# The Academy's Prodigy Wants to Defeat the Genius - 0

1st and 2nd Place

"First place goes to Ivan Contadino."

Carlo wasn’t particularly surprised.

It was something he had expected.

"Second place goes to Carlo della Cascata."

The hundred examinees stirred noisily.

Ivan was first, and Carlo was second.

In other words, the final result of the Imperial Central Magic Academy entrance exam meant that a commoner ranked first, while Carlo, the eldest son of the Cascata family—one of the Empire’s Four Pillars, and the one referred to as the First Pillar—ranked second.

Carlo himself showed little reaction.

However, his stiffened expression indicated his discomfort, and his clenched fist, with veins bulging, showed that his reason was barely suppressing his emotions.

"Third place, Wilhelm von Mittenburg."

The young man with neatly trimmed hair remained serious, though the slight upward curl of his lips trembled, perhaps revealing his satisfaction with third place.

"Fourth place, Lucas von Scheiskehl."

The blond youth frowned upon hearing his name.

"Losing first place to a mere commoner… This is absurd."

A small voice spoke up from nearby.

"We all saw you just following the path Carlo cleared."

Lucas’s face twisted instantly at those words.

His trembling fists swung wildly as he shouted,

"Hah! Silence! You mongrels wouldn’t have even reached the finish line if you had followed the same path! The beasts would have stopped you all!"

Though a slight commotion arose, Albina resumed reading the results.

"Fifth place, Sophia von der Zauber."

"Kyah!"

The brown-haired girl involuntarily jumped in place, letting out a high-pitched squeal of excitement.

Then, feeling the jealous and envious gazes around her, she quickly hid her face behind her bangs, lowering her head.

"Sixth place, Liam Foucault."

"How unfortunate."

The short-haired blond man, a burly figure resembling a bear, clenched his fist and muttered.

"Seventh place, Kiara di Servitore."

"Whew."

The black-haired woman let out a long sigh of relief.

"Eighth place, Regina Parma."

"Ah!"

The girl named Regina Parma smiled brightly.

"Thank goodness… Now I’ll be able to meet Ivan… and Carlo."

"Ninth place, Michele Briccone."

One of the Four Pillars, the Briccone family.

Michele Briccone clicked his tongue, muttering to himself about the troublesome situation ahead.

"And finally, tenth place, Emil von Aufstich."

With this, all of the Four Pillars had been named.

Yet the murmurs among the crowd grew into a significant wave of unrest.

A commoner took first place, the great noble house of Cascata landed in second, the slightly lesser noble house of Scheiskehl took fourth, and the other two great houses were ranked ninth and tenth. To many, this outcome was nothing short of a humiliation for the nobility.

Emil, however, thought it was fine.

He had fully expected to fail this exam, had already braced himself for his father’s scolding and even a beating.

But now that he had passed, at least he could face his father with some dignity.

Since passing itself was a miracle, Emil quietly offered a heartfelt prayer of gratitude to the gods.

With the results announced, there was nothing left to do.

Even if something remained, it wasn’t his concern. Since the academy was in the Empire’s capital, perhaps the only thing left to do was to explore the city.

For gossipers, today would be a busy day.

The examinees had witnessed firsthand the unprecedented success of a commoner, and bards and storytellers in the taverns would no doubt spend a good sum buying these stories from them.

As the examinees dispersed, Carlo was among them.

As regret danced and joy sang in the air, Carlo quietly slipped away.

Someone called out to him.

"Carlo della Cascata, you’re a successful candidate, correct? You need to collect your admission packet and sign here. This way, please."

‘What a nuisance.’

Carlo reluctantly followed the man.

His mood was at its worst. Today, he realized that ten years of effort had amounted to nothing.

Before the talent of a genius, the efforts of a mere prodigy—or, at best, a highly skilled individual—were meaningless.

Even employing tricks and unorthodox methods had proven futile.

Exhausted by the weight of that realization, Carlo absentmindedly signed at the registration table near the podium and accepted his admission documents. He wanted nothing more than to toss them away, but that would likely be interpreted as an insult to the academy.

Resisting the impulse, he simply rolled up the bundle of documents and left the auditorium, heading toward the carriage waiting for him.

‘…I’m tired.’

It had been a long day.

He decided to return to his estate, rest, and resume training tomorrow.

But just as he was lost in thought, someone suddenly snatched the admission documents from his hands.

"The name of the first-place candidate sounded familiar."

"……"

Carlo stared silently at the man.

A man past middle age, heading into his later years—Enrico della Cascata.

The current head of the Cascata family.

And Carlo della Cascata’s father.

"Isn’t that the same wretched brat you used to play with when you were little? Ivan Contadino."

"That’s right."

"And you lost to that brat?"

Carlo didn’t respond to his father’s words.

Whatever he said here would only be an excuse.

A loser is a loser.

No matter what justification he gave, it would be nothing more than pathetic self-rationalization.

So Carlo remained silent.

"To think I raised such a disgrace as my eldest son… Tsk, tsk…"

The words struck Carlo’s ears.

A fiery rage flared up instantly.

His eyes burned with that fire as he turned to face Enrico.

"Am I wrong—"

"This is just the beginning."

Cutting his father off mid-sentence, Carlo spoke.

"It’s only the beginning, so don’t speak so carelessly."

Seated across from Enrico, Carlo rode in silence on the way back to the estate.

As they neared their territory, the Cascata family’s pride—the magical waterfall—came into view, along with the ruins of the temple above it.

Staring at those ruins and the waterfall, Carlo reaffirmed his resolve.

He had done everything he could.

Elixirs, special techniques, elite education, relentless training without a single day’s rest.

Even paying a heavy price to borrow the power of the gods.

Yet he had still lost.

The only conclusion left was that he simply lacked Ivan’s natural talent.

‘…Fine, I’ll do it. I’ll give anything, if it means I can defeat you… I will offer up whatever it takes.’

Carlo’s eyes burned with a sinister fire.

The flames of envy and jealousy smoldered within him, ready to consume him whole.

He would give anything.

He would obtain the power to defeat that man.

No matter what it took.

# The Academy's Prodigy Wants to Defeat the Genius - 1

The Cascata family was one of the most prestigious lineages.

Not only had they produced generations of high-ranking mages, but they had also contributed to the Empire’s prosperity with their power. As such, their domain was vast, and fitting for a family of magical renown, they possessed numerous divine relics.

Among these relics, the Ancient Temple of the Waterfall was the most powerful shrine under their control.

It was a bright night with a full moon.

Unlike the sun, the full moon cast its white light across the land, illuminating everything with its silken glow, its radiance shining in silence like an illusion.

Within this light, the Ancient Temple of the Waterfall recognized its visitor.

The waterfall, which would have denied access to anyone without Cascata blood, welcomed the heir of the family.

Carlo della Cascata, the rightful successor and direct descendant of the lineage, took a deep breath.

With his towering height and broad frame, he had an imposing physique. His strong features, with firmly pressed lips, revealed his resolute nature.

Clatter…

Carlo set a ritual vessel filled with water from the waterfall upon the altar before sitting down and closing his eyes.

What he sought was an inexhaustible and overwhelming source of magical power—power to defeat one man.

The image of that man surfaced in his mind.

Ivan Contadino.

A poor farmer’s son who worked on Cascata lands, yet also Carlo’s childhood friend.

Carlo had always been immensely proud and eager to prove himself.

As the eldest son and heir to the Cascata family, he had undergone rigorous training from a young age, carrying the pride of his lineage within him. With elite education, boundless resources, and the expectation that he would become an exceptional mage, Carlo’s arrogance had been apparent even in childhood.

It was only natural that he sought to demonstrate his superiority among his peers.

Then, an incident occurred that changed everything.

When Carlo and Ivan were still young, Carlo, eager to show off before the village children, had taken a magic tome from his father’s study and shared it with Ivan.

Despite only glancing at the tome once, Ivan began to grasp magic, his genius shining through.

And then—

Carlo vividly recalled the sight of Ivan’s spell, [Storm], tearing through the sky, annihilating beasts, and shattering the stone wall that Carlo himself had failed to breach.

Grit…

Clenching his teeth, Carlo, lost in recollection, trembled with frustration.

He could not do what Ivan had done.

No matter how much he trained, he could not wield such overwhelming power.

Even after years of relentless effort and every advantage available to him, Ivan had reappeared after ten years, soaring far beyond Carlo’s reach.

It was an unacceptable truth.

A reality that the eldest son of the Cascata family, heir to a centuries-old magical dynasty, could not acknowledge.

He had used every resource at his disposal—drinking elixirs to increase his mana reserves, hiring battle-hardened mages from magical legions for tutoring, and even beseeching the Waterfall God to grant him more power.

Yet, even with all this, he had not surpassed Ivan.

Ten years later, Ivan had returned, more powerful than ever, leaving Carlo with the undeniable realization that no amount of training would bridge the gap.

It was the chasm of innate talent.

A gap so vast that mere effort could never hope to close it.

That was why Carlo had returned to this waterfall.

He was willing to offer anything.

He desired greater magical power, power to surpass Ivan.

"You may take anything else. O Waterfall God. My vow is already kept, but I offer another price in exchange for even greater magic."

This ritual was known as a consecration.

A secret technique passed down within the Cascata family.

One offers an appropriate sacrifice and receives power in return.

It was a transaction, yet unlike ordinary exchanges, the entity involved was divine.

The first sacrifice Carlo had made was his vow never to release his magic externally.

That vow had been upheld, and his body, forged for battle, was well suited to maintaining it.

But after his defeat at Ivan’s hands, he craved even greater power.

"Whatever the offering, as long as I can bear it, I will give it. O Waterfall God, grant me more magic."

Seated in meditative posture, Carlo closed his eyes and prayed.

All he could do now was wait for a response from the god.

Rumble…

The ritual vessel trembled violently.

As if answering Carlo’s desperate plea, the vessel shook, rippling with force.

Carlo opened his eyes, staring intently at it.

The shaking intensified until water spilled over the rim, its turbulence growing ever stronger.

Then—

"Ugh."

A groan escaped Carlo’s lips.

A wave of overwhelming power—pure mana—engulfed him.

Even while seated, he felt his legs straining.

As though he might be swept away, Carlo braced himself, gripping the ground to endure it.

His towering, muscular frame—trained in physical combat to compensate for his vow—shook under the force, but he held firm.

"Guh… Ugh…"

Gritting his teeth, he endured the surge.

He knew he had to withstand it.

If he failed, the consecration would be for nothing.

Summoning every ounce of his strength, he bore the power until, at last, the raging waves began to subside.

A slow, confident smile crept onto Carlo’s lips.

Power surged through him like a boundless ocean of mana.

It was an energy so immense that it could obliterate the limitation of external magic release, if he so wished.

Carlo was elated.

With this power, defeating Ivan would be effortless.

The humiliation of his last defeat would be erased by an overwhelming victory.

Breathing heavily, Carlo slowly opened his eyes.

It was time to witness his transformed body.

Surely, his physique had changed to match his newfound strength.

He looked down at his hands.

They were white and slender.

His fingers were long, and his once tanned skin was now starkly pale.

Almost sickly.

His arms were thin and delicate—far from his previously muscular form.

‘…I can always rebuild my body, what matters is the magic.’

A body could be trained.

Muscles could be restored.

If this was the price for such magic, it was not too great a loss.

Yet, unease crept into Carlo’s mind.

His center of gravity felt off.

For a physical fighter like Carlo, balance was crucial.

He peered into the water.

Worried that he looked frail, he gazed into the water—only for strands of hair to fall into his sight.

‘What…’

Carlo had always kept his hair short.

Yet now, it obscured his vision.

In the reflection, pink eyes stared back at him.

Long, cascading dark blue hair.

And above all—

A beautiful girl.

The reflection was of a woman so stunning that even Carlo was momentarily at a loss for words.

Not only that, but she possessed an exquisitely feminine figure, more perfect than any noblewoman he had ever seen.

"…Hmph."

Even his voice.

It was that of a young woman.

Carlo della Cascata, the rightful heir to the noble Cascata family.

Now…

A noble lady.



"What in the world… has happened to me?"

# The Academy's Prodigy Wants to Defeat the Genius - 2

Carlo quickly regained her composure, despite the rather shocking realization that her entire physical form—including her gender—had completely changed.

What mattered most was the overwhelming magic coursing through her body.

It was incomparable to before.

Previously, her magic had been like a mighty river cutting across the continent. Now, it surged like a grand torrent, rushing toward the ocean, an unstoppable current of power.

‘With this…’

As she clenched her fist, small bursts of purple lightning crackled.

The magic, now so potent, could no longer be suppressed as easily as before.

"It would have been perfect if only my gender had remained the same…"

Regret was inevitable.

But there was no turning back—this was the nature of consecration.

Bearing both satisfaction and regret in equal measure, Carlo descended the waterfall and returned to her estate.

The Cascata estate stood as a testament to its long history and tradition, with an imposing stone entrance as its first line of grandeur.

The emblem of the family—a lotus—was carved in relief on the massive gate, its sheer size enough to overawe any visitor. And before that gate now stood Carlo.

"I told you, I am Carlo della Cascata. Open the gate immediately!"

The guards were clearly perplexed.

Even with her furrowed brows, the young woman before them was undeniably beautiful.

She was tall for a woman, yet still within the expected range. Though her clothes were loose and oversized, betraying their original owner, her figure was unmistakably feminine. Nothing about her appearance resembled Carlo della Cascata.

‘Damn it, offering my gender as a price is turning into a real inconvenience…’

"Look, miss, I don’t know who you are, but the young master is a man."

Carlo found herself with mixed feelings.

It was good that the guards were this diligent, but their dedication was proving troublesome for her.

"Listen, Antonio and you, Picatro. I know both your names—aren’t you even slightly concerned about what might happen next?"

Hearing their names, the guards hesitated in visible confusion.

"D-Don’t be ridiculous, miss. The young master wouldn’t remember the names of mere hired hands like us!"

"That’s right! The young master always considered us nothing more than ants! There’s no way he’d know our names!"

Hearing their exchanged words made Carlo’s head ache.

True, she had been rather dismissive of commoners and servants in the past. But surely, after over ten years, she at least knew the names of those who had guarded the estate for so long…

…Or so she hoped.

Maybe.

Possibly.

Regardless, the guards showed no intention of opening the gate.

"Even if you refuse, I can open it myself."

Carlo snapped her fingers lightly.

While she had refrained from doing so out of mere laziness, the stone gate could also recognize Cascata blood.

Rumble…

The massive gate trembled as it slowly opened.

"H-How?!"

"Only a member of the Cascata family can open this gate…"

"I told you, I am Carlo. This is perfectly natural."

With a sigh, Carlo stepped forward.

He briefly regretted not specifying that her gender should remain unchanged during the consecration.

"S-Still! You cannot enter! No matter what trick you pulled, we are the guards of the Cascata family! We cannot allow a stranger to pass!"

Spears blocked her path.

Their dedication to duty was commendable—but at this point, it was more of a nuisance.

"Do you know the family motto of the Cascata lineage?"

"Magic shall make it so."

"Exactly. More precisely, 'Magic shall enforce it.' And if you still refuse to believe me, I will demonstrate."

Carlo gathered a small amount of magic into her arm.

Or so she intended.

But with her newly amplified power, even a slight amount was far greater than expected.

‘Oh, this is nice.’

Satisfied, Carlo struck one of the guards in the stomach.

"Ugh!"

Ignoring the groaning man who collapsed to the ground, Carlo turned to the other guard.

"Now, what’s my name?"

"Uh, uh…"

"I’ll ask again, what’s my name?"

"C-Carlo…"

"One last time. My name?"

"C-Carlo della Cascata, young master!"

"Good, you should’ve said that from the start."

Carlo reached out to pat the guard’s shoulder, but since her new height was considerably shorter, the motion felt awkward. Instead, she ended up patting the man’s elbow before flashing a grin.

Even without [Awakening], this strength was beyond satisfactory.

One major drawback of lightning magic was that its spells required heightened senses through an Awakening Ritual to unleash their full potential.

Yet now, with such abundant magic, Carlo could summon tremendous power even without an awakening.

‘Excellent, this is overwhelming.’

For once, she even allowed herself a small smile.

As she stepped into the courtyard, heading toward the main estate, she suddenly stopped.

Before her stood a man, staring directly at her.

"Who might you be, miss?"

"…Carlo."

"Carlo?"

Enrico della Cascata.

Carlo’s father.

Their unexpected encounter shattered the grin from Carlo’s face. Enrico, too, scrutinized her with an increasingly rigid expression.

"Carlo? That’s impossible… Unless…"

Enrico’s eyes widened in shock.

Considering the powerful lightning magic and the fact that this individual had entered the estate without issue, it was undeniably Cascata blood.

Despite the unfamiliar appearance, there was only one conclusion.

"You went to the waterfall?!"

"Yes."

"You fool—!"

A furious outburst erupted as Enrico unleashed a torrent of blue lightning, crackling with hostility.

Carlo, however, remained calm.

"Yes, I went there."

As Enrico seethed with rage, veins bulging in his neck, Carlo simply nodded.

"You… You changed even your body for this? As the firstborn, do you feel no shame—?!"

But before he could finish, Carlo vanished.

A moment later, she reappeared right before Enrico, gripping her father’s mouth shut.

"For power. For overwhelming strength. What does a body matter? What does being the firstborn of Cascata matter? Look at me, old man. You can’t even resist me. Doesn’t that prove my decision was right?"

Enrico’s eyes trembled at the sheer magical force radiating from Carlo’s grip.

This was not the same Carlo he once knew.

"Try escaping, go on."

Carlo smirked.

A clear taunt.

"I will do whatever it takes to win."

With that, Carlo loosened her grip on Enrico’s mouth.

"I won’t hesitate to shorten my lifespan through training, use Cascata’s wealth for elixirs, or even make deals with the gods. If it makes me stronger, I will do anything. Magic shall enforce it. That is the teaching of the Cascata family, isn’t it?"

"To go this far—"

"It doesn’t matter whether you acknowledge me or not. You’ll have no choice but to."

Carlo didn’t wait for Enrico’s reply.

Murmuring the Cascata family’s creed—Magic shall enforce it—Carlo turned to leave but glanced back once more.

"Handle the academy’s affairs as you see fit. Say it was a magical accident, or that, due to family circumstances, I’ve been living as a man until now. Cover it up however you like—you are the family head, after all."

With that, Carlo strode away without hesitation.

Enrico could only stare blankly at the departing back of his eldest son—now his eldest daughter.

‘Gender is meaningless. It doesn’t matter.’

Power was all that mattered.

Enrico della Cascata, one of the Empire’s Four Pillars and a mage among mages, had been caught off guard—but even so, he had been subdued by Carlo’s hand.

If Carlo continued to grow at this pace—no, even as she was now—defeating Ivan would be as effortless as crushing an insect. And that arrogant younger brother of hers, showered in empty praise, would be no different.

‘Power is justice. Power is truth. This is what I have sought. Gender… is nothing more than a trivial detail. It is irrelevant.’

Muttering the family’s creed once more, Carlo clenched her fist tightly.

"…That being said, this beauty is truly something else. I’ve never seen anyone with a face like this before."

Hmm. Hmph.

The woman reflected in the mirror was, even by Carlo’s own assessment, stunning—almost too much so.

Her eyes, slightly slanted upward, resembled a feline’s.

Her complexion, with a subtle rosy hue, was perfect.

"Mmm… Mmm."

Carlo gazed at her reflection in silence for a long while.

Had she perhaps become too beautiful?

It was an unsettling thought.

# The Academy's Prodigy Wants to Defeat the Genius - 3

"My chest is too big. This is going to be… troublesome."

Carlo bounced the weight in her palm experimentally. The sheer size and resilience of her new form defied belief.

She had little understanding of the female body—her entire life had been devoted to magic, and this transformation only compounded her lack of familiarity.

"Close-quarters combat is going to be harder to execute properly."

Dressed only in undergarments, Carlo examined her body from different angles.

With magic unable to be projected externally, she had always relied on fusing magic with close combat. This new physique was not exactly ideal for that style.

She knew that large breasts were considered a hallmark of beauty.

But attached to her own body, they were nothing more than an unnecessary burden.

And then, there was the ridiculously long hair…

‘Hmph, I’ll manage somehow.’

Yes, if it was the price of power, it didn’t matter.

It couldn’t matter.

As she resigned herself to this reality, Carlo suddenly froze, ears pricking up at an approaching conversation.

—Father, I heard Carlo did something stupid and turned into a woman.

—…Yes, that is how it happened. Be careful what you say, Fabio.

—Sure, but I think I need to see this mess for myself.

Footsteps approached.

It was undeniably Fabio’s voice—and the sound of his steps nearing the slightly ajar door.

Carlo grabbed her discarded clothes.

She had just pulled up her trousers and was reaching for her shirt when Fabio’s voice rang from the doorway.

"Carlo, I heard you did something ridiculous."

And then, without hesitation, Fabio stepped inside.

Their eyes met.

Fortunately, Carlo had at least managed to put on her trousers.

However, her upper body was still wrapped in a tight binding of cloth, her distinctly feminine curves clearly visible, and the sheer size of her chest barely contained.

Fabio’s breath hitched as he instinctively stumbled back out of the room.

"How ridiculous, brat. Get lost."

Carlo had yet to fully grasp her own body’s impact.

She failed to consider how her appearance—especially to her five-year-younger brother—would be shockingly distracting.

Her words were sharp and cutting, full of the same derision as ever.

Fabio, however, knew that tone well. Despite the differences in voice and body, the sheer arrogance confirmed her identity.

Even so, he couldn’t bring himself to re-enter the room. Instead, he called from the hallway.

"You were supposed to be the eldest, and yet you wished for something like this? Aren’t you ashamed?!"

No reply came.

Then, footsteps.

Carlo emerged before Fabio’s eyes.

"Urk."

The trousers were too loose, barely clinging to her hips, accentuating the new curves of her body. The cloth wrapped around her chest emphasized rather than concealed her changed form.

Fabio averted his gaze, unable to meet Carlo’s eyes.

Carlo, however, glared down at him.

"Brat, you’ve been praised endlessly because of your peculiar magic, haven’t you? That’s why you’ve never grown out of your childish arrogance. You don’t know a damn thing about the world."

Carlo grabbed Fabio’s hair and yanked his head up.

Fabio had been avoiding eye contact, but now he was forced to look directly into Carlo’s piercing gaze.

"You probably grew up hearing nonsense like ‘Your rare gift will make you a great mage.’ But if I kill you here, none of that will mean a damn thing. If I, who have gained power through the means you ridicule, were to strike you down with all my strength, you wouldn’t even have a chance to fight back."

"Y-You maniac!"

‘Was she joking? Or was she serious?’

Fabio swallowed hard, sneaking glances at Carlo’s fist, where sparks of lightning crackled ominously.

‘She might actually do it—’

"Magic shall enforce it. Do you still not understand? Cascata’s way is to use any means necessary to grow stronger. If you’re going to spout nonsense, get lost. Before I decide to kill you right here."

Carlo released her grip, shoving Fabio away.

Fabio stumbled, collapsing to the floor of the hallway.

Carlo didn’t spare him another glance, only leaving behind a cold sneer.

"Pathetic fool."

With that, Carlo slammed her door shut.

Fabio sat in stunned silence, his lips pressed tightly together as he glared at the closed door.

The Cascata family consisted of three people:

Enrico della Cascata, the head of the family.

Carlo della Cascata, the eldest child.

Fabio della Cascata, the youngest.

That night, the three sat around the dinner table.

There was barely any sound beyond the clinking of utensils.

Despite being a family, there was no warmth, no casual conversation—just a tense silence.

"Carlo."

Carlo looked up at Enrico, waiting for him to speak.

"You have time before you return to the academy. Figure something out."

"You already know. The waterfall took its price, and it won’t return it. I have no intention of trying."

Enrico didn’t reply immediately.

He cut into his heavily seasoned meat, chewing deliberately before speaking again.

"You’ve always been like this. Stubborn to the end."

"I’d prefer if you called it unwavering. And if you really need me to hide it, I could always disguise myself as a man."

"Do you really think that’s possible with your current body?"

Carlo had to admit—it wasn’t.

Her physique was undeniably feminine. Disguising it was no longer an option.

"Then how about illusion magic? I could make myself look like a man."

Fabio scoffed.

Carlo shook her head.

"Is there anyone in our family who can cast illusion magic?"

"No."

"Then we’d have to rely on an outsider. Would you really expose a Cascata mage’s circuits to someone else? If not, stop talking nonsense."

Ignoring Fabio’s scowl, Carlo continued eating.

"If you refuse to return as you are, Carlo, then understand this: A woman cannot inherit this family."

Enrico’s words made Carlo’s utensils pause for a moment.

Inheritance…

She briefly considered the notion before letting out a small laugh.

"That was never my concern, I always knew you never intended to pass the family to me. Once you die, the fools will all flock to him and his magic."

"Carlo, they aren’t fools. They’re simply wise."

Fabio smirked as he interjected.

Enrico finally lost his patience, slamming his hands against the table.

"Enough, both of you! It can’t be helped. The academy cannot know about the waterfall, so as far as they are concerned, you were always a daughter. The family had you live as a man for political reasons."

A reasonable lie. Given the power struggles within noble families, it was plausible enough to be accepted.

Carlo rolled her eyes.

"I’ve never been ashamed of this. I don’t care about appearances. Frankly, this conversation is killing my appetite."

She set down her utensils with a sharp clatter.

Enrico scowled.

"I’ve tolerated your defiance enough. Where are your manners?"

"Just wait and see. Whether I’m right or wrong—I’ll make it clear soon enough."

With that, Carlo turned away, leaving the dining room.

Enrico sighed, rubbing his temples.

"I don’t know where I went wrong with that one…"

A few days passed, and the day of the entrance ceremony arrived.

Ivan headed to the academy as instructed.

Though he lived within the Cascata domain, he had rarely seen a proper city, residing beyond the outer walls. The academy, standing before him like an entire city in itself, overwhelmed him with its sheer grandeur.

The number of students was relatively small.

Even this year, there were only two classes, with a total of just ten new students. Across the entire academy, the number barely exceeded fifty.

Despite this, the academy was not merely a place for students. It was a gathering ground for countless mages who pursued the study of magic, making it more than deserving of being called a city.

Ivan wandered through the academy, taking in the various buildings while heading toward the designated meeting place for his class before the entrance ceremony. However, every building looked nearly identical, and after some time, he realized he was hopelessly lost. Resigned, he decided to ask someone for directions and glanced around.

"Ah, there."

He spotted a student wearing the same uniform as his own.

The boy was slightly shorter than Ivan and had a gentle, good-natured appearance. As Ivan approached, the boy looked at him curiously before recognizing the matching uniform and breaking into a friendly smile.

"Oh, are you a new student?"

Ivan had been about to speak first, so the boy’s friendly approach was a relief.

Ivan awkwardly smiled and nodded.

"I'm Emil von Aufstich, nice to meet you."

‘Oh, one of the Four Great Nobles…’

Ivan hesitated, unsure whether he should shake the hand suddenly extended toward him.

This young man, Emil, was from one of the Four Pillars, a grand noble family, whereas Ivan himself was just a lowly commoner.

"We’re all academy students, right? There’s no need for ranks here. Let’s just be casual, okay?"

"Ah, ah… Uh, yeah. I’m… Ivan. Ivan Contadino."

"Oh! So you’re the top scorer?!"

Emil’s eyes widened in surprise.

Ivan suddenly wondered if this was alright.

Had he drawn too much attention to himself? He was starting to regret how much fame he had already gained.

# The Academy's Prodigy Wants to Defeat the Genius - 4

The student dormitories were arranged with two buildings facing each other.

A bridge connected the two structures at the midpoint, and while the dormitories were not particularly large, they had a modest charm to them.

"Ivan, we might have to split up here. Each of us will gather in our respective classes before the full assembly. Are you in the Eastern or Western class?"

"Oh, my class? Let me check…"

The new students were divided into two groups of five.

These groups were designated as the Eastern and Western classes, and Ivan had been assigned to the Eastern class.

"Oh, you're in the Eastern class too? That's great! So am I. I'm relieved to have a friend in the same class."

Emil beamed at Ivan.

Ivan hesitated, unsure how to respond to the noble’s genuine smile, but before he could figure it out, Emil grabbed his hand and led him toward the dormitory.

"Here we are, this is the instructor’s office."

Standing before the designated meeting place, both of them instinctively took a deep breath.

For Ivan, it was nerves. For Emil, it was the uncertainty of who else would be in their class.

"It’ll be fine, everyone seemed like good people."

Ivan reassured both Emil and himself as he knocked on the door and pushed it open.

Sunlight streamed into the office.

Several chairs were arranged neatly inside.

The room wasn’t particularly large, and aside from the two of them, only two others were seated—but there was no instructor in sight.

A woman with long black hair and violet eyes sat with her arms crossed, one leg resting over the other, leaning back in her chair.

A short distance away, a broad-shouldered man with cropped blond hair sat lazily, idly running his fingers through his hair.

‘That guy must be Liam. I remember him because he didn’t seem like a mage… But who is she? Was there someone like her among the successful applicants?’

Ivan smiled awkwardly as he stepped inside.

Behind him, Emil let out a nervous groan but followed nonetheless.

"H-Hello, everyone—I'm Ivan. Ivan Contadino…"

The woman scoffed and turned her gaze away.

It was a blatant display of disregard… Ivan felt a bit awkward, but the blond man offered a friendly greeting, easing the tension slightly.

Emil, however, was already lamenting that the class atmosphere seemed doomed from the start. He quickly took a seat beside Ivan.

"Hey, Emil."

"Yeah?"

"Do you know who they are?"

"Ah… Well, the blond guy should be Liam Foucault. He placed sixth. I heard he’s not from the Empire—he’s from a foreign noble family. Apparently, his lineage is famous for magic swordsmen."

"Magic swordsmen?"

"Yeah, but the Empire’s mage battalions are still stronger."

"I see… And what about the woman?"

"I don’t know, I’ve never seen her before."

Even Emil didn’t know… Ivan glanced at the woman’s back, deep in thought.

One person immediately came to mind: Carlo.

Black hair and violet eyes.

It matched Carlo perfectly, but Carlo was a man, so it couldn’t be.

"Do you have any guesses?"

Emil had quickly picked up on Ivan’s hesitation.

Ivan had been thinking about Carlo, but that was impossible—Carlo was a man.

"No, I don’t know… I’ve never seen her before."

At that moment, the office door opened again.

A girl with dazzling silver hair entered, brightening the entire room with her presence.

The moment he saw her, Ivan’s face lit up, and upon noticing him, the girl’s expression mirrored his joy.

"Regina!"

"Ivaaaaan!"

The girl—Regina—ran toward Ivan and clasped his hands with unrestrained excitement.

Her smile, full of unfiltered happiness, radiated youthful exuberance.

"I never expected we’d end up in the same class, Ivan!"

"Yeah, me neither. It’s great to see you here, Regina."

"Hey, Ivan. Do you two know each other?"

"Ah, oh. Yeah."

It was only then that Ivan remembered Emil standing beside him.

Since they were in the same class, introductions were in order, but meeting Regina after so long had momentarily made him forget.

"This is Regina. Regina Parma. We grew up together. She went abroad to study about ten years ago, so we haven’t seen each other much since. Regina, this is Emil. Emil von Aufstich."

"Aufstich…"

Regina's expression stiffened slightly.

Though she was a noble, seeing a great noble like Emil made her tense.

"You can relax, Regina. If you're Ivan's friend, you're my friend too."

"I-If you say so…"

"Anyway, Regina, I didn’t expect to meet you here."

As Ivan smoothly shifted the conversation, Regina slowly relaxed, her tension easing away. With her bright smile returning, she glanced around and then asked Ivan.

"Is Carlo in a different class? It would’ve been great if we were in the same one. I wanted to talk to him after hearing the exam results, but I never got the chance."

"Yeah, it would’ve been nice if Carlo was with us. Unfortunately…"

"Honestly, you’re all being too loud. You’re not hosting a social gathering."

A cold voice cut through Ivan’s sentence.

It was husky, yet unmistakably feminine, and the speakers instinctively turned toward the source.

It was the woman sitting near the window.

Her long black hair cascaded down her back, and though they couldn’t see her face, she clicked her tongue and looked outside with a scoff.

"M-Maybe we were too loud… We should probably keep it down."

"Yeah."

Admittedly, they had been chatting quite a bit… Ivan, Regina, and Emil all shut their mouths at the same time, exchanging uncertain glances.

The office door creaked open, revealing a familiar figure.

A woman with striking red hair—one who had overseen the entrance exams—stepped inside.

"Looks like everyone’s here. You remember me, right? Have you all introduced yourselves?"

"Y-Yes!"

Only three voices answered: Ivan, Regina, and Emil.

"Hmph. I figured as much, not that it matters."

Regina subtly nodded and moved toward her desk inside the office.

"As you all know, I’m Albina. Albina Patrone, your instructor. Judging by how far apart some of you are sitting, I’d say you’re not exactly getting along."

No one responded.

Though Ivan, Regina, and Emil had introduced themselves, they still weren’t exactly close, so they simply nodded politely. Albina, in turn, gave a slight nod in acknowledgment.

"What you might not realize yet is that once you’re assigned a class at the Central Academy, you’re stuck with each other until graduation. Like family… Or better yet, like spouses."

"Spouses…"

Regina unconsciously muttered the word, sneaking a glance at Ivan.

Her face reddened slightly as she took in his bright, lively expression.

"You’ll know each other’s magic better than your own families do. So, you might as well start getting along. Since none of you seem eager to introduce yourselves, I’ll pick someone to start. You, big guy. Go first, and we’ll go clockwise."

The large man scratched his nose and stood up.

His sharp eyes swept the room before he finally spoke.

"…Liam Foucault. Nice to meet you."

His introduction was so brief that the atmosphere remained awkward.

Though he spoke Imperial fluently, his foreign accent was noticeable, adding to the stiffness in the air.

"I-I’m Regina Parma! My specialty is, uh, knitting! I hope we all get along!"

Her cheerful, bubbly greeting lightened the mood slightly.

Even Liam, who had been sitting at a distance, adjusted his posture and looked at her with interest.

"Ah, I’m Ivan. Ivan Contadino. I’m a commoner, but—"

"Ivan, there are no commoners or nobles at the academy. Cut out the unnecessary part."

"Ah, y-yes, instructor!"

"Next."

Following Ivan, Emil stood up.

"I-I’m Emil. Emil von Aufstich. Nice to meet you…"

He hurried through his introduction and sat down immediately.

Now, only one person remained—the mysterious woman.

She looked around the room with clear irritation.

"Hurry up, everyone’s waiting."

At Albina’s urging, the woman finally stood.

She was tall—remarkably so for a woman.

Even Liam, who had remained detached, found himself watching her intently. Her presence was undeniable—

"…Carla, Carla della Cascata. That’s all."

In that instant, Ivan froze.

Regina’s eyes widened.

Even Emil gaped, letting out a stunned, "Huh?"

# The Academy's Prodigy Wants to Defeat the Genius - 5

The one most shocked was, of course, Ivan.

It was only natural—he had spent time with Carlo in his childhood, and back then, Carlo had undoubtedly been a boy. Unless his memory was playing tricks on him, Carlo was supposed to be male. However, the young woman standing before him, introducing herself as "Carla," carried an unmistakable aura—one that declared with absolute certainty that she was, indeed, Carlo.

Moreover, both Ivan and Regina knew very well that the Cascata family had only two children.

The eldest son, Carlo della Cascata, and the younger son, Fabio della Cascata.

There was no mention of a sister.

"...Alright, I get why you're surprised, but the situation is simple."

Seeing the two of them thrown into confusion, Albina let out a small sigh.

In truth, this wasn’t all that rare.

"Carla had been using transformation magic to live as a man all this time. It was for the protection of Fabio della Cascata, who would become the heir. This sort of thing isn’t uncommon. To protect the true heir, another is made to—"

Albina glanced at Carla.

"—for example, disguise a daughter as a son and have her pose as the heir."

An expendable daughter, used as a decoy for the heir, taking on the potential risks of assassination attempts.

"Then Carlo... No, Carla was acting as a shield for Fabio?"

"There’s no need for you to know the details. Digging too deep into noble affairs will only get you hurt. In any case, Carla has come of age now, and Fabio is old enough to fulfill his role, so she's returned to her true self. No need to overthink it."

It didn’t fully make sense.

But if Albina was saying so, and if the friend they had thought of as Carlo was actually a woman named Carla all along, and if nobody else was treating this as strange, then there wasn’t much point in Ivan arguing about it.

Ivan took a few steps forward toward Carla.

The cold sharpness in those violet eyes—unchanged even after revealing her true form.

"Now that I look at you like this, I can still see traces of Carlo... I never expected to meet you like this. You could've told us sooner."

Ivan reached out his hand toward Carla.

Somehow, it felt like the right thing to do—to offer a handshake.

"—Get that out of my sight."

Carla smacked Ivan’s hand away with a sharp slap.

There was no hesitation, no consideration. Just rejection.

"You had no right to know my circumstances. Now get lost, commoner."

Ivan awkwardly withdrew his hand with a wry smile.

Returning to her true form had apparently made her even rougher—her hands certainly packed more of a punch.

Ivan didn’t mind much, but the atmosphere had already soured.

What had started as an interesting turn of events had quickly turned cold—Carla radiating open hostility, Ivan at a loss for words. The mood in the classroom was a complete mess.

"...Wow, they look like they’re about to fight," Emil muttered anxiously.

Regina shook her head and mumbled under her breath,

"Carlo was always like this... but not quite this bad."

Albina, on the other hand, let out an exasperated sigh.

"This batch is going to be a handful. Alright, everyone, back to your seats."

Ivan returned to his seat, and Carla took hers.

The atmosphere remained frozen.

Albina, who had to lead this group of students through the academy, was already burdened with concerns, but there was no helping it.

"First, let’s all calm down. I suppose I should introduce myself properly. I already did once, but I am Albina Patrone. I graduated from the Imperial Central Academy twelve years ago.

Afterward, I entered the research division and specialized in summoning magic. Seven years ago, I joined the Mage Corps during the war and served as a company commander. After I retired, I started working here as an instructor."

"A company commander in the Mage Corps? That’s a position meant for long-term service," Liam questioned.

A company commander in the Mage Corps was just the beginning of an elite path. With enough achievements, one could rise to battalion commander, then regimental commander, and perhaps even division commander. Leaving such a prestigious career to become an instructor was difficult to comprehend.

"That’s something for another time. It’s a personal matter, Liam. I hope you don’t mind me calling you that?"

Liam nodded, and Albina glanced at her wristwatch.

"It’s time. Now that we’ve introduced ourselves, we need to meet the West Division as well. Let’s head to the auditorium."

The West Division had already arrived.

Unlike the East Division, they seemed to have a more relaxed, friendly atmosphere as they chatted among themselves.

Lucas, however, scowled as he saw the East Division entering.

"Those slow idiots, must be because they’ve got a commoner slowing them do—huh?"

Lucas’s eyes widened.

Amidst the entering students was an overwhelming beauty.

Tall, porcelain skin, sharply defined feline eyes.

A figure with curves in all the right places, a bust that demanded attention, and long, elegant legs.

Before he knew it, Lucas was standing in front of her, extending his hand.

"I don't recall seeing you at the entrance exam. May I ask which noble house you belong to, my lady?"

Carla stared at Lucas with blatant disinterest.

This fool was beyond saving.

Not worth even the slightest engagement.

Carla slowly reached out her hand—

And let loose a powerful electric current.

—BZZZZT.

"GAHHHHHH!"

A surge of lightning seared through Lucas's nerves, sending him crumpling to the floor with a scream.

It was a miracle he hadn't wet himself from the sheer pain.

"W-What the hell—?!"

"Why? Did you want to shake hands with the ‘disgrace’ of the Cascata family?"

Carla’s words made Lucas jolt upright in shock.

"D-Disgrace?! But Carlo was supposed to be a man—!"

"That’s because you’re too much of an idiot to recognize transformation magic. Those useless eyes of yours—maybe you should gouge them out."

Carla had already lost interest.

Shoulders straight, back tall, she strode past Lucas without another glance, ignoring the gazes from the East Division as she took a seat at the center of the auditorium.

Amidst the murmurs, both divisions found their seats and awaited their instructors.

The auditorium doors swung open, and a mustached man stepped in.

Climbing onto the podium, he scanned the students before addressing them.

"The future great mages of the empire, welcome. I am Dario Artigiano. Whether you go on to become scholars of magic or commanders in the Mage Corps, I do not know. But I hope each of you will devote yourselves to your chosen path."

Carla scoffed.

Devotion? Effort?

She knew better.

She had poured in every ounce of effort imaginable, more than anyone else—

And still, there were things she could not reach.

"Carla della Cascata. What is your future aspiration?"

The sudden question didn’t faze Carla.

Leaning back in her chair, she crossed her legs and replied,

"To surpass every mage in existence—including every single one in this room."

Murmurs rippled through the auditorium.

It was an absurdly arrogant statement.

She was effectively saying she would surpass even Instructor Albina and Instructor Dario himself.

Dario, however, simply smiled.

"A fine ambition, a fitting goal for a top-ranked entrant. I look forward to seeing how far you can go."

Lucas, of course, sneered.

"As if, she can’t even beat a commoner."

The moment he spoke—Carla vanished.

A split second later, she was gripping Lucas by the collar, her other hand crackling with electricity beside his face.

"You really ought to think before you speak, idiot. I nearly fried you alive."

There were no classes on the first day after the entrance ceremony.

Since the main purpose of the day was for students to get acquainted, they were free to leave once the ceremony ended. Whether they stayed in the dormitory or commuted from home was up to them.

"I'm staying in the dorms since my hometown is far away… What about you, Ivan?"

"Oh, me? I'm in the dorms too."

"Cascata is pretty close to here, isn't it?"

"It is, but…"

Emil probably knew that Ivan was a commoner, but he seemed unaware of what that actually meant. He must have assumed Ivan lived in a decent house, being a young master himself.

"The environment isn't great, the dorms are actually better. What about you, Regina?"

"Oh, I'm in the dorms too. I could commute, but I figured I'd focus better on my studies if I stayed here."

"Really? That’s great, all three of us are in the dorms!"

Ivan felt excited—he had made a new friend in Emil, reunited with Regina after a long time, and now they would all be living in the dorms together.

Carla was still on his mind, but since she was in a different situation, he figured it couldn’t be helped.

‘Huh?’

Just then, Ivan spotted someone walking ahead.

Long black hair flowing down her back, a tall figure—it was Carla.

"Hey, I’ll be back in a bit. Just wait here."

"H-Huh? Ivan! Where are you going?"

Regina called after him, but Ivan just waved her off and ran toward Carla.

"Carla!"

Carla frowned at the voice calling out to her from behind.

It was a voice she had no desire to hear.

A face she had no interest in seeing.

So she pretended not to hear and picked up her pace.

"Carla! Haa, haaa…"

“…Close your mouth, your breath stinks.”

"S-Sorry."

Had she slowed down, or had Ivan sped up?

‘I probably slowed down, damn it.’

Carla shot Ivan a glare.

"It’s been a while, Carla."

“…It hasn’t even been ten minutes since we parted, goodbye."

"W-Wait!"

Sighing openly in frustration, Carla ran a hand through her bangs.

He was insufferable.

Annoying, frustrating, irritating!

Everything about Ivan, everything in her life, was unbearable because of him.

"I'm sorry! I’ll apologize first!"

“…For what?"

The sudden apology made Carla frown as she looked at Ivan.

He scratched his head awkwardly, forcing an unnatural smile.

"For what happened ten years ago."

Carla’s expression stiffened.

"I don’t really remember what I did wrong. But what I do know is that I won because you let me. After that… my memory is kind of fuzzy. But since you never talked to me again after that, I must have done something wrong, right? So whatever it was, I’m sorry."

Carla felt her lips quivering.

Her head burned white-hot with rage.

A surge of molten anger boiled in her chest.

"...You don't remember? You think I let you win?"

"Yeah that’s why I won, right?"

Ivan clearly had no idea.

He wasn’t even aware that he had another personality.

The way he had changed back then—the memory of that moment still sent shivers down Carla’s spine.

And what did he mean by letting him win?

Carla—Carlo—had given it everything he had.

He had fought desperately to win against Ivan.

And yet, he lost.

Despite wanting victory so badly, he lost.

Even if that had been Ivan’s other self, it was still Ivan’s own strength.

Even after pushing himself to the limit, he had still been defeated.

He had wanted to win so badly, but he couldn’t reach it.

And now, after all these years, he was saying that he let him win?

A violent urge surged through Carla to punch Ivan right in the face.

But that would only be a loss for her.

This wasn’t the time or place—she needed to win properly, in a fair fight.

She forced down her anger.

Crushed it under the weight of logic.

"...I wasn’t asking for an apology. Don’t misunderstand, I just want to surpass you… So be ready."

Looking at Carla, Ivan recalled the way Carlo had looked in his childhood.

—I will surpass you! No matter what!

"...Carla, back then, you were definitely my friend. But now, I feel like I know almost nothing about you."

"What a coincidence, I feel the same way. I don’t understand how a mere commoner like you could be that strong—I don’t know anything about you at all."

With that, Carla brushed past Ivan.

"Carla, I may not fully understand how you feel. But if you’re trying to surpass me, I’ll do my best too. I want us to have a real fight."

Carla stopped in her tracks.

But she didn’t turn around.

Ten years ago, during their duel.

Back then, Ivan had tried to avoid fighting.

She had expected him to say something vague again, something wishy-washy about avoiding conflict—

But this was different.

"...I’ll be looking forward to it."

Leaving those words behind, Carla strode off.

Ivan stood there, watching her receding figure.

# The Academy's Prodigy Wants to Defeat the Genius - 6

Late at night, silence reigned.

Starlight filtered through the still night air. For Ivan, who had spent more days staring at a tattered ceiling than at the sky, standing here felt strangely unfamiliar.

A dormitory, and not just any dormitory—one with a garden attached. It was an odd sensation.

The garden alone was larger than the plot of land his family had farmed.

Being in a place overflowing with such luxury, standing tall without having to bow to nobles, felt surreal.

‘Even the dorm room is a private one…’

Ivan clenched and unclenched his fists a few times, thinking once again how unpredictable life was.

None of this luxury would have been possible without that person—his benefactor.

With that thought, Ivan slowly began walking.

He had planned to enjoy some alone time, but he barely made it a few steps before running into someone familiar.

“Oh, Ivan?”

“Regina? Why aren’t you asleep?”

“Well…”

Regina scratched her cheek, unable to admit she had hurried after him the moment she spotted him.

Her fingers trailed over her flushed cheeks before she finally blurted out an awkward suggestion.

“I couldn’t sleep… Ah, since we ran into each other, do you want to take a walk?”

They had seen each other during the day, hadn’t they? Ivan thought so, but he didn’t say it aloud.

He simply nodded and started walking beside her.

Regina did most of the talking, while Ivan mostly responded with nods.

Trivial chatter, stories about her time studying abroad, and how she had been living her life.

It wasn’t surprising that at some point, the topic of Carla came up.

“…How was Carla?”

“I was shocked, I always thought she was a man.”

“Right? But wasn’t she incredibly beautiful? Even as a girl, my heart skipped a beat.”

Regina stole a glance at Ivan as she spoke, trusting that the dim moonlight would conceal her side glance.

“She was, I guess…”

“What do you think?”

“About what?”

“Do you find her… interesting?”

“Well, I wouldn’t say I don’t…”

“W-What?!”

Regina practically jumped at his words, making Ivan glance at her in confusion.

She had clenched her hands into fists, staring at him intently.

“It’s nothing major. Not something I’d tell anyone else.”

“W-Wait, could it be… did you fall for Carla?”

“What are you even saying?”

Ivan chuckled at her reaction.

‘Fall for Carla?’

That was impossible.

“That’s not it. I thought she was a guy until today. How could I fall for someone I just met today? Life isn’t a fairytale.”

“T-That’s true…”

Regina let out a small sigh of relief.

Ivan found her reaction amusing, but before he knew it, they had completed a loop around the garden and reached the dorm entrance.

“It’s time to head in and rest. The girls’ dorm is in the east wing, right? The boys’ dorm is in the west, so we should part ways here. Go on, Regina.”

“Yeah, alright. Sleep well, Ivan. See you tomorrow.”

After parting with Ivan, Regina returned to her room.

Even though her noble title was now only in name, she was still accustomed to luxury, so she had no trouble adjusting to her elegantly furnished private room.

She threw herself onto the bed, burying her face into a pillow.

Her legs kicked at the air, a gesture of girlish embarrassment, and muffled cries of “Ivan is so cool!” spilled into the pillow.

On the first night at the academy, Regina was certain—her feelings were about to bloom.

"Everyone’s here on time? Good, this is a great start."

Albina stood at the podium in the lecture hall, scanning the students with a satisfied smile.

Yes, the fact that no one was late was definitely a good start.

A promising start… at least, that’s what she decided to believe.

"Since this is our first class, it’s best to get to know each other better. You all heard Instructor Dario’s words, right? This class will stay together until graduation. So, it’s in your best interest to get familiar with one another."

Whoosh.

Albina raised her index finger and swiftly drew a line from top to bottom.

It was a simple hand gesture, yet a red line appeared in midair as if she had drawn it with a pen on paper.

"Now, we need some teaching materials…"

She reached into the red line as if it were a pocket, her hand sinking into the space.

"Where was it… Ah, here it is."

When her hand emerged, she was holding a small, fist-sized crystal ball.

Placing the crystal ball, complete with its stand, onto the podium, Albina waved her hand, and the red line vanished in an instant.

"…Why are you all staring at me like that?"

Everyone except Carla was watching the scene with wide eyes.

It was their first time seeing such magic, and they couldn’t even begin to guess what kind of spell it was.

Pulling an object out of thin air, as if she had a separate storage dimension—how could that not be fascinating?

"This is just standard military-grade magic. If you enlist in the Mage Corps, you’ll be provided with one, so no need to be so amazed. Anyway, this here is called a Circuit Amplifier."

The crystal ball glowed with a faint blue light, but it had no other distinctive features.

It looked like something a scam fortune teller in a marketplace might use—plain and unassuming.

"You’ve already introduced yourselves yesterday, but since you're mages, shouldn’t you introduce yourselves as mages as well? That’s why today, we’re going to take a look at each other’s magic circuits and learn about them."

At that, Carla flinched.

Magic circuits were unique to each mage.

While their foundation was inherited from their family, the layers built upon that were the mage’s personal history—evidence of the path they had walked. In other words, it was a record of their very essence as a mage.

Revealing that to everyone—especially when Carla’s circuit had been warped by two separate consecrations—could lead to suspicion. She herself didn’t care, but her family was trying to keep information about the waterfall a secret.

"Magic circuits are important. But is it okay to reveal them to others?"

It was Liam who spoke up.

Being a noble from another country rather than an imperial citizen, he had an even stronger aversion to exposing his circuit.

"You don’t have to worry. I’ve placed a restriction spell so that none of us can disclose any information about the circuits outside this room. Also, the academy considered inter-family relationships when dividing the class… though that’s a bit of a secret. Anyway, watch this."

Albina stuck out her tongue revealing a glowing red symbol on it.

The mark shone brightly in the shape of an X.

"This is a Sealing Spell. It’s also military-grade magic. Since it’s in effect, I physically can’t speak about your circuits outside this class. The academy guarantees this, so you don’t have to worry. As for any of you sharing information… well, that’s a matter of trust."

At that, Carla shot a glare at Liam.

"Even if you say that, having a foreigner in the class makes this a different matter for us."

Liam met Carla’s gaze head-on.

"That’s precisely why I asked first—to make sure I wouldn’t be a burden to my classmates. Ever heard of consideration, imperial?"

"Alright, enough. Since you’re in the same class, you’re practically family. Stop arguing. And we all know that a magic circuit alone doesn’t make a mage powerful, right? The circuits you have now are just the beginning. You’ll grow and develop them throughout your academy years."

It wasn’t a lie.

A magic circuit represented the path a mage had taken up to that point—it didn’t dictate their future growth. While it could give a general sense of the direction they might develop, that, too, was always subject to change.

"If you still don’t trust me, I’ll show you my own circuit first. No complaints, then, right?"

Albina placed her hand on the crystal ball.

As she channeled her mana, the orb flickered with a red glow. Soon, the energy overflowed, forming intricate patterns in the air and completing a large diagram.

"This is my magic circuit. As you all know, a magic circuit is essentially a map that shows how a body transforms mana into spells."

A series of glowing dots connected in a branching pattern.

At the center was the core.

Extending from it in four directions was the main body.

From there, it split upward and downward into the head and tail sections, while two lateral extensions formed the left wing and right wing.

Typically, the vertical sections were longer than the horizontal ones.

"Each branch can split up to two times and extend up to four levels. Including the core, a circuit can have a maximum of 31 points. The number varies from person to person. The more points you have, the greater your potential spells. In rare cases, some branches might not exist at all, but those are special cases."

Magic itself had a unique structure.

It needed to align with the puzzle-like form of a circuit to be used effectively. The most basic circuit formation was a minor cross shape, which required only a single point in any section to function.

"My magic is Summoning Magic. To use it, you need a bull-horn shaped circuit with two branches extending from the head section. Here, like this…"

Albina pointed to a part of her own circuit—her head section.

"This area is well-developed. That’s why I can use Summoning Magic."

Carla listened to the explanation with growing apprehension.

Revealing one's circuit was essentially revealing what kind of magic one could use—and the latent potential they had for other types of magic.

She knew that transparency about circuits was an academy tradition, but she hadn’t expected the instructor to display hers so openly and in such detail.

‘…There’s no way to avoid this.’

"Alright, we’ve taken a close look at a former Mage Corps officer’s circuit, so it’s time for all of you to lower your guard and show yours. Since I know none of you will volunteer… Let’s see, Emil. You go first."

Emil’s face went pale.

# The Academy's Prodigy Wants to Defeat the Genius - 7

Would a cow being led to slaughter feel like this? Emil's reluctance was written all over his face as he hesitantly stepped forward.

With Albina watching, he couldn’t refuse, but summoning the courage to move was another matter.

"What are you waiting for?"

Carla, growing impatient, finally spoke up, and only then did Emil, looking utterly miserable, shuffle towards the podium.

"Place your hand here and channel your mana into it."

"Yes… um, my circuit is really nothing special…"

"It’s fine."

Emil placed his hand on the crystal ball.

As mana slowly flowed in, the orb let out a low hummm before projecting the circuit into the air. Seeing the structure, the students unconsciously let out small gasps.

It was an incredibly tangled mess.

Even on the back of Emil’s hand, the circuit appeared absurdly knotted. It was so complex that even Albina, who had been in countless battles, was momentarily taken aback. The structure was so convoluted that it seemed like it would be difficult for Emil to even use basic spells. Oddly enough, advanced spells might actually be easier to cast than fundamental ones, but the number of spells he could use was still extremely limited, making the entire structure incredibly inefficient.

"Um… Emil?"

"Yes…"

If Albina was this surprised, it was no wonder Emil looked completely dejected.

His face was full of gloom, but Albina gently patted his shoulder.

"Well… this is too complex to analyze on the spot, so let’s take it slow. Just from looking at this, I can’t tell what element your magic leans towards. Could you tell me?"

"I… well, right now, I can only use Vision Magic…"

"I see."

Emil’s expression screamed I knew it.

He had held a tiny bit of hope that Albina, being a former officer of the Mage Corps, might be able to decipher his tangled circuit. But it turned out to be just as incomprehensible to her as it was to everyone else.

"Still, once you develop your abilities, this circuit could be exceptionally strong in a specific field. Don’t be too discouraged."

Easier said than done. Emil trudged back to his seat, his disappointment evident.

Next up was Regina.

"This… is an incredibly textbook circuit for a combat mage."

Her circuit was well-balanced across all four sections, allowing for a wide variety of spells. The Great Cross formation, which greatly expanded the range of her magic, was present in her circuit, along with a Ring-Type circuit that condensed and projected powerful magic in a smaller area. This meant she could be effective in both small skirmishes and large-scale battles involving tens of thousands of soldiers.

"Judging by the elemental signature, your magic involves crystallizing mana, right?"

"Yes, that's correct. I’m training in that field."

"That’s especially useful in warfare. Regina, what do you plan to do after graduation?"

"I plan to enlist in the Mage Corps."

Regina answered with a slight blush.

She wondered if her response made her sound too materialistic. In truth, joining the Corps was often seen as an ambition for power and influence.

Besides, in this empire, noble daughters—whether of high or low rank—had very few options outside of being married off in a political arrangement. Rising through the ranks in the Mage Corps was, in many ways, the best option available to her.

"I see, you have a promising future ahead. Keep working hard."

"Thank you."

Regina beamed as she returned to her seat, immediately turning to Ivan.

"Ivan, what did you think?"

"It’s amazing, Instructor Albina even praised you."

"Ehehe…"

Regina giggled like a little girl.

Emil, on the other hand, was visibly envious. Carla, who had been watching with an unimpressed expression, clicked her tongue and shook her head. The more complicated a circuit, the greater its potential—if developed properly.

Albina’s words weren’t empty reassurances; Carla knew that Emil’s circuit could be powerful. The real issue was that Emil himself didn’t realize it, which she found rather pathetic.

"Alright, next—Liam."

Liam, who was even taller than Albina, stepped forward, casting a literal shadow over the room.

Albina tilted her head up to look at him, smirking.

"Your father was massive, but you’re even bigger."

"You know my father?"

"Of course, I was his junior."

"…Excuse me?"

Liam’s eyes widened in shock, and Albina simply nodded.

When Liam placed his hand on the crystal ball and his circuit was projected into the air, Albina’s smile deepened.

"Not just your build—your magic is just like his. A fire-based magic system suited for large-scale warfare… And since your circuit includes a Meteor-Type formation, that makes sense. However, since your Wings are short, it doesn’t support the Great Cross formation, but your Ring-Type circuit is well-developed. You’ve trained in magic swordsmanship, haven’t you?"

"Oh, yes, I have."

"I thought so, since you take after your father, it was easy to figure out. For some mages, this structure might be a drawback, but since your element is fire, it actually works in your favor… For instance, in close combat, you could use it to melt weapons and armor. Your magic isn’t just for the backlines—it’s useful on the frontlines, too. Your father did the same, so I suggest honing that skill further. It’ll serve you well."

"Is that so? Thank you."

"Alright, next. Carla, it's your turn."

Carla clicked her tongue softly as she stood up.

Honestly—she wasn’t particularly eager to do this, but there was no helping it.

If she had to reveal it anyway, it might be better to get it over with quickly.

Carla stepped up to the podium and placed her hand on the crystal ball before Albina could even say a word.

As she channeled her mana, the orb let out a faint hummm, then projected the circuit diagram into the air.

"This is…"

In rare cases, some branches might not exist at all, but those are special cases.

Albina had said it herself.

She had described it as rare, and yet, here it was, manifesting right before her eyes, leaving Albina at a loss for words.

There were no wings at all.

Having just one missing section was already an anomaly, but Albina had never seen a case where both wings were completely absent.

Carla, however, knew the reason perfectly well.

Ten years ago, she had exchanged her firepower for raw mana in a ritual of offering, which had altered her circuit into this peculiar state.

"With a structure like this, it's physically impossible to project mana outside your body. Carla, were you aware of this?"

"It’s my own circuit, of course I know. It doesn’t inconvenience me."

Carla responded indifferently, but Ivan, watching from his seat, was just as shocked as everyone else.

He remembered Carla’s circuit.

Back when they were children, when she was still a young noble, Carla had once stolen a circuit amplifier from her house and secretly showed Ivan her circuit.

Back then, it hadn't looked like this. Her wings had been intact—he was certain of it.

But that was ten years ago.

Something must have happened in the time they had been apart.

"Your head and tail sections are well-developed, making you a textbook example of a lightning mage… but to have no wings at all… To be honest, I've never seen a case like this in my life."

Even during the entrance exam, Carla had never used an external mana projection spell.

Albina recalled Carla’s performance in the exam.

From Awakening to Thunderstorm, every single one of her techniques had been focused on coating her body with electricity and integrating it into her martial arts.

"…You're staring a little too intently, and it's making me uncomfortable."

Snapping out of her thoughts, Albina realized that Carla was looking at her, her violet eyes sharp and cold.

That piercing gaze—it wasn’t just irritation.

A silent warning not to probe any deeper.

Albina exhaled through her nose.

She knew the Cascata family was unusually protective of Carla.

And just recently, she had even received a personal message from His Majesty’s Chief Secretary, the Court Mage—Lord Cascata.

The Academy prided itself on equality, but instructors were not exempt from political pressures.

"I have no wings, as you said, so I cannot project mana externally. My method of combat is to encase my body in electricity and enhance my physical abilities. That’s all."

Carla provided her own explanation, as if cutting the conversation short.

Just as she was about to pull her hand away, Albina instinctively grabbed it.

"R-right. That makes sense. But another peculiar thing is… the hourglass shape—it suggests necromantic potential—"

Ah.

Albina stopped mid-sentence, realizing her mistake.

Necromancy? As if Cascata would ever touch something like that.

"…Do I look like someone who would use that kind of magic?"

Carla's voice was ice-cold as she yanked her hand away.

Albina, suddenly self-conscious—aware of how badly she had just misspoken—awkwardly cleared her throat and called up the next student.

Carla stepped down.

Ivan stepped up.

As they passed each other, Carla clicked her tongue.

She knew.

She knew exactly what was coming next.

Seating herself, Carla propped her chin on her hand and gazed out the window.

She really didn’t want to see this.

A faint hummm filled the room, followed by an awed murmur from the students.

Carla squeezed her eyes shut.

Projected above the crystal ball would be his perfectly developed magic circuit.

‘How much had it evolved over the past ten years?’

Jealousy twisted in her gut, but the curiosity was unbearable.

And so she looked.

And her breath caught in her throat.

All four sections were flawlessly developed, with every endpoint fully extended into 31 perfect nodes.

It was the kind of magic circuit any mage would kill to have.

A circuit so complete, so balanced, so perfect, it was coveted.

Carla clenched her jaw.

‘It’s fine. It’s fine—’

Sure, his circuit was well-rounded, but in lightning magic and close combat, she still had the advantage.

For now.

But then she noticed something odd.

Albina wasn’t reacting.

In fact, the instructor wasn’t surprised at all.

Arms crossed, she nodded as if this were the most natural thing in the world.

Carla frowned.

Any real mage should be in awe.

Shouldn’t Albina be stunned? Shouldn’t she be shocked? Shouldn’t she at least be interested?

But she wasn’t.

Instead, she looked… bored.

"Instructor," Emil spoke up, hesitant. "With a circuit like that, in theory… doesn’t that mean he can use all types of magic?"

Albina finally turned her attention away from Carla.

"Yes, that’s right. With all four sections at 31 nodes, it’s a perfect structure. Given enough time, he could master any form of magic."

"Wow… Ivan, that’s incredible…"

Emil sounded awestruck.

And frankly, there wasn’t much else to say.

"Keep honing your skills, Ivan. I expect great things."

Albina’s encouragement made Ivan smile sheepishly as he returned to his seat.

Carla watched the scene unfold, and everything about it—all of it—felt wrong.

# The Academy's Prodigy Wants to Defeat the Genius - 8

"With this, we've taken some time to observe each other's magic circuits. I hope this serves as an opportunity to understand and respect one another's magic and to grow together. Also, there's no need to inform the Western Class about this, nor should you. We all know that wouldn't be a good idea, right?"

Seeing the students nod in agreement, Albina smiled in satisfaction.

"Alright then, that's it for now. It's lunchtime, so eat well, and I'll see you all in the afternoon. We'll also go over the curriculum for the semester then, so don’t be late. Dismissed!"

As soon as Albina left the classroom, Carla shot up from her seat. It was lunchtime, but she wasn't particularly hungry—she simply didn’t want to stay in that classroom any longer.

That perfect magic circuit of Ivan’s refused to leave her mind. Why did that lowly commoner, that wretched demon, have such a flawless, dream-like circuit, one that any magician would envy? She couldn’t understand it, and the jealousy that churned inside her was so dark and vile that it made her sick. Without another thought, she strode out of the room.

"Carla!"

She quickened her pace at the sound of that voice. That fool—he actually believed they were friends. She had never thought of him as such, and yet he clung to her so annoyingly, so persistently, as if they still shared some bond.

"Carla, let’s eat together."

‘Damn it.’

She muttered a curse under her breath.

She had gotten shorter—her strides had shrunk with her, too. Despite speeding up, Ivan caught up effortlessly. Worse still, walking beside him like this made her keenly aware that she now only reached his shoulder.

She had been taller than him before. And this damned body—every step she took made her chest feel uncomfortable, as if the cloth bindings weren’t enough to suppress it.

"Huh? Carla, let’s eat together."

She stopped abruptly and glared at him. The sight of Ivan grinning at her, all carefree and oblivious, made her want to punch him square in the face. The urge surged violently inside her, but she held it back, clenching her jaw, before turning away and resuming her stride.

"Come on, Carla. Let’s eat together and talk. I have so many things I want to ask. About your circuit, about why you hid your gender, about the past ten years."

Ivan blocked her path, arms outstretched, clearly determined not to budge until he got the answer he wanted. Carla sighed heavily.

"Ivan Contadino."

"Yeah? So you’ve decided to eat with me now?"

"No, not at all. In fact, I’m even more convinced I shouldn’t."

"Huh… why?"

A commoner is a commoner.

This fool had no understanding of how things worked among nobles.

"This is the Academy, Ivan. If we sit around discussing my magic circuit or my family matters, do you really think no one will eavesdrop? Use your head for once."

"Oh…"

Ivan couldn't come up with a response. He had to admit—noble affairs were a mystery to him.

"So move."

She tried to push past him, but misjudged their height difference. Instead of shoving his shoulder, her hand merely nudged his upper arm. With a scoff, she quickened her pace, distancing herself from him.

"Sorry, Carla! I was being an idiot!"

Hearing him call out after her, Carla sighed long and deep.

‘Idiot. Complete fool.’

The pleasant weather led Ivan, Emil, and Regina to take seats at an outdoor table. As expected of the Academy, the ingredients were high-quality, the trays elegant, and even the utensils luxurious.

"Hey, Ivan."

"Yeah?"

Regina ran her fork along the plate noiselessly before speaking again.

"What did you and Carla talk about earlier?"

"Earlier?"

"Yeah, before lunch."

"Oh, that."

Ivan took a large spoonful of risotto, chewing thoughtfully before answering.

"I just wanted to talk to her. She’s changed so much. I figured something must have happened over the past ten years, so I wanted to ask over lunch. She shot me down immediately."

"Shot you down… you mean she refused?"

"Yeah, she said discussing things like that in public wouldn’t sit well with the nobles."

"Well, she’s not wrong…"

Regina chewed her risotto, deep in thought.

Carla rejecting Ivan should have made her happy. And yet, the way things had changed between them was troubling. They had been so close a decade ago, but now? She had no idea what had driven such a wedge between them. With a complicated expression, she continued eating.

"One thing’s for sure—Carla definitely hates me."

"You only just realized that?"

Regina stared at Ivan incredulously.

It was obvious to anyone watching. The way Carla looked at him, the words she spoke—it was all dripping with barely restrained disdain. And yet, it had taken him this long to notice? Then again, this obliviousness was part of his charm.

"Still, if we all spend time together, maybe—"

Before she could finish, Ivan pointed his spoon toward the cafeteria’s interior.

Where he pointed, a tall, muscular young man with tanned skin and cropped blonde hair stood awkwardly scanning the room, looking every bit like a foreign traveler who had accidentally wandered into the Empire’s lands.

"Hey, isn’t that Liam?"

"It is."

"Oi, Liam!"

Regina and Emil instantly ducked their heads.

Ivan had a way with people, sure, but did he have to be so loud about it? Every head in the cafeteria turned toward them.

"Come on, eat with us!"

Liam, looking put on the spot, hesitated before reluctantly making his way toward them.

And watching all of this unfold was Carla.

Ivan’s carefree, foolish grin, Liam hesitantly joining them, the four of them sitting together, chatting as they ate—it was all so easy for them.

Expression unreadable, Carla picked up her spoon.

She wasn’t hungry. Not really. But she had to eat. She had an afternoon class to get through.

"Oh, look who it is. If it isn’t the esteemed Lady Cascata."

As Carla scooped up a spoonful of risotto and brought it to her mouth, she let out a long sigh and put the spoon back down.

Everything from one to ten was scraping against her nerves, making her blood boil.

"...Lucas, it would be great if you could just get lost."

"Oh my, such crude language from the noble lady."

"Forget the 'noble lady' nonsense, drop the titles."

It was Lucas.

Still as obnoxious as ever, he ignored the other students from the Western Class who were trying to stop him, paying them no mind at all.

"If you just leave now, I won’t say another word."

"Oh dear, the noble lady seems to be in quite the foul mood."

Lucas perched himself on the edge of Carla’s table with a sneer.

The Western Class students looked visibly uneasy, but as Lucas was from a high-ranking noble family, they couldn’t do anything about it.

"Well, of course. The noble lady must have wanted all eyes on her, but instead, everyone’s busy laughing with some commoner. No wonder she’s fuming."

Carla pushed her tray away and closed her eyes.

‘Annoyance.’

This was undoubtedly annoyance.

Discomfort, disgust, and the lingering irritation left by Ivan’s actions all mixed together into a thick, murky, revolting emotion.

Carla took a slow breath.

Hadn’t she always considered this bug beneath her?

Back when she was still Carlo, she hadn’t even spared him a second thought.

So she could just ignore him like the barking mongrel he was.

And yet.

"But to think you lost to such a lowly commoner, what a shame for our noble lady."

He had crossed the line.

Perhaps, Carla’s own patience had simply worn too thin.

That was enough.

She didn’t need to hold back.

She was irritated, and she saw no reason to suppress it.

Carla slowly stood up.

"Lucas."

"Huh?"

That smug, slimy face, paired with his lecherous grin, was repulsive beyond words.

Had she always hated him this much? Maybe she just never paid attention to his face when she was a man. But standing here now, she could feel his eyes running up and down her body, and it made her skin crawl, like filth slithering over her.

"I have two things to tell you."

"Oh? Two things? Not just one? The great Carlo has shown his true form and become so generous."

"First."

Carla pulled a white glove from her pocket.

"We are already students of this academy. Even if a fight breaks out, the worst that can happen is a disciplinary action."

"...What are you getting at?"

Lucas’s eyes narrowed.

Sensing Carla’s intent, he started forming a seal with his fingers, ready to counter her.

"The other thing is, just because I’ve returned to this form…"

Carla threw the white glove straight at Lucas’s face.

As the unmistakable sign of a formal duel struck him, she delivered her final words.

"It doesn’t mean you’ve become stronger than me."

Thwack!

Carla’s fist struck Lucas dead center in the face, landing like the sting of a wasp.

# The Academy's Prodigy Wants to Defeat the Genius - 9

They say the most entertaining thing to watch is a fight, and when the ones fighting are the most talked-about figures in the Academy—Carla della Cascata and Lucas von Scheiskehl—there’s no need to say more.

Lucas, who had just taken a direct punch to the face from Carla, sprang up and waved his hands in rapid gestures. A magic projectile, even larger than a fist, shot toward Carla, but she easily deflected it.

The deflected magic projectiles scattered in different directions, but the students who had been eating merely cast protective spells over themselves, too entertained by the fight to even think of stopping it.

"Lady Carla… Carla! We’ll apologize on his behalf, so please stop here!"

Kiara, a West Class student with long black hair tied up in a white ribbon, hurriedly stepped between the two and shouted.

“…Hmph.”

He wasn’t even worth considering as an opponent to begin with.

The impact Carla had felt from his punch, the sensation of deflecting that magic projectile—Lucas was still nothing but a worm.

"Carla, if there's any issue, we'll handle it properly. I’ll testify that Lucas was the one who provoked this first, so let’s end this here."

Carla exhaled a long breath, her body still tense with the remnants of adrenaline.

Besides, if the fight escalated any further, the fact that she threw the first punch would put her at a disadvantage.

Since Kiara was offering to testify for her, there was no need to make things more complicated… or so she thought, until Lucas, blood gushing from his nose, approached her with his face burning red.

"You bitch, you hit me first! Damn it, don’t think this is over!"

Carla scoffed and glared at him.

Barking dogs don’t bite, and right now, this one was yapping far too much.

"Judging by the way you speak, you’re nothing but a vulgar mutt, Lucas. If I were to judge by your manners alone, I’d believe you were the commoner here."

"You damn wench! I was willing to let it slide since you’re the heir of Cascata, but look at you, nothing more than a scarecrow flapping its mouth! Let’s see how long you can keep running that mouth of yours!"

Lucas stretched out his fingers.

Waves of magic flared up around him, signaling that he was about to cast something far stronger than a mere magic projectile.

Carla smirked, crossing her arms.

"Go ahead, do it. Whatever it is, just do it."

"What?"

"I won’t dodge or interfere with whatever magic you’re preparing, so go ahead. But if it doesn’t take me down, you’d better be ready to lose one of your limbs."

Carla's eyes gleamed dangerously.

She truly meant it—she stood there, arms folded, waiting for Lucas to finish his spell.

"Lucas! Stop! Damn it, someone go get an instructor, now!"

"Lucas, cut it out! This isn’t going to end well!"

The West Class students were frantically trying to stop him, but Lucas, already blinded by rage, wasn’t listening.

Meanwhile, the upperclassmen had set up barriers and were now eagerly watching, clearly treating this as mere entertainment. The only ones who were actually worried were the West Class students.

"Hey—why are you trying to stop them? This is the best show we’ve seen yet! Just enjoy it!"

"Yeah—dueling isn’t forbidden in the Academy, so just sit back and watch!"

"If you’re not going to watch, at least don’t get in the way—"

"Damn it…"

Kiara could do nothing more.

By now, the magic circle around Lucas had fully formed, taking an absurdly long time to complete. Whatever spell he was preparing, it was definitely something powerful.

"…We should back off too! If we get caught in the crossfire, that’s on us!"

Finally, Kiara and the other West Class students retreated into the barriers set up by the seniors, turning the cafeteria into a full-blown arena.

"This is incredibly inefficient. How long does he need to chant that spell?"

Carla began gathering her own magic, casting [Awakening].

A crackling sensation ran across her skin as electricity surged through her body—her senses sharpened dozens, hundreds, thousands of times over.

Letting out a long exhale, Carla’s flushed face showed a mix of combat adrenaline and overstimulation from her heightened senses.

At last, she unfolded her arms and firmly planted her feet.

"Watch closely, you Cascata scarecrow!"

Magic circles spread out in layers around Lucas.

A classic war spell.

Lucas was preparing a large-scale magic attack, a technique designed for massacring enemy troops on the battlefield.

"[Mana Barrage]!"

The moment his chant ended, Carla moved.

Originally, she had planned to let him attack, but there was no way she could allow a spell like that to be cast.

A wide-area magic attack? Seriously?

"You disgrace the Scheiskehl name, you fool."

Carla dodged the barrage of magic bullets and closed in on Lucas.

She couldn’t aim for his neck—that would kill him, and that was too much trouble.

Instead, Carla slipped behind him, wrapping her arms and legs around his body to restrain him before twisting his joints with force.

Snap, crack.

"AAARRRGGHHH!"

The sickening crunch of breaking bones echoed as Lucas’s shoulder and knee gave out.

His concentration shattered, and the elaborate magic circles he had drawn collapsed and scattered into nothing.

"Use your brain for once, Lucas. Who the hell casts wide-area magic indoors?"

With his arms and legs broken, Lucas couldn’t even roll around in pain—he simply lay there, convulsing slightly, drooling onto the cafeteria floor.

"How utterly pathetic, Lucas. This is why you’re no better than a worm. Tsk."

Carla cast a cold glance at Lucas, still trembling on the floor in agony, before turning away.

Trying to wrap things up quietly had failed, and now the situation had blown up much larger than expected.

Even as Carla left the cafeteria, she wondered if there had been a way to handle things more discreetly, but it was already too late.

Kiara from the West Class had promised to take care of the aftermath, so things would likely be settled one way or another, and besides, Carla had enjoyed thoroughly beating Lucas. That alone was satisfaction enough.

For once, she was in a good mood.

Holding back just wasn’t her nature. Now that she had let it all out, she felt refreshed.

"Hey, Carla."

Well, at least until she heard Ivan’s voice.

Carla frowned, pretending not to hear him.

"Hey, are you okay?"

Hearing his voice right next to her, she couldn’t ignore him any longer. Carla tilted her head slightly and glanced at Ivan—along with the three others whose names she hadn’t bothered to remember.

"What would be wrong? I’m perfectly fine."

"Oh, I see… I was just worried you might’ve gotten hurt."

"I don’t need that kind of concern."

With that, Carla resumed walking toward the lecture hall.

Now that she thought about it, those four were also heading there, which meant she’d be walking with them. That realization soured her mood again.

Even after Carla and the other East Class students had left, the cafeteria remained in chaos as staff worked on cleaning up the mess.

Golems responsible for maintaining the Academy’s facilities swarmed the area, repairing the damage. Meanwhile, high above, from the top of the bell tower overlooking the scene, a lone figure watched.

"This year’s batch has quite a few interesting ones."

A man with one eye, the other sunken and covered by wild strands of hair, muttered to himself.

His remaining eye was locked onto Carla as she made her way toward the lecture hall, gleaming with curiosity.

"Especially that Cascata girl, she’s fascinating. Hardly what you’d expect from one of the Four Great Houses."

Since the founding of the Empire, the Four Great Houses had played an essential role, but now, people widely believed this generation to be the worst in their history.

Given the Empire’s emphasis on strength, education in virtues like wisdom and honor had always been somewhat lacking, but even so, there had never been a generation where all the heirs were such disasters.

Cascata’s heir—or rather, the one who had been presumed to be—was no exception. Even though her reputation had been built when she was thought to be a man, nothing about her temperament had changed since revealing her true identity.

"This is the first time I’ve seen you take an interest in the heirs of the Four Great Houses. Isn’t your time too valuable to waste on them?"

"Normally, yes. Those brats are all just basking in their family names, but that girl… she feels different somehow."

"She’s still just a child. A fool drunk on her own power, unable to see beyond herself. If you have time to waste on her, shouldn’t you be focusing on something more productive? Like, say, the imperial bloodline?"

A woman with piercing red eyes shot the one-eyed man a sharp glare.

He nodded, acknowledging her words, but his gaze remained fixed on Carla’s back.

"Yeah… what really matters is the Council’s orders. But still, I can’t help but wonder… why is that disgraced bloodline, stripped of its wealth and honor, now crawling around in a place like this? …Hmm?"

The man suddenly tensed, his expression twisting as he squinted.

"Is it just my imagination?"

"…No, I don’t think so."

Carla had turned around.

More than just glancing back, her eyes were locked onto the very top of the bell tower, exactly where they stood.

"Did she just make eye contact with us?"

"It certainly seems that way."

"The invisibility spell is active, isn’t it?"

"Of course. It’s still in effect, and it was cast by him personally."

"…Then how the hell did she notice?"

The woman remained silent.

Meanwhile, Carla kept staring up at the bell tower for a long moment.

Then, as Ivan caught up to her, she let out a sharp breath, turned away, and continued toward the lecture hall.