. It’s really all over…”

Still covering her face, Carla poured out her thoughts.

Her heart ached so fiercely she couldn’t hold it in any longer.

“What kind of strongest mage could I ever be? I can’t do anything like this. I’m not even a proper human being, let alone a mage. Not like this…”

“…Carla.”

What kind of eyes was Ivan looking at her with?

She was lying there, which meant Ivan had to be looking down at her.

Someone like her, who would never tolerate anyone looking down on her, now didn’t care at all.

Her pride had been completely shattered.

She couldn’t even wield the only pillar that had ever supported her—magic.

Twenty years of her life had crumbled to dust inside her, without even leaving behind proper fragments.

“Carla, I’ll help. Let’s try again. If we just start over from the footwork—”

“It’s fine, Ivan. I told you. I’m done. Even if you try to help… as a mage, I’m finished.”

Carla sighed again, softly.

She could feel the tears about to fall—she could feel it.

“Carla.”

Ivan gently helped her up.

Not forcing anything, he simply lifted her into a seated position and let go.

“Don’t try to comfort me, Ivan. I’m just… just…”

‘It’s over. Carla della Cascata is over.’

That’s what she wanted to say.

Everything was finished. Her life as a mage had come to a complete end.

“It’s fine now… Ivan, just, really, it’s fine.”

There was no one else to blame.

She was the one who had made the offering to the waterfall god, who had accepted whatever price came with it, and who had let her guard down in front of Venere.

She had brought this all upon herself—there was no one else to accuse.

“Carla, you were stronger than anyone I’ve ever known. I’ve seen it myself. Even if it was ten years ago… you were always working hard. Always.”

It was clumsy comfort.

Carla, as she used to be, might have snapped at him—You call that comfort?

But now, she stayed quiet, just listening.

“Let’s try just a little more. With lightning magic, maybe you could try slowing down your movements. That might work—I think so, at least.”

“…I can’t even function in daily life, Ivan. It’s fine. Let me go.”

By now, she just wanted to rest.

Maybe Enrico was right. Maybe she really should just accept that offer, control that worm, and live the rest of her life in peace. But—

‘Could I even control that worm in the first place?’

Even that confidence had crumbled. She was lying here, covered in dust.

“Let go—Ivan. It’s fine. Really. I’ll just stay like this, quietly, and let that worm…”

“Don’t say that!”

Before Carla could even react to Ivan’s sudden shout, she felt his arms pull her in tightly.

She could feel the lingering trace of magic—wind magic. The breeze wrapping around her body.

"If I have to be a scarecrow, then I will. I’ll stand here for you as long as it takes. And every time you fall, I’ll be there to catch you. So don’t give up. If you give up… then I’m done too."

At some point, Ivan had pulled her into a firm embrace.

Holding her tightly in his arms, he shouted:

“You think I’d just send my friend off to that piece of trash?! No way. Never! That’s never going to happen… You have to stay here. By my side.”

Something about Ivan felt different now.

His voice, his tone—colder, sharper than usual. It made Carla instinctively afraid.

But it didn’t weigh her down like fear used to.

It was… strange.

His arms were warm.

And yet, the edge in his voice made her shrink back.

But somehow, the resolve within that sharpness—his determination—whispered to her, told her that Ivan—

‘He meant every word.’

# The Academy's Prodigy Wants to Defeat the Genius - 49

The exchange match had become the hottest topic of discussion lately.

With only a week left until the event, Lorenzo was pleased to see that everyone seemed to be putting in serious effort in their own way.

Among them, the one he was most concerned about was, of course, Carla.

Seeing the small scratches that would appear and disappear on her face was enough to tell him she was putting herself through intense training.

“The captain’s match is important, sure—but don’t forget the team battle. After all, we’re basically down to just four actual combatants in our squad.”

The room fell silent at Lorenzo’s remark.

Sure, it was his style to speak bluntly without sugarcoating anything—but this time it felt especially harsh.

Even so, it wasn’t the remark itself that bothered the others so much—it was how Carla might respond.

But Carla said nothing.

In fact, uncharacteristically, she simply nodded.

She’d been training day and night for almost a week now, with Ivan’s help.

But the results hadn’t been good.

They say effort never betrays you, but in the face of a wall that effort alone can’t overcome, it crumbles just like anything else—Carla was painfully realizing that now.

“Either way, instructors aren’t allowed to interfere in your matches or training. You’ll have to handle it on your own, so work hard. Class dismissed. Oh, Emil—you stay behind.”

With a quick jerk of his chin toward Emil, Lorenzo walked out of the classroom.

Emil followed, not looking happy about it.

​

“Sit down.”

As soon as they got back to the instructor’s office, Lorenzo lit a mana-cigarette.

Like a man who couldn’t breathe properly without it, he took several quick puffs in a row.

“Emil.”

“Y-yes?!”

Startled, Emil looked up from the chair, meeting Lorenzo’s eyes.

Those strange eyes—impossible to read, emotionless, void of desire or rage—made Emil slowly lower his gaze again.

“…Still not ready to talk?”

“I-it’s just…”

“Your magic circuit. Albina might be willing to let it go, but I’m not. That’s an artificially tampered and corrupted circuit. Emil, I’ve only seen one like that before in my life.”

“I-Instructor…”

Lorenzo brushed the smoke off his collar to kill the smell.

With a light sigh, he stroked his unkempt beard.

And then—his eyes changed.

Suddenly, they were sharp enough to pierce straight through Emil sitting right in front of him.

A shiver ran down Emil’s spine.

Lorenzo’s gaze didn’t just look at him—it felt like it was demanding him to spill everything inside.

“…It’s not something I can talk about easily.”

“I figured. It’s the Aufstich family, after all… that’s not something you can just speak lightly about. But Emil, this isn’t about your family. This is your life on the line. You can’t just gloss over this.”

Emil dropped his head low and said nothing.

Emil’s family, the von Aufstichs, were the weakest of the Empire’s Four Pillars.

Though their contributions were substantial, their influence was minimal—largely because of the family’s use of hereditary descent magic.

This magic, known as Divine Descent Magic, went beyond summoning—it could invoke beings so powerful they were likened to gods.

If such a spell was successfully cast, it could instantly flip the tide of battle.

Whether a battle was between armies or individual mages, once something godlike descended onto the battlefield, it became a wildly asymmetric fight.

However, the reason von Aufstich’s influence remained low was due to secrecy.

This divine-level spell couldn’t be allowed to spread, and the price to summon such an existence was too steep.

As a result, the family drastically reduced its public activity.

Heads of the household also died young, with quick successions.

And now, it had reached the worst outcome—Emil, now an adult, still hadn’t properly inherited the magic.

“Father said… he had a way. He told me it was for my sake.”

“Emil.”

Lorenzo lit another mana-cigarette.

His mind was conflicted—Emil’s unnatural circuit…

If his suspicions were correct, then Emil didn’t have much time left.

That’s why he was trying to get the full story. But it wasn’t going well.

“…You’re aware that von Aufstich retainers have infiltrated the academy, aren’t you?”

“Yes.”

That group dressed in black—the ones who had told Lorenzo to stop investigating Emil.

Lorenzo didn’t know how they’d gotten in, but the headmaster had acknowledged them, so there was little he could do.

“Emil.”

“…Yes?”

Lorenzo crushed the spent cigarette in the ashtray.

A spark jumped and singed his skin, but he waved the smoke away without blinking.

“Your life matters more than your family’s magic. Don’t forget that.”

Emil, his eyes now visibly dimmed, bowed his head.

“…Yes.”

​

Emil closed the door to the instructor’s office and turned around.

By now, there was probably no one left in the classroom.

It would be best to quietly grab his books and head back to the dorms—so he thought, and made his way there.

Since the room was likely empty, he opened the closed door without much thought—and flinched.

“…Liam?”

By the window, dyed in the colors of the setting sun, a large shadow was cast.

Sitting on the windowsill, with his greatsword strapped to his back as always, Liam was looking at him.

“You’re late, Emil.”

His face was obscured by the shadow.

So Emil couldn’t tell what expression Liam was wearing, but judging from his tone, he didn’t sound angry.

“Yeah, sorry. But… were you waiting for me?”

Emil gave a sheepish smile as he spoke.

“Of course I was. Didn’t I say we should test out our coordination?”

With a smooth motion that didn’t match his bulky frame, Liam hopped down from the windowsill.

That motion jogged Emil’s memory of what they’d talked about earlier in the day.

—Emil, how many consecutive casts can you manage with special-grade magic?

—Up to 1,028 shots… why?

—If I go in for close combat while you provide backup from behind, we might make a good pair.

—You think so?

—I’m sure of it. Let’s try syncing up after class today, for the team battle.

—Yeah, okay.

“…Right, sorry. I’m late.”

“It’s fine. Actually, the red sky feels kind of nice.”

Liam walked slowly over to Emil.

He was a full head taller and nearly twice Emil’s size. Standing right in front of him, Liam looked down and smiled.

“The sunset is the color of fire. In our homeland, we call this time of day a ‘burning afternoon.’”

“Burning afternoon…”

It really was a beautiful phrase.

The sound of it wasn’t bad either, and Emil smiled softly.

“Yeah, alright. Let’s go, Liam.”

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“Liam… how do you think Carla’s doing?”

On the way to the training room,

Emil asked cautiously.

Liam, walking beside him, glanced over, then scratched his cheek and stayed quiet for a moment.

“Hard to say. I wouldn’t say she’s doing well, that’s for sure.”

Liam knew it too.

He’d witnessed Carla’s overwhelming magic firsthand—honestly, if she had been in full health, Liam wouldn’t have stood a chance against her. That devastating power that erased monsters in a single blow—there was no way even Liam could’ve endured that.

“Really?”

“Yeah. The more someone had, the harder it hits when they lose it. A woman who held that much power… to lose an arm like that. I always thought she was amazing—didn’t act like most women. It’s a shame.”

“I see… Hey, Liam. In your country, do you also have that rule, where women can’t become family heads?”

“We do.”

Liam answered without a moment’s hesitation.

“Women exist to bear children, after all. Carla being born a woman… that’s the real tragedy. Same in the Empire. A woman can’t be a general. A family head who can’t become a general? That’s just ridiculous.”

“I guess that’s true…”

Emil’s expression visibly darkened.

“Then women less capable than Carla must have it even worse…”

“That’s just how it is, Emil. Carla was exceptional. The amount of effort she must’ve put in to reach that level—just the fact that a woman could do that is incredible. That’s why it’s even more unfortunate.”

Emil’s face remained downcast.

“Anyway, Emil, both you and I have to push ourselves harder. If us men can’t even reach the level Carla did, wouldn’t that be embarrassing?”

“Y-yeah, I guess so…”

Even Emil’s voice had lost its strength.