# 52 - Exchange Match (1)

1. Inter-house Competition (1)

Was it thanks to Ivan's clumsy consolation?

Carla woke up the next morning feeling unusually light.

It was true that her body was physically lighter, but she also felt as if the listlessness that had been weighing her down had somehow been lifted.

"Did you sleep well?"

Ivan, already up and dressed, smiled as he handed her a cup.

Carla couldn't bring herself to smile back, but she nodded. "Yeah."

"That's good. Today's an important day, after all."

"...Yeah, it's an important day."

Carla emptied the cup of water and handed it back to Ivan.

"I need to get ready to go. Help me, Ivan."

"Okay."

Ivan readily nodded.

Carla steeled her resolve and headed for the bathroom.

"For a commoner, you do a decent job of tidying up."

"I guess it's become a habit. I don't think it's because I'm a commoner, though?"

"That's a compliment, you know. You should be grateful."

"Yeah, yeah, thanks. Thanks a lot."

Carla, who was frowning as if to say, 'You sound sarcastic,' sensed a very familiar Magical Power signature and frowned.

Standing there was, as expected, a familiar face.

"Enrico."

Enrico, Enrico Della Cascata.

Carla's father was standing there.

Not only him, but also Fabio, standing awkwardly beside him.

Having unexpectedly taken on the role of soju, he was receiving training, and his posture clearly showed that he was trying to look dignified.

"Come here, Carla."

Carla tried to ignore Enrico's call.

"...Let's go, Ivan."

But Ivan, who was supposed to move with her, stood still with his head bowed, and Carla, realizing that it was because of Enrico's presence, clicked her tongue and turned back to Enrico.

"Come here. Carla, come here, and Ivan, was it? You can go on ahead."

"...Yes."

Ivan glanced at Carla and moved his lips very slightly.

Enrico, who was quite a distance away, wouldn't have heard it, but Carla could barely make out the words.

"Good luck, Carla. I'm always cheering for you."

Carla simply nodded.

Then she approached Enrico, and Ivan bowed to Enrico again and walked towards the grand hall where the Inter-house Competition was being held.

"What brings you here?"

"Carla."

Carla maintained a defiant attitude towards Enrico.

She could never feel good towards Enrico, this man.

She couldn't read anything from Enrico's expression or eyes as he stared at her.

She didn't know what feelings he held for Carla, but they were certainly not friendly.

"If you called me, say something..."

She couldn't even finish her sentence.

— SMACK!

Sparks flew before her eyes.

A searing pain swept across Carla's left cheek, and she involuntarily staggered.

"Sister!"

She almost fell.

If Fabio hadn't rushed to catch her, Carla would have face-planted onto the cold gravel path.

"...What the hell? Weren't you supposed to sell me off for a high price? You shouldn't be making marks like this, should you?"

Carla glared at Enrico.

Her cheek was already starting to swell, and she could feel that Enrico had really hit her with emotion.

"Carla, Carla Della Cascata. Did you not hear the head of the Family?"

"...What are you talking about?"

Carla spat and glared at her father.

Enrico's face and eyes finally showed emotion.

It was an emotion that Carla was very familiar with: anger.

"You are to become the mistress of the Schaiskeil Family. And yet, you dare to defile yourself so carelessly?"

"...Oh, so you heard about that."

— That commoner is the first man who spent the night with me.

A few days ago, at a restaurant or somewhere.

Those words she had whispered in Lucas's ear had finally reached Enrico's ears.

"You must know that you must remain pure until you get married. And yet, you give your body to a mere commoner. Can you really say you're in your right mind?"

Flames seemed to be burning in Enrico's eyes.

However, Carla, facing those eyes, was able to regain her composure.

Her cheek was burning as if a fire was raging.

But in contrast, her mind was cold.

"Ah, I see. You definitely heard about it. Yeah, a commoner... that commoner, Ivan, that is. You're asking if I gave my body to Ivan? Yeah, so what if I did? I guess you can call off the engagement."

"The engagement, I don't care about such things."

Enrico's voice gradually subsided.

"Just kill the bastard who caused the scandal, silence him. If no one knows the truth, it's as if nothing ever happened."

"Kill Ivan to silence him? That's ridiculous."

Carla smirked.

Kill Ivan? Enrico? — Maybe he could.

Ivan is strong, but Enrico is probably stronger.

Moreover, Enrico, who has the experience that Ivan lacks, would definitely do it if he decided to kill Ivan.

But that wouldn't do.

Killing Ivan, that wouldn't do.

"If you kill Ivan, do you think I'll just stand by?"

"What will you do if you don't stand by?"

Purple Magical Power bloomed like a flower from Carla.

Although she was missing an arm, her Magical Circuit was still working and her Magical Power was overflowing like the sea.

In the crackling sound of Lightning Bolt sparking, Carla said to Enrico.

"I'll just die with him. Why? In the Empire, when a widow dies with her husband, it becomes a beautiful story, right? Isn't that right?"

"Have you ever seen such a crazy thing?"

"So you're not saying it's impossible, Enrico."

Carla slowly extinguished the rising Magical Power.

Steeling herself, she took a step towards Enrico.

Her cheek was still throbbing, but the pain only strengthened her resolve.

The throbbing cheek spread like wildfire.

Will Enrico really kill Ivan?

Could he really go that far?

But Ivan is a commoner, and as a commoner, he coveted a great noble—

This fact alone might be enough for Enrico to really kill Ivan.

That wouldn't do.

That, really wouldn't do,

Carla approached Enrico.

Because Ivan is strong.

Because Ivan is really strong.

Using that,

"Hey, Enrico."

Carla stood in front of Enrico and said.

She used to be taller, but now she had to look up a little in this situation.

Even in this place, Carla realized that she had become weaker.

"Think carefully, if you're the head of the Family."

"What do you mean?"

"Think carefully. If you want to increase the Family's power, it's faster to replace Schaiskeil, that idiot trash bug, with a new pillar called Contadino."

Enrico's eyebrows twitched at Carla's words.

What Carla was saying now was so arrogant that it was absurd to him.

"Carla. Do you know what you're saying?"

"I'm saying that Ivan is much more promising than that idiot who hasn't even fully learned Family Magic... Can't you understand me? Schaiskeil will be ruined in that guy's generation. I think you're thinking of absorbing it. Watch Ivan fight. Then you'll understand what I'm saying."

Carla was convinced.

Lucas, that bug, is a guy who will ruin the Family.

Rather than betting on such a guy, she was saying to absorb a new Family with Ivan Contadino as the starting point.

This is not something that can be said easily.

The pillars of the Empire are not pillars for nothing—they are called pillars supporting the Empire only because they have a long history and tradition and have proven their value in long wars. To push out Schaiskeil and build a new pillar in such a pillar.

It was a word that would rather be called crazy.

"You're talking crazy, Carla."

"Crazy or not, you'll know if you see it directly. You know that today is the Inter-house Competition anyway."

Carla took a deep breath.

"That's why you came. If I show an ugly side here, you'll probably have me drop out around this time without even going to the midterm exam."

Enrico did not answer.

But rather, his tightly closed lips indicated a silent affirmation of Carla's words.

"That guy said he would dedicate his victory to me. He said he was confident that he could win even if he had to face all five of them."

"Impossible. For chicks like you."

"That guy can do it. ...If Ivan loses, I'll quietly drop out and go to Schaiskeil. So, watch. Watch Ivan's match. Watch Ivan's match, not mine. Judge then whether my choice was right or wrong."

Enrico stared at Carla intently.

Carla was speaking to Enrico with her eyes wide open, and her eyes were shining brightly.

"There's no way that's possib..."

"Magical Engineering will make it so, right?"

“……”

Enrico did not answer.

He stared at Carla for a long time before simply turning away.

Carla knew from Enrico's actions that her persuasion had worked.

She sighed in relief and turned around as well.

Enrico will go to the audience seats, and Carla has to go to the waiting room, so they are heading in different directions.

"...Sister."

It was Fabio.

Fabio was restless, watching Enrico and Carla's reactions, but he seemed a little relieved that it ended without a major conflict.

"Thanks for earlier. Your movements have become faster than I thought."

"...I tried. Because of someone."

Fabio smiled and replied.

"Yeah, you did well. That's how a Cascata should be."

"Yeah."

Carla smiled quietly.

It was a moment when her heavy heart was lightened.

Now, all that remains is to enter the Inter-house Competition.

Author's words (Author's afterword)

Current stockpile: Up to episode 70

I tried my best

# 53 - Exchange Match (2)

1. Inter-house Competition (2)

I don't know the order of the West House.

The core of the captain's match is said to be in the order of the matches, so if this is leaked in advance, the opponent will naturally be at an advantage in setting the order accordingly. Therefore, neither the East House nor the West House revealed the order of matches even after the Inter-house Competition began.

However, what the West House can naturally expect is that Carla of the East House will be the first to compete. For reasons that Carla would find very offensive—that she is currently the weakest in combat power, and it would be enough if she could inflict even a little damage on her first opponent.

Carla sat in a corner of the waiting room and took a deep breath.

The swelling on her cheek, where Enrico had hit her, had already subsided.

But what was weighing on her at this moment was doubt about herself—whether she could actually do it.

'...Fearing to fight. I can't be like this.'

Carla took another deep breath.

She was the first.

Since it was just an Inter-house Competition for first-year students, it wouldn't attract much attention, and at most, parents would come to watch.

But Carla was nervous for the sole reason that Enrico was in the audience.

'Ivan has to do well.'

Unconsciously, Carla's gaze turned to Ivan.

He seemed a little nervous too, as he was lightly jogging in place and loosening his shoulders. Feeling Carla's gaze, Ivan looked at Carla as well.

Their eyes met in an instant.

Ivan grinned, and that smile, somehow, pricked at her heart.

Perhaps that's why Carla quickly turned her gaze away.

Maybe, without her even realizing it.

She heard the patter of footsteps.

Then, someone sat down next to Carla.

"Carla, are you nervous?"

"No. What nervousness?"

"It's okay, Carla. There's no need to be nervous. Just do what we practiced, just that one thing properly. Then it'll be okay."

Carla didn't respond to Ivan's words.

"I believe in you."

"...You just do well, Ivan. I haven't forgotten your promise to bring me victory."

"Of course not. I'll win everything and bring you victory."

Carla slowly turned her head back to look at Ivan.

And behind him, she saw Regina with a somewhat stiff face.

"Go to Regina. She's frozen. I wonder if all Ice magic users are like that."

At Carla's words, Ivan turned around.

Regina, who had been so stiff, smiled brightly as soon as she saw Ivan.

"Go quickly. Take care of Regina first, you idiot."

"Huh? Oh, uh. Okay."

Carla pushed Ivan towards Regina, practically shoving him away, with a look of bewilderment on his face, and nodded slightly to Regina.

\*

'My opponent is... hmm. Sophia von der Zauber.'

A brown-haired girl.

At first glance, she looked cute, lively, and healthy, reminiscent of Regina, but she seemed younger and fresher than Regina.

* Sophia of the Magic. A middle-ranking noble from the East. The Magic she uses is Puppet Magic. Hey, Carla. If you know what I'm thinking, mind your own business.

Lorenzo's words came to mind.

Lorenzo, who had explained each and every member of the West House.

'A Puppet Mage, huh? A troublesome opponent.'..One more thing, I should tell you that the academy didn't intentionally assign the classes that way. What I mean is, the West House... the kids have a bit of a personality. Especially Sophia von der Zauber, she's...

'Arrogant and has a great contempt for the weak, you said.'

Yes, she seems that way.

Even to Carla, the undisguisable, vile smile on Sophia's face was clearly visible.

"Oh my... if it isn't Miss Carla? Are you sure you can face me in that state?"

It was a voice that could only be heard by each other anyway, and wouldn't be heard outside the arena.

Carla wasn't weak enough to complain about being insulted like this, and Sophia probably had the same intention.

"Wouldn't it be better to just give up before you lose the use of your remaining arm?"

"Sophia von der Zauber."

Carla said her name and spread her legs.

About shoulder-width apart.

Her clenched fist was in front of her solar plexus.

The Magical Power that circulated was blocked in one place, but it was still flowing smoothly.

"It's a shame, but I can beat someone like you. Even without one arm."

At Carla's words, the smile disappeared from Sophia's face.

With a desolate expression, Sophia glared at Carla with a strange look in her eyes, half-open and half-closed.

"...You'll regret those words."

"I won't regret it. I told you, I can beat someone like you? Even without an arm."

"I'll make you regret it with that body, with your whole body. [Der Beginn des Pols]."

From the tips of her outstretched fingers, thin, Magical Power-infused silver threads spread out with a rustling sound.

The silver threads, which could be weapons in themselves, seemed to embroider the sky in a chaotic pattern, then plunged all at once into the arena floor.

'All I can do is one thing. To stand my ground and not fall. And... to catch that one thing.'

Carla closed her eyes and recalled her practice with Ivan.

'My right arm is enough. I can do it...'

She repeated inwardly as if chanting a spell.

The one thing she had created with Ivan, perhaps the only thing left to her.

"[Lightning Bolt]."

Purple Magical Power enveloped her.

Rather, at this moment, Carla finally felt alive.

The excitement of battle,

The pleasure of fighting,

The heat of the battlefield that shook her.

All of this made her alive.

Even though she was surrounded by the countless puppets that had sprung up, led by Sophia's silver threads.

Even though she was being targeted by the puppets' wickedly gleaming claws and sharp teeth.

As Carla heated herself up in this way, the silver threads that had spread from Sophia's fingertips rapidly extended around her. The more intense her gestures became, the more elaborate and precise the puppets' movements became.

"There's nowhere to run, Miss Carla. Why don't you give up here?"

Sophia lightly twirled her fingers, swirling the silver threads like living creatures.

The puppets that sprang up from the floor nimbly leaped up, relentlessly targeting Carla's empty left side. Even as she quickly moved her feet to avoid them, Sophia's silver threads flew like snakes, aiming for her ankles.

"Keuk."

With a small groan, Carla rolled on the floor. She skillfully used the strength of her lower body to get back on her feet, but as soon as she did, she smashed one of the puppets with her fist, but another puppet dug in from behind, aiming for her feet.

* Clang!

With a noise like stepping on metal, the puppet's head was shattered. While Carla was stepping on and crushing one puppet, another puppet swung its claws towards Carla's right arm.

'This will be hard to avoid.'

Carla gritted her teeth and stepped back.

It was a maneuver for evasion, but her unbalanced body lost its footing and wavered.

At that very moment, another puppet lunged at her side.

'Now.'

Purple lightning flashed from the fingertips where Lightning Bolt gathered.

"[Flash of Lightning]!"

The Lightning Bolt flashed and struck the puppet's torso, then flashed again and tore through the puppet.

Carla used the gap to regain her footing.

She had faltered once, but Carla grinned.

"It's not over yet, is it?"

"Of course not!"

Sophia's fingers slid as if dancing.

In step with that movement, the puppets, nearly twenty of them, swarmed towards Carla.

Carla looked at them and thought.

If her body were intact, they would be nothing.

But as she had to accept the situation, she absurdly remembered Ivan's voice at that moment.

* Let's create a situation, Carla.

A martial artist doesn't necessarily have to hit the opponent.

* Can't you hit the ground and release that... shockwave? Something like that?

'...I hate to admit it, but that Ivan is a genius.'

"It's over."

Sophia's voice, full of ridicule, was heard.

Over?

Me?

No way.

Carla smiled instead.

There was one Magic left, the one created with Ivan's advice.

Strength in the legs that stepped on the floor.

With a balance that would never collapse, that would never lose even one arm.

'Now!'

Carla instantly drew all the Magical Power that had been running through her body into her fist.

The purple light burned to the extreme, and with a Lightning Bolt so intense that the shape of her fist could not even be seen, Carla slammed that fist into the arena floor with all her might.

"[Earthly Lightning Bolt]!"- Boom!"

A purple explosion, so intense that the arena shook.

The electricity that erupted from her body swallowed the silver threads and puppets, erasing even their forms.

Sophia, caught in the aftershock, staggered back, covering her face with her hands.

"What... what is this, what's going on... there was no talk of this, Lucas..."

The sensation of the silver threads extending from her fingers snapping.

At the end of that sensation, even the connection with the puppets was completely severed.

Just when the vision that had been stained purple seemed to be gradually returning to normal.

A kick that swept Sophia's ankle.

Sophia, who didn't even let out a scream, lost her balance and spun around.

* Pow!

A fist that struck Sophia with a vengeance!

* Crash!

Looking down at Sophia, who was sprawled out on the arena floor, Carla wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

Her face, wet with sweat and flushed red, exhaled a panting breath, and Carla looked down at Sophia with wide eyes and said.

"I told you, I would win."

Author's Note

"Win."

# 54 - Exchange Match (3)

1. Inter-house Competition (3)

One of the problems Carla had noticed since becoming a woman and continuing to train with Ivan was this.

It was none other than stamina.

Carla realized that the first Magic she had cast, Lightning Bolt, consumed far more stamina than she had thought—the consumption of Magical Power wasn't a big issue, but stamina was a significant problem.

Wiping the sweat from her face, Carla clenched her fist.

It was a tough and exhausting body, but this was the thrill of victory.

She had forgotten it because it was once her daily life,

But feeling something she had forgotten for so long made the pleasure all the more exhilarating.

'I won.'

I won.

Carla bit her lip, trembling with the exhilarating feeling of victory that threatened to burst out. She felt like jumping up and down and cheering like a girl, but that would be too much.

* Inter-house Competition, Match 1, Commander's Match.
* First bout, Carla Della Cascata versus Sophia von der Zauber.
* Winner, Carla Della Cascata.

The broadcast from within the arena clearly declared Carla as the victor.

Once again, it stirred the joy of victory from deep within Carla's heart, which had been dormant.

'Just one more time. Let's win just one more match. I'm not asking for much.'

Carla clenched her fist and turned to look back.

There, in the waiting room, which was wide open, she saw Ivan waving his arms wildly. The smile on his face clearly showed how genuinely happy he was about Carla's victory.

'You silly fool.'

Even so, Carla couldn't help but chuckle.

Ivan, you silly guy.

* Next opponent, Lucas von Schyskeil.

As soon as the voice echoed, Carla flinched and clenched her fist again.

Rising from the west waiting room and approaching the arena was a blond handsome man—Lucas von Schyskeil.

How could that smile on his face be so vile?

She couldn't help but think that Ivan's smile was much better, even if it was the same smile, and Carla glared at Lucas.

Lucas, who had already entered the arena, lightly stretched, swinging his arms around.

"Well, well, Lady Cascata. You look quite exhausted."

Indeed, Carla's uniform was torn all over, and there were scratches from which blood was seeping out on her white skin. She was still panting heavily, looking every bit as exhausted as she was.

Carla didn't bother to answer.

After all, Lucas's purpose was to provoke her, and getting worked up over every word would only tire Carla out.

"To struggle so much to beat a small fry like Sophia, I didn't expect you to be like this. Don't you think so, madam?"Shut your mouth, Lucas." It's not something someone like you should be saying."

Lucas chuckled at her words.

"I was just worried because you looked so terrible. Can't I worry about you, madam?"

'…I must defeat that bastard no matter what.'

Carla's strength lies in her fighting spirit.

An indomitable fighting spirit that doesn't falter no matter who the opponent is, that is what constitutes Carla.

As the excitement subsided, Carla slowly rotated her shoulders to relieve the tension in the pain she felt all over her body. The sense of discomfort from the absence of her left arm had decreased a lot, but it was still regrettable.

* Are both sides ready?

Carla raised her hand and waved it.

It was a signal that she was ready, but instead of such a signal, Lucas raised both hands.

An eerie, dark green Magical Power glow.

Seeing the Magical Power gathering in both hands, Carla frowned.

There was no way Carla wouldn't recognize that Magic.

The Schyskeil Family Magic, Poisonous Smoke Magic.

The very Magic that had played a significant role in the war, allowing the family named Schyskeil to establish itself as a pillar of the empire.

The fact that Lucas had used Poisonous Smoke Magic against Carla was the same as strongly expressing his will to defeat her.

"Well, I'll gladly face you. It would be good to show the difference in our levels around here. [Poisonous Mist]."

The dark green Magical Power overflowed and slowly spread across the ground.

The poisonous mist that spread out slowly faded in color, losing its color as if melting into the air.

But that was it; the poison was still there, making even breathing dangerous.

Carla drew up purple Magical Power.

The purple Magical Power that swirled around her right side crackled and sparked, and the hair that Ivan had tied up also fluttered fiercely upwards.

"It's true that I've become weaker since I lost an arm. But it's not like you've become stronger, right?"

"Ha! Yes, Carla. I really like that confidence. I like that side of you too. But you're facing an opponent who is too strong for you right now, and that's me."

Magical Power, which must have been full of poison, flashed vividly and floated up as a sphere.

The dark, dark green sphere that hovered around Lucas burst towards Carla with a pop! sound at Lucas's gesture.

"[Lightning Bolt]!"

Carla's fist shattered the sphere with a piercing strike.

The incantation had to be short—the more poison she inhaled, the tighter the noose around her would become.

Carla glared at Lucas, shattering the sphere flying towards her.

Magic made of poison was almost completely incompatible with her.

If she dragged it out, the poison she inhaled would become her shackle, so Carla judged that it would be wise to knock Lucas down directly before she collapsed.

But Lucas was still looking at her with a vile smile in the midst of the brilliantly blooming poisonous mist.

"Poison is really good. This way, I don't even need to move, I just need to stall for time. But stalling for time against you right now is also a problem. Shall we end it appropriately?"

Lucas spread his palm and slammed it down on the ground.

The violently rising poisonous mist surged like waves, as if it had its own will, and crashed towards Carla.

"[Lightning Flash]…!"

Clearly, Carla was at an advantage in terms of speed.

Carla was faster than she had been when she was Carlo.

With that judgment, she pushed through the waves of encroaching poisonous mist and charged straight towards Lucas.

Poison, after all, is a delayed effect.

It was too slow to cause an immediate effect—there was a weakness there, so Carla judged that it would be wise to knock Lucas down before she collapsed.

Carla charging in.

Lucas retreating in comparison.

'I expected that…!'

Both feet plant on the ground.

The swirling purple of the flame wraps around her, protecting her like a solid armor.

"[Brain Armor], [Charge]…!"

Protecting her body with Lightning Armor,

Concentrating the rising Lightning Magical Power into her fist.

Crackling Lightning sparks like smoke from her fist.

Pulling back as if drawing a bow,

Clenching her fist,

The final blow,

Here, nowㅡ

"This is the final blow, Lucas…!""

"That's all?! How ridiculous!"

But something was amiss.

Lucas felt an unknown sense of crisis at Carla's posture, pulled back as far as possible.

Setting up a defense with poisonous mist, and hastily raising poison in both hands, Lucas glared at Carla.

"[Exploding Lightning Strike]…!"- Kwaang!"

Lightning exploded.

With that explosion, Carla's fist—no, Carla herself—flew like an arrow towards Lucas.

A barrier of poison blocked her.

The poisonous mist that rose in front of Lucas was an even darker dark green, and at that moment, the arena exploded and dust rose.

"Yes, this is your limit. Carla Della Cascata."

Lucas said, feigning a relaxed expression as if trying to hide his staggering legs.

Carla was kneeling on one knee, barely supporting herself with only her right arm.

Carla's Exploding Lightning Strike ultimately failed to penetrate Lucas's poisonous mist.

It was close—but it ultimately failed to penetrate, to the point where even calling it close would be hesitant.

And Lucas was overjoyed by that fact.

To Lucas, who had never beaten Carla even once, the fact that he had won, even if it was only in his own mind, encouraged him.

"I won. Carla Della Cascata. Can you see your limit now?"

Lucas twisted the corners of his mouth, looking at the lingering poisonous mist rising from his fingertips.

However, his breathing was already heavy.

Carla's last explosive strike did not break through his defense, but it was certainly true that it had affected him.

But at this moment, Lucas didn't care about such things.

What mattered was Carla, yes, Carla Della Cascata.

She must be frustrated by the humiliation of defeat.

Lucas thought that leaving her with ridicule was the best way to end this confrontation, but he frowned when he saw Carla.

"...Carla, why are you smiling?"

Carla was not frustrated.

Rather, she even had a faint smile on her face, which was clearly close to ridicule.

"...You're so happy to have beaten someone with only one arm and after a series of battles, you look like a bug."

"Yo, you damn…!"

Seeing Lucas trembling with anger made her feel a little better.

Even so, a long sigh escaped from Carla.

What good was having Magical Power to spare?

Her stamina was now at its limit.

"And, it's not over yet…"

"What?"

"Heu, heueu…you, you won't win in the end. Because there's someone who promised to bring me victory."

"Ha, how ridiculous. What's the point of a victory that you didn't achieve?"

Carla looked up at Lucas.

She always looked down on Lucas when he was defeated, so she thought she would feel humiliated now that she had to look up at him, but that wasn't the case.

Rather, she felt refreshed.

She had defeated Sophia, the vanguard, and had managed to exhaust Lucas, the vice-captain, to some extent.

Judging from Lucas's trash-like Magical Power, he wouldn't be able to unleash such poisonous mist on the next runner.

"Ivan said he would bring me victory. Because our team's victory is also my victory."

That was the end of her words.

Carla slowly closed her eyes.

Her eyelids closed heavily.

At that moment, the moment her consciousness disappeared, she thought of Ivan's face.

'Now it's your turn, Ivan. As you said, victory, to me…'

A faint smile spread across her lips.

Soon after, she collapsed—

An announcement signaling the end of the match followed.

In that voice, Lucas leisurely circled the arena, waving his hand towards the audience.

"Now, who's next? Anyone, come out. I, Lucas von Schyskeil, will face you all. Just like Carla being carried out there!"

Lucas slowly turned his head and ridiculed Carla, who was being carried out on a stretcher.

One word from the author (Author's Note)

The other day... I was supposed to meet someone, but they said they weren't feeling well, so I suggested postponing the appointment, but they insisted that they were okay?

So I thought they would be okay and met them, had dinner and dessert together, but yesterday I got a message saying they were confirmed to have COVID.

I told you not to meet me, seriously, aish.

# 55 - Exchange Match (4)

1. Inter-house Competition (4)

In the first-year auditorium of the academy where the Inter-house Competition is taking place.

The fact that each grade uses a separate auditorium already reveals the status of this central Magical Engineering Academy.

As a nation that prioritizes military power, the Empire's interest in this academy is immense; while the third-year competition, which is nearing the end of its military training, is important, the first-year competition holds equal significance.

For this reason, the first-year competition, though unofficial, is an event that the royal family watches with great interest.

“It’s been a while.”

At the sudden voice, Enrico Della Cascata rolled his eyes and glanced sideways.

In truth, he could roughly tell who it was just by the voice, and since it was someone he did not welcome at all, there was even less reason to be glad.

“Not at all.”

“Is that so? To me, it feels like quite a while since I last saw you.”

Lord Cascata sat beside his younger brother.

Enrico clicked his tongue softly and gestured to Fabio to step back, then formed a hand seal.

“I meet Martina every night, you see. It seems you don’t.”

“......”

Martina Della Cascata.

She is the woman who was named by Lord Cascata, the mother of Carlo Della Cascata and Fabio Della Cascata, and the wife of Enrico Della Cascata.

“I buried it in my heart. Unlike you.”

“I see her face in my dreams every night. You, who buried it in your heart. It’s obvious who Martina would be more grateful to.”

“Martina wouldn’t want you to suffer like that.”

“She wouldn’t want me to forget so coldly like you, either.”

“Was it the Water God that made Carla like that?”

Enrico glanced at his brother again.

His fidgeting fingers gradually slowed down until they finally intertwined.

“Are you trying to change the subject? I’ll indulge you. Yes, that fool must have made an offering to the Water God. With an arm like that. Don’t you have a conscience? Your niece has become like this. Don’t you feel any guilt?”

“Am I less human than a father who wants to get rid of Schyskeil?”

“Either way, she has become a daughter. Since she made an offering, she can never return to being a man. Whatever Carla thinks, she can’t go back to the past. So wouldn’t it be better to go in a direction that helps Cascata?”

“Schyskeil doesn’t seem to have a bright future.”

“I know. In the end, it will help Fabio as well.”

“Oh, Martina will weep if she sees this. To think you would sell her out just because she became a daughter.”

Enrico shook his head.

“It’s for the Empire. Schyskeil and Aufstieg. It’s better for those two to disappear. They’re like pests.”

“I agree with that. Aufstieg will collapse on its own anyway.”

“Enough. The match for my niece is over, so you should go back now.”

“Do you have anything left to see?”

Enrico did not answer.

He intended to watch until the match of the commoner that Carla had asked him to observe.

“...I do.”

“Is that so? I have something left too.”

That was the last of their conversation.

Lord Cascata and Enrico Della Cascata.

In the arena they were overlooking, Ivan was entering.

Lorenzo watched Ivan's back while igniting a Magic Herb and letting the smoke rise.

Changing the order suddenly like this wasn’t inherently problematic.

The order could be adjusted depending on the situation, and in any case, winning was what mattered.

However, this time, Ivan’s momentum felt different, which troubled him.

Wasn’t Ivan always the one with a naive sparkle in his eyes, always gentle with his words? But the Ivan who asked to change the order now seemed cold and sharp, as if he had become someone else.

— Please let me go next.

— Why?

— That bastard insulted Carla. I can’t let it go.

The competitive spirit was something that the Empire also encouraged.

The effort to win and the desire for victory became a driving force for self-improvement.

— …Alright, then Ivan. You go.

Ivan didn’t even say thank you.

He simply turned quietly and nodded at Regina, who was originally next in line.

Regina nodded back, her face filled with anxious eyes, and Ivan slowly left the waiting room and headed for the arena.

“My turn was supposed to be next, commoner.”

Lucas sneered at Ivan, who didn’t respond at all.

However, in truth, that sneering was a way to hide the kind of anxiety that was creeping up on him.

Ivan looked different from usual.

Though they didn’t often meet, according to the information Kiara had obtained, he was likely of a weak disposition. But even when they had met in the dining hall before, Ivan had been unpredictable.

“Choose one.”

Ivan said as he brushed back his disheveled hair.

His gaze was cold, and the corners of his lips twisted into a sneer directed at Lucas.

“You’ve touched my things so much, so you should pay the price. Hybrid, do you understand?”

Lucas doubted his ears.

The person in front of him was Ivan, Ivan Contadino.

A commoner dared to call Lucas, the heir of the noble Schyskeil, a hybrid, once again.

“Are you crazy, commoner? I could make you crawl around here in a daze.”

“You? Me?”

Pointing a finger at Lucas and then at his own chest, Ivan’s smirk turned into a laugh of disbelief.

“Not even funny. Truly, you are the kind of people who would seek sweetness under a traitor.”

“You’re speaking incomprehensible words, commoner.”

“Choose.”

Lucas frowned at Ivan’s words.

He couldn’t understand what he was being asked to choose.

“For convenience, I’ve only been using what you call Lightning Magic… but since you’ve humiliated me so much, I want to face you with that girl’s magic. Would you prefer a close combat beating, or a mid-range fight? Long-range would be difficult, given how narrow the arena is.”

Ivan looked around as he spoke.

Lucas let out a laugh of disbelief at Ivan’s demeanor.

“Do as you please, commoner. It seems you want revenge for Carla, but go ahead and do it your way.”

As the voice announcing the start of the match rang out, Lucas summoned a poisonous mist.

He had used quite a bit of magical power—Carla was indeed strong, and as a girl, she had shown enough determination that Lucas had to exert considerable effort.

In fact, it was right to be nervous.

Lucas knew well that Ivan Contadino had ranked first in the entrance exam, and even that foul-tempered Carla had only ranked second. This meant that Ivan was stronger than Carla.

“Do as you please, commoner. I understand why you’re bringing up revenge for my wife, but it’s already too late.”

A dark green poisonous mist swirled up from Lucas.

The thick poison covering the arena floor looked suffocating, and trying to approach Lucas through it would be tantamount to suicide.

The drawback of Poison Magic is that it takes a long time to cast.

Even if it is cast, it has a persistence that means it takes time to produce immediate effects.

However, having already summoned a lot of poison while facing Carla, he could now produce sufficient effects.

“Do as you please, you said.”

Ivan smiled.

“Let’s see… Carla did it like this.”

Ivan spread his feet shoulder-width apart and shifted his weight to his back leg.

One heavily clenched fist was in front of his solar plexus, while the other was naturally forward.

“Ha.”

With a small shout, purple magical power erupted from his entire body—

“W-What the hell.”

Enrico stood up involuntarily.

Not only him, but even Lord Cascata, who had been sitting next to him, stood up abruptly.

He couldn’t believe the sight before his eyes.

Lightning Magic isn’t exactly a secret and is a type of magic used by many, but the magical power enveloping Ivan now, and the Lightning Bolts created from that power, were the Family Magic of Cascata.

Moreover, Ivan was creating eight Lightning Bolts, then nine, and just now, ten! He was spinning ten Lightning Bolts around.

Enrico could summon twelve Lightning Bolts, and Lord Cascata could summon fifteen.

With Ivan not only using the Family Magic of the Cascata but also summoning ten Lightning Bolts, Enrico stared at Ivan with wide eyes.

The uses of Lightning Bolts are endless.

They can be laid down, or used to attack from a distance, but Ivan did not do that.

In front of the dumbfounded Ivan, he charged toward Lucas—just like Carla, he charged toward Lucas, and that image was vividly reflected.

Author's Note (Author's Afterword)

Another chapter will be uploaded this evening.

# 56 - Exchange Match (5)

1. Inter-house Competition (5)

Lucas could hardly contain his shock as he witnessed the scene unfolding before him.

One thing was clear: Ivan's speed was not on par with Carla's.

Carla, even in her days as Carlo, had impressive speed.

That is the nature of Lightning Magic.

It begins by maximizing the caster's physical abilities, resulting in a dramatic increase in strength and speed. Thus, even that guy who was Carlo had a speed that was hard to follow with the eyes, and after revealing her true form as Carla, it remained the same.

Ivan did not possess such speed.

Lucas could follow him with his eyes, indicating a significant drop in speed compared to Carla.

However, one thing was clearly different: the destructive power.

— Bang!

A lightning orb circling around Ivan smashed through a poison barrier without hesitation. Lucas barely dodged Ivan's fist flying toward him and shouted in panic.

“Y-You! How can you use Lightning Magic…!”

“Why, did you think I couldn't use Lightning Magic?”

With a smug smile, Ivan brought his fist down toward Lucas.

Lucas barely managed to evade it, scattering the poison, but this time the lightning orb erupted with fiery sparks, incinerating the poison.

‘Burning poison? How is that even possible!’

He had never heard of such a thing.

Even Flame Magic could not burn poison.

Let alone Lightning Magic, which does not directly create flames, how could it perform such a feat!

“I told you, mongrel. I will treat you just like I would treat my wife.”

Ivan's expression remained relaxed throughout.

In contrast, cold sweat trickled down Lucas's cheek.

“Stop talking nonsense…!”

Gathering all the poison he could cast, Lucas unleashed a barrage of poison attacks toward Ivan.

“Are you not even breathing!?”

The human body cannot withstand poison.

To avoid inhaling it, one must hold their breath, but if they do that, they cannot move like this!

“You're more foolish than I imagined, Lucas. No, let me be polite. Lucas von Schyskeil. You are incredibly foolish and dim-witted beyond my expectations!”

Ivan withdrew his fist and curled the corners of his lips upward.

“I use Dust Storm Magic. I use Lightning Magic. So can I guarantee that I cannot use Poison Magic?”

“…What.”

Lucas was at a loss for words.

Upon reflection, he could not make such a guarantee.

However, it was nonsensical to think that one could freely use all three high-level magics: Dust Storm, Lightning, and Poison Magic. It takes decades to master even one!

“You might think it's impossible, but that's why you're a mongrel, Lucas. A genius is precisely what I am!”

Ivan raised his hand.

As he opened his clenched fist and held his palm flat, a thick dark green magical power began to swirl.

“Y-You’re insane!”

Lucas gasped in shock. That dark green hand… that was the casting technique of the Poison Magic, the symbol of the Poison Master. Moreover, the intensity of the green surpassed even Lucas, indicating that the mastery of Poison Magic had surpassed him.

“My vessel is the best, Lucas. A genius is what this body refers to. You, like a mere fly, cannot even approach or gaze upon me. Understood?”

“Y-You…”

“But I will stop here for now, knocking you down with Poison Magic. I cannot waste any more time. Besides, my goal is to avenge my wife.”

With a light wave of his hand, the Poison Master vanished as if washed away.

In its place, a violet magical power settled, crackling with lightning sounds.

“Now, I will only face you with Lightning Magic. And, just like my wife did, I will face you in unarmed combat.”

Then, Ivan gathered all the lightning orbs that had been flying around him.

The ten or so lightning orbs, which had been flying around with a will of their own, smashing through the poison barrier, vanished, and the poison swirled around Ivan, gathering thickly.

“Phew…”

Ivan exhaled deeply.

Just like Carla, he stood firmly on the ground with a stride about shoulder-width apart.

Just like Carla, the swirling violet flames that enveloped him flickered sharply.

“…Then I will also face you seriously…!”

Lucas straightened his hands, extending his fingers rigidly.

From there, dark green magical power gathered, and the poison he was controlling deepened in hue.

“[Constrict—Poison Kill]…!”

The poison surged high into the sky.

The dark green poison scattered, forming thousands of sharp dagger-like poisons, all aimed at Ivan as they hovered in the air.

Ivan slowly lowered his stance.

Unlike Carla, who had hunched down to gain more propulsion, Ivan, already capable of sufficient propulsion, lowered his stance and gathered magical power into a single point near his waist.

“[Heavenly Poison Kill]—!”

Lucas's incantation echoed as he swung his arm fiercely, as if giving a bombing command.

The thousands of daggers, filled with poison and hovering in the sky, all aimed their tips at Ivan and flew toward him simultaneously with Lucas's incantation.

“Wife, watch closely.”

Ivan smiled broadly.

Even as thousands of daggers flew toward him, Ivan maintained a relaxed smile—

“[Thunder Strike]!”

— Boom!

It felt as if lightning exploded at that spot.

From where Ivan stood, a massive explosion echoed, and he dashed forward with all his might, his legs kicking off the ground. The concentrated magical power exploded, scattering the characteristic violet of lightning in all directions—

As he flew toward Lucas, he burned away every incoming poisoned dagger.

Carrying the force of the explosion, Ivan crashed through the poison barrier Lucas had set up like a piece of paper, flying toward Lucas.

The poison barrier shattered and broke apart without a trace.

The vision obscured by poison also faded and burned away before the lightning.

To Lucas, who stood exposed without any protection— Ivan's fist struck his abdomen in an instant.

“Guh.”

He couldn't even scream properly.

With a smirk on his face, Ivan continued to push his fist deep into Lucas's abdomen with the momentum intact. The trace of Lucas was drawn long as he was pushed from one end of the arena to the opposite wall.

— Crash!

A tremendous sound echoed as the arena's barrier shook.

As clouds of dust rose and settled, only Ivan's figure was visible.

The audience murmured.

Because of Ivan standing alone, it seemed as if Lucas had vanished.

“…Hmph.”

Ivan snickered as he withdrew his fist and straightened his body.

Taking a couple of steps back, Lucas finally revealed himself, slowly collapsing to the ground, embedded in the arena wall.

“This is all you are, mongrel.”

Ivan looked down at him and said.

“To think you would dare to insult someone of such low stature.”

Ivan lifted his foot.

Then, he placed his foot on Lucas's head and began to rub it in.

The audience fell silent as if cold water had been poured over them.

Even though Ivan was the victor, this was a bit too much— after all, Lucas was the heir of a great noble family, and even in an academy, this felt excessive.

“You will no longer even think of insulting my wife.”

Ivan looked up and surveyed the audience.

Then, he raised his hand and pointed with his finger toward one spot.

“—Go ahead, do as you please. You filthy traitor's servant.”

The finger pointed toward a place.

There, Lord Cascata, with a hardened expression, was seated.

The atmosphere in the audience was generally not good.

Although Ivan had won, the clear gesture of insult toward Lucas von Schyskeil stirred murmurs among the nobles.

“Isn’t that a bit too much?”

“Even so, to treat the heir of a great noble like that…”

Noble-looking spectators began to murmur and glance at each other.

Among them was the head of the Schyskeil family, Contred von Schyskeil.

He was looking down at the arena without any expression, while the nobles gathered around him were gossiping about Ivan's actions.

Conversations flowed as if everyone was carefully scrutinizing Ivan's every move, glancing at Contred.

“That commoner… No, what was his name? Contadino? Where on earth did he get such strength…”

“Even so, to publicly insult the heir of a great noble family. Isn’t that going too far, even for an academy?”

“Could it be that Ivan Contadino is a noble's illegitimate child or has hidden lineage? He doesn’t seem like a mere commoner with that strength and demeanor…”

Whispers grew louder from somewhere.

But no one dared to directly criticize Ivan.

The power with which he had just ruthlessly trampled Lucas von Schyskeil was not that of an ordinary commoner.

“Still… to overwhelm Poison Magic so perfectly. I can’t believe it.”

“The pride of Schyskeil has hit rock bottom.”

“But isn’t that equivalent to shaking the order of the Empire!”

A debate was unfolding among the nobles a little distance away.

They were not from Schyskeil but from the Cascata faction.

Enrico, who had been watching Ivan, asked Lord Cascata.

“What do you think, brother?”

Lord Cascata, sitting beside him, asked in a low voice.

“What do you mean, what do I think? Isn’t the answer already clear?”

Enrico answered briefly and nodded.

“That guy… he’s not just a commoner. He possesses a strength that cannot be explained by mere lucky talent. There’s something hidden.”

Lord Cascata's gaze sharpened further.

“That's a reasonable assumption. …And I think it has become certain.”

“Is that so?”

Enrico paused for a moment, then looked up to survey the arena. Ivan was stepping on Lucas's head, still looking dignified as he glared at the audience.

“How interesting.”

A deeper smile hung at the corners of Lord Cascata's lips.

“…Those Aufstieg bastards. They are incredibly cunning.”

Author's Note

But honestly, I think of creative works as just that— creative works...

In a previous chapter, Liam said something like women exist to bear children, and some people might think that way. If one is a traditionalist, they might think that way, and I’m not someone who is good enough to mix my own ideology into a creative work. And well, women do give birth, so does that mean men give birth? Sometimes when a man gives birth, it makes the news because it’s so rare. Giving birth is sacred. It’s also the fruit of love. Anyway, that’s how I feel. I’m not a great person, so I don’t have the skill to insert ideologies or anything like that, so if you have something to say, I’d appreciate it if you could say it boldly. If you just talk to yourself and erase it, I won’t be able to respond, right?

# 57 - Exchange Match, Brief Break

1. Inter-house Competition, A Short Break

"Carla's already awake. You should go in. She was wondering what happened to you."

Lorenzo, who was standing in front of the sickroom door, answered as if he had been waiting for Ivan.

The only reason Ivan would come to the infirmary was obvious, and there was no reason to waste time.

"Yes, Instructor. You worked hard today."

Ivan smiled brightly and greeted Lorenzo.

"...Instructor, is there something on my face?"

Lorenzo seemed uneasy.

No matter what, Ivan's behavior was unsettling.

Usually, he was so docile and polite, but once his eyes turned—and considering that the standard for his eyes turning was usually when Carla was involved—there was definitely something about him.

"No, it's nothing. Go in quickly. Carla's waiting."

Without realizing it, Lorenzo had been staring intently at Ivan's face.

To Ivan's questioning gaze, Lorenzo shook his head and pointed behind him, at the sickroom door.

"Just so you know, Lucas is in the room on the opposite side of the hallway. He doesn't seem to be awake yet. I doubt you'd go there even if I told you to, right?"

At Lorenzo's question, Ivan frowned.

Just hearing about it made him feel unpleasantness creeping up—visiting that guy in the hospital? Absolutely not.

"Alright, then go in."

Ivan bowed deeply to Lorenzo once more.

Lorenzo silently patted Ivan's shoulder and disappeared across the infirmary hallway.

The first thought that crossed Ivan's mind as he opened the infirmary door was that it smelled like lilacs.

There weren't any vases or anything like that, but looking at the pair of violet eyes staring at him made him think so.

"Ivan."

"Yeah, Carla. Not lying down..."

Carla was sitting propped up against the head of the bed.

Her remaining right arm was bandaged, and her face, which was filled with unconcealable fatigue and exhaustion, was one that suited haggardness very well.

"I heard the team battle is over."

"Yeah, it is."

Ivan slowly moved closer to the bed.

There was a chair right next to the bed, probably where Lorenzo had been sitting, and Ivan stood next to the chair, looking at Carla.

"You're looking at me with those eyes again, you commoner."

At Carla's blunt words, Ivan chuckled and pointed to the chair, saying,

"May this commoner sit in this chair, Lady Carla?"

"Sit down, stop talking nonsense."

Seeing that she was still the same as ever, she seemed to be doing alright.

Feeling a strange sense of relief, Ivan sat down and quietly looked at Carla.

"What happened?"

Carla asked, silhouetted against the setting sun.

Her face was shadowed, making it impossible to read her expression.

"We won."

"I know that. What happened?"

At Carla's repeated question, Ivan paused for a moment, wondering what to say.

But only for a moment, as Ivan quickly realized what Carla wanted to hear.

"Carla, I brought victory to you."

Ivan held out his fist.

Carla quietly looked down at Ivan's fist.

She had heard the story from Lorenzo.

That Ivan had used Lightning Magic just like her.

And that he had beaten Lucas half to death in her style, as retribution for insulting Carla.

With this fist.

In the same way as Carla.

Carla reached out her hand.

With her hand wrapped in bandages, Carla caressed Ivan's fist.

"...You beat Lucas down with martial arts."

"I did."

"Why?"

"You're asking the obvious."

Wind flowed in through the open window.

Scattered black hair, and violet eyes looking at Ivan.

Once again, Ivan seemed to smell the scent of lilacs.

"It wouldn't have meant anything otherwise. Carla, I wanted to offer you a more perfect and certain victory."

"...I see, so that's why."

Carla smiled faintly.

She hadn't even imagined he would go this far.

Carla now reluctantly, very reluctantly, admitted that Ivan was a genius.

As shown in his Magical Circuit, he could quickly apply any Magical Engineering, and he was such a genius that he could achieve in one year what an ordinary person would take ten years to achieve.

But martial arts would be different… Carla had thought.

Martial arts were different from Magical Engineering.

However, Ivan had surpassed even Carla's expectations.

"But, Carla. Your role in this victory was significant. Because you defeated Sophia, we would have won even if it wasn't me. It's not a victory I achieved solely with my own strength."

Carla quietly looked at Ivan.

Carla had defeated Sophia.

However, Carla had also been defeated by Lucas, who came up next.

If it had been the old her, she would have been furious, accusing him of trying to deceive her, but Carla was surprisingly calm.

"Don't be ridiculous, you commoner. In the end, you were the one who defeated everyone after that. I heard you were practically the most active in the team battle too."

"That's not true. Emil and Liam were the most active."

"Then the instructor must have lied."

"Anyway. It's true that you played a big role too, so you don't have to be so depressed."

Ivan said, looking into Carla's clear eyes.

His words were without a hint of falsehood.

Carla had defeated Sophia, and from there, they had already gained a favorable position.

Not only that, but she had also forced Lucas to expend a significant amount of Magical Power, so even if it wasn't Ivan who went out next, they could have won.

"But you went out right after, Ivan. You even asked Instructor Lorenzo. Did you think you couldn't beat Lucas without you?"

"No, it's not that. That guy isn't worth that much. You know that."

Ivan answered Carla's words seriously.

"Then why? Regina was supposed to be next."

"Because he insulted you."

Carla's eyebrows twitched.

"What?"

"Lucas insulted you, Carla. He insulted you after you gave it your all. That's all. The moment I saw that, I lost it. No matter what, I thought I had to beat that guy to death, even if it killed me, Carla, I had to return the insult you received."

It wasn't like Ivan.

Carla was momentarily flustered and opened her mouth slightly.

"Carla, no one can insult you. No one at all. I'll take care of anyone who does. So you don't have to be afraid of anything. Got it?"

Ivan's voice was soft, but there was a strange firmness in it.

He looked straight at Carla and continued.

"If there's anyone like that, I'll take care of them all. Don't worry."

A cold spark flashed in Ivan's eyes.

The usual kindness was nowhere to be seen, and something that seemed to have risen from the depths of a deep abyss had seeped in.

"...Ivan?"

"We're friends, aren't we? Right?"

Looking at Ivan, who readily smiled and answered, Carla felt a strange chill run down her spine.

"Aren't we?"

"Y-yes. We're friends..."

Carla nodded almost unconsciously.

It was because Ivan's eyes were strangely flashing.

"Oh, and Carla. About the Exploration Game, the teams have been decided. You and me, just the two of us in one team. The other three in one team."

"Ah… really? Wouldn't it be better for Regina…? Wouldn't it make more sense for Regina and me to be on the same team?"

Ivan smiled at Carla's words.

Ivan smiled, then looked at her again and said.

"Of course it's you and me. There's no reason for anyone else to be on the same team."

Carla closed her mouth.

A strange chill ran down her spine.

Ivan, the current Ivan, didn't seem like the Ivan she knew.

It felt somehow different, and—the fear that had dominated her childhood seemed to be gradually rising from below, like water rising from her ankles.

'…Could it be that Ivan is being consumed?'

Carla suddenly had that thought.

Ivan, who was originally kind and gentle.

If that meant that the hidden side of Ivan was being revealed more and more.

'Surely not.'

Carla unconsciously shook her head.

There was no way that could be true, there was no way such a thing could happen.

'If that's true, then… how should I help Ivan?'

A long sigh escaped her lips.

Author's Note

Thank you for all your comforting words.

Actually, I wasn't upset at all. I mean, there's no reason for me to be upset, and I'm satisfied with my life now. I have a happy family and a smooth-sailing life, so I have a blessed life and there's not much to complain about. So, even if someone full of spite tries to poke at me, there's no way I'd be hurt. I wasn't hurt in the slightest, it was just a moment of annoyance. But it's true that I felt bad, so thanks to your comforting words, I feel better after a day's sleep. I deleted the comment notifications and moved them out of sight, and I feel so much more comfortable. Maybe they're jealous of me. Ah, this is why it's tiring to be successful. Oh well... haha. I'm kidding, you know? I was just joking. Anyway, I'm really okay, so you don't have to worry! And thank you!

No updates on weekends.

# 58 - Exploration Battle (1)

1. Exploration Game (1)

"The rules of the Exploration Game are simple."

Lorenzo, standing on the platform, looked around at the ten students.

He scanned the students, who seemed more excited than nervous, and continued in a calm tone, trying to hide his displeasure.

"Each team will receive a map. The map shows the location you need to reach. There, you will find Magic that allows you to escape the area. The first one to escape wins. Their class gets extra points. However, once you enter this barrier, you won't know where you'll start. So, quickly figure out where you are and move. Simple, right?"

The students exchanged strange looks at Lorenzo's words.

He spoke quickly, and it was hard to tell if the explanation was simple or if the rules actually were.

"In other words, you won't know your starting point. You know where you need to go, but not where you're starting."

Carla nudged Ivan's side and said.

Ivan tilted his head, wondering if that was the case.

Isn't it too easy?

Even if you don't know the starting point...

As long as the map shows the destination, if you can read a map, you should be able to figure it out somehow.

"Just so you know, when you enter this barrier... there's no guarantee that your starting point will be on the map you're given."

"Excuse me?"

A murmur spread through the crowd.

If the starting point isn't on the map, how are they supposed to find their way?

Lorenzo chuckled as if he had anticipated the reaction.

"Isn't it obvious? When you're stranded on the battlefield, don't assume that the map you have will always show your location. There will be times when you have to find landmarks on the map and read the map from there. I've taken that into account."

That wasn't entirely unreasonable.

"The explanation has been long. Each team should enter quickly. Take the map as you enter."

Lorenzo snapped his fingers.

Behind him, the stone gate engraved with the four-winged raven, where the entrance exam had been held, opened with a heavy sound.

"This place should be familiar, right? Everyone, go in. The East group already has a lead, but if you lose the Exploration Game, you'll be tied with the West group. You better be nervous. Oh, and if you run into each other inside, you can fight. If you get seriously injured, you'll be automatically removed, so don't worry."

Lorenzo wore a thick smile.

With a smirk on his lips, Lorenzo said.

"Then, good luck."

Inside the barrier, it instantly became a different space.

It was said that although it was a space created for the exam, it wasn't entirely nonexistent, but connected to somewhere far away on the east coast, instantly transporting them there.

Endless white sandy beaches and rocky undulations followed the winding coastline. Passing the gradually narrowing sandy beach and entering the island, there was undergrowth, gradually thickening forest, and deeper inside, even rocky mountains.

"What trash scenery."

Lucas revealed his vulgar nature without fail.

Kiara, who was on the same team as Lucas, felt a sigh escape her lips.

"...Is that so?"

"I like the city. I don't feel anything for this kind of natural scenery."

Lucas said, glanced at the map he received upon entering, and threw it behind him without hesitation.

He and Kiara started right above a rocky cliff.

If they had gone back a little further, they would have been on a steep cliff, its jagged edges exposed.

Now, the map fluttered and flew over it.

"L, Lord Lucas?!"

"No need to be surprised, Kiara. I have something prepared. You just need to help me. Since we're at the beach, isn't this the perfect place for you, Kiara?"

Kiara looked at the sneering Lucas with a dumbfounded expression.

What is he trying to do? He threw away the map when he doesn't even know where we are or where the destination is. Is he crazy?

But when Lucas took out another map, Kiara's face became even more absurd.

"L, Lord Lucas. What is that...?"

"This is a map arranged by supporters who recognized my true worth. We don't need that other map."

Lucas proudly unfolded the map.

The map looked basically the same as the distributed map, but the destination was circled in red, and the terrain was well drawn. And there was a blue flashing dot on the outside of the map paper.

"This is our current location, Kiara. Understand?"

Kiara looked at the map once and then looked at Lucas.

This is cheating, no matter what anyone says—it's a violation of the rules.

How can he show it off so proudly?

"Lord Lucas, but this..."

"Ah, and this must be it."

Lucas ignored Kiara's words and pointed to one side of the map.

There were two red dots flashing some distance away from their location.

"W, what is this?"

"This is."

Lucas curled his lips and smiled.

The smile felt somehow eerie, and as Kiara frowned without realizing it, Lucas said.

"The location of that commoner and Carla."

Lucas smiled wickedly and licked his lips.

The Aphrodisiac needle in his pocket, and the countermeasures against Ivan that Venere had told him about.

With these two, there would be no problem in toying with Carla here.

Even if Carla had feelings for that commoner, it didn't matter.

He also had no special feelings for Carla.

Carla is beautiful, but that's it.

Since she's missing an arm, she'll have to wear an Artificial body even after marriage, so she's already flawed as a woman.

He has no intention of taking such a woman as his legal wife.

For Lucas, Carla's existence is only that much.

He will marry her... to absorb the Cascata family.

And to indulge in her body as much as he wants.

'Her face is pretty decent... but it won't last long.'

But the flesh is bound to get boring anyway.

Once he absorbs Cascata, Carla is finished.

"Lord Lucas, could it be..."

The quick-witted Kiara realized what Lucas was thinking.

However, she moved her lips several times, then closed them again.

She can't stop Lucas.

She couldn't, and she shouldn't.

The Servitore still needed Schyskeil's power.

"Yes, we'll go here first."

Lucas, unaware of what Kiara was thinking, pointed to a spot on the map.

The name Abjeti Cave was clearly written there.

"Where is this?"

Carla looked around.

All she could see was the beach on the right and the forest on the left.

She could see a tall rocky mountain in the distance, so she couldn't tell where she was.

"Map... hmm."

In the meantime, Ivan unfolded the map and looked at it.

It wasn't easy to hold onto the map as it fluttered in the wind blowing along the mountain range.

"The destination... doesn't seem to be the rocky mountain."

When looking at the map, the easiest thing to think of is somewhere on the rocky mountain.

Anyone can easily guess, and the most noticeable place is the rocky mountain.

But the destination marked on the map was not the rocky mountain.

A circle was drawn somewhere beyond the rocky mountain, but the problem was that they didn't know the starting point.

The map wasn't very big.

In the first place, it wasn't a map that could contain all the terrain of this place, so Lorenzo's words that the starting point wouldn't necessarily be on the map were exactly right.

"Can't you even read a map? Stop showing off your commoner status in a place like this."

Ivan smiled awkwardly at Carla's words.

In fact, Carla's words weren't wrong, because map reading isn't something commoners usually learn. There's no way Ivan, who has lived as an ordinary commoner, would know how to read a map.

"Give it here."

Ivan handed the map to Carla, who held out her hand.

Even so, Ivan held one corner to fix it for Carla, who couldn't see the map properly because it was fluttering.

"First, we need to find where north is. If you look in the corner, there's a compass rose marked like a 4, so we can find out where north is from here."

Carla looked away from the map and looked up at the sky.

Pointing to the sun, which hadn't yet reached its zenith, Carla looked at Ivan.

"Since the sun rises in the east, we can find out the west by looking at the direction the sun is moving. If we know the east and west, it'll be easy to find the north. You have to apply that to read a map."

"Wow. Carla, you're amazing."

Carla's chest swelled as she looked at Ivan.

Yes, this is the feeling—this is it.

This feeling of victory that she hadn't felt in a long time.

That too, surpassing Ivan, that Carla knows knowledge that he doesn't!

Pride fills her chest.

Joy rises to her throat.

The sweet fruit of victory that finally came after being defeated by this commoner all along!

A thrilling pleasure filled her chest.

"Then this is..."

And as Ivan straightened the map, the letters that were finally revealed—Carla, who inadvertently looked down at it, widened her eyes.

With eyes so wide that they couldn't be wider, Carla glared at the map as if she would pierce through it.

"Carla, what's wrong?"

Carla didn't answer Ivan's question.

Her gaze was fixed on the letters on the map—the letters Abjeti Cave.

Abjeti Cave.

The cave that also appeared in the notes left by the person who tracked Venere.

The name of the cave where Venere's Artificial body are stored was recorded on this map.

Author's Note

I didn't know you'd be so disappointed that I don't update on weekends...

Since it's the Lunar New Year, I'll update...

And the cover has changed too.

And to the sponsor who hid their name,

Thank you, thank you for your words of encouragement. I originally have a strong mentality, so I don't get shaken easily even if I hear annoying things. I have been shaken only once, but that was when I was sick lol. Anyway, I'm really okay. There are about five people who try to scratch my nerves, but there are ten times as many people who support me, right? So there's no reason for me to be discouraged or hurt. Life is too short to only see good things and eat delicious things. Trying to be jealous, envious, and belittling others also diminishes one's own value, so I'm not such a narrow-minded person (not in a lewd way), so you don't have to worry! Haha, still, I'll do my best! Fighting!

# 59 - Exploration Battle (2)

1. Exploration Game (2)

"We're pretty lucky."

No one disagreed with Liam's words as he cut through the vines.

Their group consisted of Liam, Emil, and Regina, and their starting point was marked on the map.

"Except that the destination is so far away..."

Emil said in a tired voice.

The gloomy weather looked like it would rain any minute, and seeing the dark clouds rolling in from afar, it was practically a given that it would rain.

"Regina, why are you so down?"

Emil was concerned about Regina, who had been silent for a while.

He had some sense, so he expected Regina to be very disappointed that she wasn't in the same group as Ivan, but even considering that, Regina seemed too listless.

"Huh? Oh, no. Sorry for making you worry."

"It's not that... you just seem so down."

"It's probably because she's not in the same group as Ivan."

Liam boldly said what Emil couldn't bring himself to say out of consideration.

Emil inwardly clicked his tongue at Liam for casually touching on Regina's feelings, but there was nothing he could do.

"...Well, it's a little like that."

So it was.

Emil nodded.

"It makes sense... Regina likes Ivan, after all."

"H, huh?!"

Regina was so surprised that she almost jumped.

Liam was giving her love advice, and now even Emil was saying such things, so she wondered what was going on and glared at Liam.

"No, I didn't tell Emil anything. A counselor doesn't leak a client's information. It's basic, basic."

Liam said nonchalantly, cutting through the vines and looking around.

"I didn't hear it from Liam, Regina. Everyone probably knows you like Ivan, except for Ivan himself. Well, it's only three people, though."

Regina thought her face must be red.

Her face felt hot, which was probably due to embarrassment.

"It's so obvious. It would be stranger if Ivan didn't know."

"R, really...? Is it that obvious...?"

"It would be stranger if you didn't know, Regina."

So it was that obvious.

She had tried to hide it, but she was embarrassed that it was so obvious. But then, she felt a little resentful that everyone else noticed, but Ivan, the person in question, didn't.

"Shall we take a break?"

Liam swung his Curved sword widely.

The vines were cut down with a rustling sound, and thanks to the Curved sword, which contained a bit of flame, even the weeds were cleared away, creating enough space for the three of them to sit.

"Let's eat a little dried food. Stamina is important for walking."

Liam folded the map and put it in his Pouch at his waist, then plopped down.

Emil carefully adjusted his pants and sat down, and Regina also arranged her skirt and sat down.

They each took out a few pieces of dried fruit from the Pouches hanging at their waists and chewed them carefully. The dried fruit pieces, coated with syrup, contained enough sugar, which helped to revitalize their tired bodies and minds.

"Aren't you worried about Carla, Regina?"

Regina's eyes widened at Liam's casual remark, and she swallowed the piece of fruit she was chewing. She coughed, and Emil quickly handed her a water bottle, which she drank from before finally calming down.

"W, why are you talking about Carla?"

"Hmm, isn't it obvious? You two didn't know that Carla was originally a woman, did you?"

Liam picked up a long wooden stick.

He swept the ground with his foot, revealing the dirt, and drew three circles on it.

"This is Ivan, this is Carla, and this is Regina, you. Originally, you would have thought Carla was a man, so you could have taken your time and put in the effort to win over Ivan. But now that Carla has revealed her true form, you're probably flustered, Regina."

The three circles were drawn side by side.

He erased them with his foot, and now the three circles were arranged in a triangle, one above and two below.

An arrow from Regina points to Ivan.

An arrow from Ivan points to Carla.

Carla has a question mark instead of an arrow.

"This is the problem. Whether Carla's arrow points elsewhere, or whether it points to Ivan. If it points to Ivan, Regina, you'll be heartbroken."

Regina didn't say anything as she listened to Liam's explanation.

Hearing it explained by someone else, it was definitely true...

She had been worried about something vague, but after hearing this explanation, it was true.

'...I was worried about Carla.'

"Why don't you just make it a fait accompli, Regina?"

Regina's eyes widened at Liam's words.

She had no idea what he meant by making it a fait accompli, so she waited for Liam to explain.

"A fait accompli, a fait accompli. Women have their own weapons, you know."

Liam wiggled his fingers.

Regina and Emil stared blankly at Liam, not understanding the gesture for a long time, until they finally realized what he meant and their faces turned bright red.

"L, L, Liam..."

"What are you so surprised about? That's also a weapon that women can use. It's quite common in our country... if you get pregnant that way, Ivan will be yours. Isn't that right?"

She couldn't understand Liam, who was saying it so casually.

No matter what, no matter what... that's something you should do after you get married.

In fact, this is a perfectly normal way of thinking for an Imperial lady.

To pounce first and make it a fait accompli, what an obscene way of thinking!

"The Empire is too old-fashioned. There's nothing fun."

Regina was about to tell Liam that it wasn't fun.

But before she could, Liam suddenly raised his head and grabbed his Curved sword.

"Something fun has happened. Yes, this is more like it."

Liam raised his Curved sword.

Seeing Liam's movements, Emil quickly formed a Hand seal.

Just as Regina was about to float Ice ball around her, a large rock rose from the very spot where Liam had been sitting.

"Earth magic. Wilhelm."

Flames flared up from Liam's Curved sword.

A large man with brown hair slowly appeared before Liam, who had a relaxed smile on his face.

"Liam, Liam Fuco. I'll repay you for the humiliation in the team battle."

"You'll be adding to that humiliation now."

Two students from the West slowly revealed themselves behind him.

Regina's face gradually hardened as she saw them.

However, Kiara and Lucas were nowhere to be seen.

"So that's what happened. Then we should go here first."

Carla was about to run out as soon as she saw the name Abjeti Cave.

She had to find the cave immediately and check the Artificial body there.

But she was a well-educated intellectual, and she knew that there was nothing she could do alone right now. So she slowly and in as much detail as possible, explained to Ivan about the Abjeti Cave, the note where she found the name, the contents of the note, and Venere as briefly as possible.

Ivan nodded quickly after hearing the explanation.

Carla was a little surprised because she had expected Ivan to say that they should finish the Inter-house Competition first—especially this Exploration Game, which had the highest score—and then continue exploring the cave.

But unexpectedly, surprisingly, Ivan said that they should go to the cave first, as Carla suggested, rather than prioritizing the Exploration Game.

"...What about the Exploration Game?"

Carla even asked first.

In fact, Ivan could probably just push through with his strength and get to the destination.

Carla knew that Ivan had that much power, even if the instructors didn't think so.

"There are other friends, too. I think they'll cover our share. And even if we prioritize the Exploration Game, it'll be hard for you to concentrate, Carla. I think it's better to go there quickly and then join them."

No matter how she thought about it, it didn't seem like the three of them could fill Ivan's absence.

But Carla, to be honest, didn't want to miss this opportunity.

The east coast, a place very far from where she lived.

She didn't know when she would be able to visit this Abjeti Cave again if not now.

Now that she had found it so easily, she was impatient.

"...Okay, then let's do that..."

"Then let's go, Carla."

She was also grateful that Ivan was so willing to step forward.

As soon as she answered, Ivan picked Carla up.

Carla, surprised by Ivan's action of lifting her up like a princess, as if he was holding something precious, shouted without realizing it.

"Wh, what are you doing!"

"Isn't it better to go quickly? Look at the weather, it's already cloudy. It'll be a disaster if it rains."

Indeed, it was.

The sun had been out a while ago, but now the weather was cloudy.

"I've got a rough idea of the direction. So let's go quickly. Isn't it faster to move like this?"

Without waiting for Carla's answer, Ivan leaped away.

"B, but!"

Carla shouted in a flustered voice, but Ivan didn't turn his head.

"Isn't it better to go quickly? You said the cave was important."

Ivan's voice was firm.

As if the most important thing right now was this Abjeti Cave.

Carla's face turned red at Ivan's words.

'Th, this guy... was he always this... proactive?'

She turned her head away in embarrassment.

But she felt a strange sense of relief somewhere in her heart.

Author's Note

Current stockpile: Up to chapter 71

# 60 - Exploration Battle (3)

1. Exploration Game (3)

“There’s something called scale, but it’s not marked on this map. It seems intentional.”

While taking a short break, Carla placed the map on her lap and pressed down on it with her intact hand.

Reading maps isn’t easy, to the point that there’s a technique called the ‘Dokkobop,’ but Carla, being a noble, had received extensive training in it. Thus, maps typically include a scale, allowing one to estimate the distance to their destination just by looking at it.

However, the map provided to the students did not indicate any scale. This meant that it was impossible to determine the scale at which this map had been reduced.

“Not that there’s no way to figure it out, though.”

“Can’t we just go, Carla? Just head straight…”

Carla frowned at Ivan, who stood before her.

While it might be possible to reach their destination by simply following a rough direction to get through this part, would that be sufficient after graduating from this academy and being commissioned? Even for the sake of fulfilling her role as a commander, she should at least learn how to read a map…

‘…Does it even matter if I have no arms?’

At this rate, she would merely be Carla Della Cascata, a high noble, without even a commission in hand.

Suddenly, the thought made Carla feel as if she were being dragged back into the swamp of depression.

“Right, well. Anyway, we’ll manage somehow.”

Carla handed the map to Ivan and stood up.

It was much better to move her body than to be stuck in gloomy thoughts.

“It looks like it might rain, Ivan. The dark clouds are getting closer. We should hurry.”

“Yeah, let’s go.”

“Do you have enough magical power?”

After all, they had been running for quite a while with Carla in his arms.

While Ivan’s magical power was a given, Carla still asked out of concern, and Ivan smiled back at her.

“Worrying about the salt in seawater, Carla.”

Carla couldn’t help but laugh at the absurdity of his words.

“I’ve heard that somewhere before. Let’s go.”

“Okay.”

As if waiting for her cue, Ivan lifted Carla into his arms.

How long had it been that she had grown accustomed to being held like this?

It was no longer uncomfortable, and as she naturally settled into his embrace, Carla felt a strange sensation.

“By the way, what will you do if there are artificial bodies of the crafting mage over there?”

Finding the artificial bodies didn’t mean Carla could do much.

It was impossible to detach an arm from one of those bodies and attach it to Carla right now, and ultimately, finding the artificial bodies wouldn’t solve anything immediately.

“I’ll have to take one.”

“One of the artificial bodies?”

“Yeah.”

Carla was determined to retrieve at least one.

And after that, she would carefully read through the notes she had left behind at the mansion…

“Or maybe I could threaten that crafting mage to the point of killing them if they don’t attach an arm to you?”

“Hmm?”

Lost in thought, Carla perked up at Ivan’s words.

It sounded rather strange.

“I mean the crafting mage. They didn’t seem that strong anyway, right? If I find them and threaten to kill them if they don’t attach an arm to you right away, wouldn’t that work?”

“But we have no way to find them.”

“That’s true.”

Even while running with Carla in his arms, Ivan appeared remarkably calm, as if he were walking on flat ground.

Thanks to the Dust Storm magic, they were running much faster than ordinary people, but such an action was impossible without stamina to back up the magical power.

“Carla, you… might not have a grudge against them, but I do. So wouldn’t they come looking for me?”

Ivan’s words had some merit.

Venere… that woman he had mentioned.

She was likely the crafting mage.

Carla held a deep grudge against her.

She held a deep grudge against Ivan.

“And if they find out that their artificial body was stolen, they’ll probably go wild looking for the thief.”

Carla looked up at Ivan.

His face, seen from her position in his arms, was…

“…You’re smarter than you look?”

“Smarter than I look? That kind of comment makes me a bit sad.”

There was some truth to it.

The woman Carla had met had quite a strong sense of pride, and because of that, she had easily fallen for Carla’s provocation. Given that she had been unable to touch Ivan and had been so easily dealt with, it was only natural for her to harbor a grudge.

“We need to find the artificial body. If we do, we’ll have a plan. That’s where it all begins.”

“Yeah. I’ll cooperate, so let’s definitely find it.”

Ivan smiled down at Carla while running.

Strangely enough, despite her dislike of being looked down upon, she didn’t feel particularly bad about it at that moment.

Even so—

While being carried in Ivan’s arms, Carla let out a suppressed sigh.

As Ivan handled everything by her side, the fact that she could do nothing but receive help tormented her.

‘…Will things really go well? Can they flow smoothly? What will happen to me…?’

Still in Ivan’s arms, she turned her gaze from him to the heavily clouded sky and asked herself.

But she still couldn’t find an answer.

“Master, using something received from unknown individuals is…”

Kiara felt her lips drying out.

When on earth had such unknown things attached themselves to Lucas?

Kiara’s room was right next to Lucas’s, so if something had happened, she would have known.

They were almost always right next to each other, even during class, so when could it have happened?

“Shut up, Kiara. Those guys have something they want from me, so they offered me this. I’m using them just as they’re using me. How could a girl like you understand the transactions of those above, huh?”

Kiara fell silent.

When he spoke like that, she found herself at a loss for words.

“If I completely make Cascata mine, I won’t need to establish my position within the Empire. No matter how I think about it, this deal is flawless.”

Lucas muttered to himself.

Kiara felt a chill at his words.

There was no affection or respect for Carla as a person in what he said.

He merely viewed her as a tool to achieve his goals.

Having offered her concern only to receive a contemptuous reply, Kiara bit her lip tightly, unable to say anything further.

“Hmph. Ivan is indeed moving with Carla. They’re rushing madly toward the cave…”

The map in Lucas’s hand showed a point marking Ivan and Carla rapidly heading toward Abjeti Cave.

“Kiara. The humidity is high right now. Spread your magical power. We need to find those two first.”

Lucas smiled with a glint in his eyes.

It was truly, truly a chilling smile.

At that smile, Kiara bit her lip and trembled.

‘How could a person become this vile?’

She couldn’t understand.

Lucas had never been known for his good character.

But since Carla had revealed her true self, lost her arm, and rumors had spread, his wickedness had only deepened to this point.

“Now that Carla has become so powerless, I can truly trample her as I please. It’s a pity she’s missing an arm, but there’s a certain enjoyment in that as well.”

Watching Lucas lick his lips and spew filthy words made Kiara shudder.

Why had he become this way—

‘Lady Cascata…’

As a woman herself, she felt the tragedy that had befallen her.

And the tragedies that followed in its wake.

In the end, a woman destined to be embraced by this filthy and vile man.

Carla Della Cascata.

Kiara wasn’t particularly close to her, nor did they have any real connection.

But thinking of her being embraced by that filthy Lucas, she felt a surge of sympathy for her, realizing that her fate might be even more miserable than Kiara’s own.

“It’s raining.”

Kiara snapped back to reality at Lucas’s words.

Raindrops were already falling onto her face.

“How dare you let me get wet, you foolish girl.”

“I-I’m sorry, Master.”

On a day filled with humidity that hinted at rain, Kiara’s powers grew stronger.

Thus, she was more accurate than anyone when it came to predicting rain.

Yet, lost in her thoughts, she had allowed Lucas to get wet, prompting him to scowl and approach her.

—Thud!

“Ugh…”

Kiara bit her lip and stifled a groan as her shin was kicked hard.

“Find a place to avoid the rain, Kiara. I absolutely hate getting my clothes wet.”

Kiara quietly formed a hand seal.

Soon, a transparent barrier formed around Lucas, and the raindrops could only patter endlessly against the barrier without passing through.

“I think there’s a cave over there. There’s a place where the rain can’t reach.”

“Let’s go there.”

Lucas moved ahead of Kiara.

Kiara followed behind him, taking quick steps to keep up.

“The weather is nice, I really like it.”

With dark clouds filling the sky, it was hard to tell whether it was day or night.

The clouds that had quickly covered the sky cast a dark shadow over the forest.

A strong wind whipped through the branches, and the heavy air pressed down so hard that it was difficult to breathe.

The raindrops that had been falling one by one quickly turned into a torrential downpour, and Lucas, shielded by Kiara’s waterproof barrier, looked up at the sky and muttered absurdly.

“Today, I will make that arrogant girl from Cascata mine. The rain is falling to hide her tears, so it’s perfect. I might as well deal with that presumptuous commoner too…”

Crunch.

Lucas ground his teeth.

“I must kill her.”

Kiara let out a cold sigh, even amidst the downpour.

Lucas’s filthy words echoed in her ears, tormenting her.

‘…My life, and Lady Cascata’s life. We’re both being dragged into the muck.’

Her gaze turned toward the depths of the forest.

For some reason, Carla and Ivan were heading toward the same place as Lucas and Kiara.

If Lucas’s intention was merely to scold them, Kiara wouldn’t mind.

However, knowing that it was going too far, Kiara was all too aware that she had no power to stop Lucas.

The Servitore family was still relying on Schaiske, and she had no choices left.

# 61 - Exploration (4)

1. Exploration Game (4)

The rain began to intensify.

What had started as a light drizzle finally thickened, to the point where it felt as if it were pounding against their bodies.

Ivan's magical engineering was using wind magic to blow away the rain as he ran, but even that had its limits, and the rain pouring through the gaps in the wind was becoming increasingly difficult to ignore.

"Shouldn't we slow down a bit?"

Ivan paused at Carla's suggestion—was it really necessary to reduce their speed? But when he glanced down at Carla, her appearance was a complete mess.

With the rain hitting them, Carla was taking the brunt of it right in the face. Because of the water soaking her face, she couldn't even open her eyes properly, and seeing her like that, Ivan awkwardly smiled and gradually slowed down.

"I didn't mean to neglect you, I'm sorry."

"No, it's fine..."

Carla thought to herself that she felt a bit bad for being a hindrance, but she couldn't voice it.

Though they slowed down, Ivan did not stop. Holding Carla, he was heading toward Abjeti Cave, which was quite a distance from where the exploration game was taking place.

Looking up at Ivan's face, Carla felt a twinge of dissatisfaction.

"I never thought I would become a hindrance..."

Wasn't she known for her bold personality?

But now, in this sorry state, she realized anew her current predicament, which she had felt several times before.

At least her circuits hadn't reversed and broken down, so she could still use magic, but even that was half-hearted. The circuits were intact, but her body was not whole, so the circuits couldn't perform at their best in the current situation.

And this was the result.

"But you're not cold, right?"

Ivan's words snapped Carla out of her thoughts.

At some point, Ivan, who had been looking ahead, was now smiling down at her.

"Yeah. I'm not cold."

"Right. It's probably because we're holding each other like this. You have body heat, after all."

"If we go a bit further, we might end up taking our clothes off and holding each other."

"I-I didn't think that far."

Ivan quickly became flustered.

There was something oddly amusing about his reaction.

"Why, am I not enough? Would you prefer Regina?"

"Wh-why is Regina coming up? It's not like that. By the way, I think we should be seeing our destination soon..."

Ivan turned his head and headed toward a large tree trunk nearby.

It was still raining, but they needed to check the map anyway.

"Ah, I think... we took a wrong turn."

"See, you should have been looking at the map. But it doesn't seem like we're too far off."

Carla said while looking at the map Ivan was showing her.

She was oddly concerned that it might sound like she was blaming him.

"We can just get back on the right path. We haven't strayed too far. Since we're here, let's take a little break, Ivan."

"Isn't it better to go straight?"

"It would be hard for you to carry me too. I know I'm heavier than I look. So let's just catch our breath for a moment."

"Should we...? Is the rain not hitting us?"

Ivan reached over Carla's head and waved his hand around.

For him, it was a thoughtless action, but for Carla, the situation was different. Leaning against the tree trunk, she could see Ivan's chest right in front of her. As he waved his hand above her head, right in front of her was Ivan's broad, somewhat wet... no, very wet... chest muscles right in her line of sight...

"Carla, are you okay? Your face is red."

"N-no, it's nothing."

It was only when Ivan's face suddenly appeared after that moment that Carla snapped back to her senses.

"Are you worried about something?"

"I don't have anything like that. I'm just wondering if I'll find what I'm looking for in Abjeti Cave."

"You have to make it happen. Isn't that obvious?"

"What do you mean by 'make it happen'?"

Carla asked Ivan, who had plopped down next to her with a thud.

Ivan paused for a moment, then looked at Carla and said.

"Well, it's so you can achieve what you want. So that your arm can come back. I mean, I will make it happen."

"You?"

"Of course. We're friends. I think it's only natural for a friend to help achieve what they want."

"Uh... really?"

Ivan smiled again at Carla's response.

"And because it's you, Carla, of course I have to help. It's not someone else's business."

'...Isn't it someone else's business?'

Ivan was saying something strange for no reason.

"Ah, let's eat something dry."

Carla turned her left hand to her back waist and rummaged through her pouch.

She distinctly remembered that there had been some simple food in the pouch they had been given before entering, and thinking of that suddenly made her feel hungry.

"These are dried fruits. They seem to have sugar on them. This must be expensive."

Ivan took the piece of dried fruit that Carla offered and turned it around in his hand. Seeing that, Carla couldn't help but chuckle.

"Hey, what's the point of just drying fruit? It wouldn't taste good without sugar."

"Ah... really? I haven't had fruit much."

"That's because you're a commoner..."

Carla was about to say that but quickly shut her mouth. She didn't want to bring up the topic of commoners here and risk upsetting Ivan.

'To get to Abjeti Cave, I need this guy's help... there's no other choice.'

Yes, that's right.

To get what Carla wanted, she needed to cater a bit to Ivan's feelings.

It couldn't be helped.

"This is delicious. Maybe it's because of the sugar, it's really sweet."

"Really?"

Carla tasted the piece of fruit Ivan mentioned, and while it had sugar on it, it was actually only a trace, so it wasn't particularly sweet.

"What do you mean it's sweet? You should come to my house later. I'll give you some really delicious dried fruit."

"How can I go to a house I can't even go to?"

"...Next time, um. Next time."

"I think I've filled my stomach a bit, so should we get going?"

After eating a few pieces of fruit and some jerky—which was quite good by Ivan's standards—he groaned and stood up.

"Yeah."

Ivan stood up first and patted his backside.

It had rained a lot, so there wasn't much dust to shake off, but habits are habits.

"Okay, Carla. Get ready to hold on."

"...Can you rephrase that?"

Holding on sounded strange.

"Why?"

"Can't you just say something like 'I'll support you'?"

"I'm carrying you, so I'm saying hold on."

"...Regina is going to have a hard time."

Regina seemed pitiful for no reason.

Though Carla grumbled, she grabbed Ivan's outstretched hand and stood up.

"Ah!"

Unintentionally stepping into a puddle of water, she let out a yelp and lost her balance. Ivan was there to catch her before she fell forward.

"Carla, are you okay?"

"Uh, uh...?"

"You're holding on, right?"

And indeed, that was the case.

Carla buried her face in Ivan's chest, effectively wrapping herself in his arms. The sound of the rain began to fade, and it felt like she could hear his heartbeat—before long, she realized that the heartbeat she heard was not his, but her own.

"You're not hurt, are you?"

"Yeah, um... I'm fine."

Ivan helped Carla stand up again, smiling as he extended his arms forward, looking as if he was really going to hold her.

Just then, as Carla hesitated to approach him, a voice interrupted.

"You're making a scene. To be flirting with a woman who will become someone else's wife, is the blood of a lowly servant inescapable?"

Ivan frowned and turned to the direction of the voice.

"I didn't detect any magical power coming this way. Lucas, you can't be strong enough to hide your magic."

"The one above uses the one below."

Breaking through the rain, Lucas slowly revealed himself.

Behind Lucas, Kiara appeared with a dark expression, and seeing her, Carla scowled and shouted.

"You filthy insect, why are you here again? Are you looking to get beaten up again?"

"You're saying something funny, Carla. Back then, I was just surprised by that servant's strange actions. Besides, my subordinate Kiara is invincible in this heavy rain, you know."

Carla couldn't deny that statement.

She knew it too—Kiara di Servitore, her magic was of the water type.

In weather rich with water like this, she could display extraordinary strength.

"Forget that servant and come to me, Carla. You who will become Carla von Schaiske. Come here and let me hold you."

"You're ridiculous."

Carla's face twisted in disgust.