

Chapter 3 Part 5



After Rufus left, Reid and Elria joined the others who remained at the workshop.

As it was already evening, they quickly returned to the academy—

"—Wow! The food is delicious!!" Millis exclaimed in high spirits, laughing loudly in the academy's dining hall.

In contrast to Millis's cheerful demeanor, Faregh let out a deep sigh.

"I wonder if I've done something irreversible...?"

"What are you talking about!? When one of us is in trouble, we help each other out!!" Millis responded, patting Faregh on the back with a thwack.

Observing the two, Reid whispered to Wiesel.

"...Hey, what's up with those two?"

"Oh... Millis wanted to know how much of a 'favor' she was owed for when she asks for one, so I converted our work's market rate compensation for this time..."

"...How much was it?"

"Roughly this much."

Wiesel held up five fingers with a grim face.

".....Five hundred thousand?"

"No, five million."

".....Seriously?"

"I should mention, for the sake of honor, that this amount considers the type of magic power system involved when requesting a magic craftsman, the range of the engraving, the complexity

of the magic circuits, and it's based on the appropriate market rates. Moreover, the price has been reduced because she is not formally a magic craftsman."

"Shouldn't she just become a magic craftsman?"

"I fervently suggested it as well, but she said, *'If I'm going to stand out when I return home, it's best to be a mage!'* So, for now, she's considering it after she becomes a mage."

"She's burying her talents for the sake of appearances back home..."

"However, it's not entirely a bad thing. Like me aiming to be a mage for the development and research of magic equipment, being in a magic-heavy environment will lead to improved precision and speed in engraving. In fact, it's common for those who were originally mages to retire and become magic craftsmen."

"And Faregh the Kid owes her, so she won't be left wandering the streets, huh?"

Since a sizable 'favor' was made with Faregh, a scion of a distinguished family, it makes sense why Millis would be frolicking around so happily.

"Thanks to Lady Millis, I could achieve the performance I had envisioned. So, as a magic equipment engineer, I'm left with no regrets about the perfect job."

"...The request fee skyrocketed because you got carried away, didn't it?"

"The best work deserves the greatest reward. Besides, the Welminan family has connections everywhere, not just money, so this 'favor' can be said to be very powerful."

Wiesel adjusted his glasses and smiled as he spoke. His reasoning was sound, but it wasn't just Millis who had quite the character; Wiesel did, too.

Perhaps sensing a bright future ahead, Millis playfully engaged Elria with a cheerful smile on her face.

"So, Elria-sama, how was your date with Reid-san?"

"....."

"Huh, Elria-sama?"

"Mm... What is it, Millis?"

"No, um... I was just wondering how your date with Reid-san went."

"Yes, it was a lot of fun. We visited various shops, ate delicious skewers at a stall, and even Shehri seemed to enjoy the walk," Elria replied, though she seemed somewhat distracted.

Noticing Elria's demeanor, Millis leaned in and whispered to Reid.

"...Reid-san, did something happen?"

"Something messy happened towards the end. It's not like I did something, or that something happened to us, so don't worry about it."

"Well, despite everything, I believe that Reid-san is someone who is considerate of others, so I'm not worried about that..."

Millis looked at Elria with concern.

It was likely that Elria was troubled by the situation involving Rufus. However, this was not something Reid and Elria should have meddled in. It was a matter related to another family's affairs, and by extension, to national matters. Given Rufus's situation, it was not a topic to be discussed carelessly with others.

".....!!"

Just as she was contemplating this, Elria suddenly perked up. Standing up with vigor while holding her tray, she declared, "I'm going to get seconds."

"Seconds...? Didn't you have a light portion because you just had skewers?"

"I didn't have enough, so I'm going to get some more," Elria replied in a somewhat restless manner.

Following her gaze, Reid understood her intentions.

"Got it. Maybe I'll go get seconds, too."

"Eh, you too, Reid-san?"

"Yeah. It's crowded, and it looks like it will take time, so we'll be back a bit later."

"Understood. In that case, Lord Welminan, until they return, let's discuss new magic equipment."

"No, wait, what's this about new magic equipment!?"

"Come on, Faregh-san, let's at least hear them out. If it's new magic equipment developed by Blanche's workshop, it means we're dealing with information not available anywhere else, you know?"

"I-Is that so? In that case, I might as well listen..."

"Then, let's start with the new combat technique that's suitable for Lord Welminan——"

Carried along by Millis's words, Faregh listened to Wiesel obediently. He would have to be careful not to get conned into buying strange things one of these days.

Ignoring the three of them, Reid followed Elria through the dining hall——

"————May I sit next to you?"

She called out to Rufus, who was sitting at a table.

".....Eh?"

Rufus, taken aback by the sudden approach, looked up in surprise.

Reid also smiled wryly and raised his hand slightly towards the surprised Rufus.

"Uhh, you're Elria-chan's——"

"I'm Reid Frieden. It seems Elria has been quite concerned and was looking for a chance to talk with you, so she approached you."

"I-I was just asking because there was a free seat, and it just happened to be Rufus there..."

"That's impossible timing-wise, isn't it?"

Reid lightly patted Elria on the head, and Rufus smiled slightly.

"So, can we talk while we eat?"

"...Yes! Let's eat together!" Rufus responded with a smile.

With that, Rufus crafted a broad smile, and they sat down to carry on a casual conversation.

"You were alone? Don't you eat with your classmates?"

"Um... I don't really eat with them much. I'm the youngest in the class, and since I can only use summoning magic, I can't really join in on magic conversations either."

Rufus laughed as if troubled, but surely there were other reasons for her isolation. After all, she had made a pact with the 'Guardian Dragons' and also handled a flying steel dragon during the entrance exams to gain admission. This showed her inherent talent as a mage.

Rufus's mother had mentioned that flying steel dragons were considered inferior, but making a pact with a dragon species magical beast in the first place puts one at a very high level among summoning magic users. It wouldn't be surprising if some students envied Rufus for her exceptional abilities at such a young age.

"Um... I'm sorry, Elria-chan."

Rufus muttered an apology, slightly bowing her head.

"During the mock battle... I thought I absolutely had to win and couldn't afford to lose... I'm sorry for causing Elria-chan's <<Mana-Eater Wolf>> pain."

With her pale crimson eyes slightly moistened, Rufus bowed her head to Elria, who shook her head in response.

"It's okay, Shehri wasn't angry."

".....Really?"

"Yeah. Besides, as I said in the park, it was my fault for stopping the battle midway."

"N-No, that's not it! It's true that Rafika was barely able to move, and since it was a mock battle, not an actual one, it should have been stopped...!!"

"Since mock battles are meant to simulate actual combat, it was my fault for not considering every situation."

"But if I had admitted defeat, Rafika wouldn't have acted recklessly!"

"Rafika tried hard to fulfill Rufus's wishes. It's such a good child."

"Elria-chan's Shehri also obeyed orders precisely. It was amazing!!"

And so, they waved their hands at each other, each denying and praising the other. However, amidst this exchange, Elria calmly declared, "That's why—next time, I definitely won't lose."

Hearing this, Rufus tensed up slightly.

"In the next conditional exam, I will be restricted by the academy to only use magic up to the third tier. But even so, I'm confident I can win and will put forth all my effort to ensure I don't lose."

Rufus knew this was not mere arrogance. She understood from actual combat experience.

The flying steel dragon Rufus summoned and commanded was estimated to be at least of the eighth tier, and considering the vessel's movements, it would not be surprising if it matched the ninth tier. However, Elria had overwhelmed it using a <<Mana-Eater Wolf>>, which was of the lower fifth tier and even below the dragon species in rank.

Elria not only could use the exceptional technique of 'Weighted Multiplication Deployment' but also had overwhelming magic combat experience.

Even with the restriction of only using third tier magic, if Elria declared she would *"give her all"*, she would surely be able to seize victory.

That was why Elria had also told Rufus's mother that her intention was *"not out of pity"*.

Elria admitted that the incident in the mock battle was due to her own complacency. She declared that this time, she would shed all that and fight with all her might to win.

"I also have an unwavering purpose. It may seem trivial compared to your circumstances— but for me, it's a promise that absolutely must be fulfilled."

To settle a millennium-old conflict.

It was a pretext but also a necessary ritual to significantly change their relationship, a ceremony for two who were once enemies to come together anew.

"That's why, I will absolutely not lose."

With a firm attitude, Elria declared again.

Rufus then, with a twisted expression—

"—Elria-chan, you are truly strong."

Rufus murmured, her face almost tearful.

"I... I just managed to make a contract with the children of the 'Guardian Dragons'."

Saying this, Rufus began to talk about herself.

"I originally didn't intend to make a contract with the 'Guardian Dragons'. All I wanted was to become a mage with Rafika, who has been with me since I was born."

But Rufus paused her words.

"My teacher said, '*You can make a contract with the Guardian Dragons*', and believing those words, I approached the children of the 'Guardian Dragons', and they accepted me, forming a contract."

".....Teacher?"

"Yes. The teacher is someone who studies 'Guardian Dragons'. They taught me things I didn't know, which weren't even in the literature."

That was how Rufus established a contract with the 'Guardian Dragons' that symbolized Serios. However, with that came an overwhelmingly heavy responsibility.

"At first, my mother was happy. Since our family was not from the legal wife's line but from a concubine's, the harder I worked, the more my grandfather praised us."

This status and blessing were ones they would not have originally received. Such privileges were granted to those who had fulfilled their contracts with the 'Guardian Dragons'. However, that meant one had to be a '*Contractor of the Guardian Dragons*', similar to someone who was once required to take on the role of a—'*Hero*'.

"Every time I summoned Rafika... my mother started to get mad at me. Even though I finally managed to subdue the 'Guardian Dragons', she wondered why I wouldn't use it."

"...Is it because you couldn't fully control the 'Guardian Dragons'?"

"Yes... The children of the 'Guardian Dragons' are proud creatures, and if they find their medium lacking in magic power, they get angry and start rampaging, obeying or disobeying orders depending on their mood."

Summoning magic was different from other kinds of magic in that the relationship with the summoned magical beasts was a significant factor. If the summoner sent back a magical beast that did not obey, it could worsen their relationship with the beast and could even lead to the annulment of the contract. But if they ignored a rampaging magical beast, it could harm those around them.

"I explained it to my mother, but... since I'm the contractor, they wouldn't hurt me, and it would prove the strength of the 'Guardian Dragons', so she said it was fine," Rufus laughed weakly.

Yet, Rufus refused to use the 'Guardian Dragons'. It was not just because they could cause harm; there was also a desire not to have others despise the magical beasts that had contracted with her.

"And so, when I kept summoning only Rafika, my mother began to dislike it. Eventually, she said she'd forcefully annul my contract with Rafika... That's when I begged to stay with her if I could be the top student at the academy."

That was why Rufus was so fixated on winning above all else.

Defeat meant losing relationships and parting ways with friends.

For Rufus, who had always been with Rafika, it was akin to losing a friend in death.

"But... my mother is also right. What's expected of me is to use the 'Guardian Dragons'. I understand how hard she struggled before I could make a contract, and I know she worked hard so I could aim to be a mage."

Then, Rufus quietly looked down and said,

"That's why... I just don't know what to do anymore."

Caught between a dear friend and a mother's expectations, she was uncertain about what to prioritize.

It was a natural conflict for a young girl.

Yet even this conflict was not allowed for Rufus.

Her upbringing, environment, the people around her, and even the country demanded that Rufus make a choice.

Seeing Rufus like this, Elria nodded slightly—

"—Then let's fight with all our might."

The moment she spoke, Rufus quietly lifted her face.

".....Eh?"

"Fighting with all your strength clears your mind. So, let's battle it out."

As if to endorse the idea, Elria nodded vigorously several times.

Rufus, taken aback by Elria's words, listened as Reid explained them further.

"Well, what Elria is trying to say is that the process is more important than the result."

"Uh... it's not about winning or losing?"

"Something like that. If you give it your all and win, that's the best outcome. If you lose despite that, there's nothing you can do."

"But... if I do that, my mother will..."

"If you've used all your strength and even the 'Guardian Dragons' and still lost, then it means no one else could have won either. If someone complains, just say *'then ask someone else'* and walk away."

"That's... that's irresponsible!!"

"It's fine to be irresponsible sometimes. Others impose their expectations just because you have the power or talent, and if you fail, they demand you take responsibility— that's the real irresponsibility."

Reid said this with a smile.

"So what you need to do is either silence everyone around by winning with all your might or lose terribly after giving it your all. It's simple and straightforward."

"But... but——"

As Rufus began to tear up, Reid lightly patted her head.

"You've always been thinking about others until now. So, at least when you're fighting, stop worrying about the surroundings and just focus on yourself."

After ruffling her hair, Reid flashed a toothy smile.

"Besides, if anything happens, I'll take care of it."

".....Reid-san will?"

"Yeah. After all, I was the one who blew away the magic of Elria you saw during the exam."

"Blew away... you mean you used magic from the same tenth tier?"

"No, I just kind of punched it away."

"Punched... the magic away?"

Rufus's head was filled with question marks; it seemed as if she couldn't quite grasp the concept. However, Reid was already accustomed to this kind of reaction.

"Anyway, no matter what happens, Elria and I will take care of it, so you just need to go all out."

".....Eh?"

"Eh?"

"I want to fight with Rufus with all my strength, so I'll leave the handling to Reid."

To Reid's surprise, Elria didn't just agree, but vigorously shook her head.

"So, I'll leave everything to Reid when something happens."

"Well, that's fine, but... just how hard are you planning to try?"

"Really hard."

"You seem like you're going to try incredibly hard..."

"Last time, I let Reid go all out, so this time it's my turn."

With an air of determination, Elria clenched her fists tightly.

It seemed that regardless of Rufus's circumstances, she simply wanted to fight.

"After all, if I don't give it my all once in a while, my skills will dull."

"But your power is limited to the third tier in the next exam, remember?"

"Showing more power than expected under limited circumstances is also a form of going all out."

"Ooh, that's quite a statement."

As the two of them engaged in this banter, Rufus let out a small laugh. A bright smile then started to spread across her face.

"Got it! I'll fight with Elria-chan with all my might!"

"Mm. I am looking forward to it."

"You better not lose to anyone else before that!"

"Of course. And Rufus, you must not lose until you fight with me."

"Then, it's a promise to fight with all our might!"

Saying that, Rufus held out her pinky finger. Seeing this, Elria also smiled and intertwined her pinky finger with Rufus's.

After nodding to each other in satisfaction, Rufus energetically stood up from her seat.

"Alright! Then I've got to do my best starting today! Thanks to both of you for listening to me!"

While smiling, Rufus waved her hands again and again until she left the dining hall.

"Reid."

At that moment, Elria unexpectedly called out to Reid.

"What's the matter, Elria?"

"I'm going to clash with Rufus with all my strength. Because I think that's what's best for her."

And so, Elria continued,

"This time, I'll leave everything to Reid."

"That's what I'm here for. It's not like something's bound to happen——"

"No, something will definitely happen."

Elria said with a stern face.

"What puzzled me was, *'Why doesn't Rufus use the 'Guardian Dragons'?*' If she's obsessed with winning, there should be no better choice."

However, Rufus stubbornly refused to use the 'Guardian Dragons'.

Rufus had mentioned the reasons, but——

"In the first place, when you think about it, the very fact that Rufus didn't use it implies that there's something off with the contract itself."

"...What do you mean?"

"Rufus said, *'Creating a vessel that lacks magic power would anger the Guardian Dragons'*. That means the 'Guardian Dragons' are aware of the lack of magic power, yet they still continue the contract with Rufus."

"Is that enough of a problem to break the contract?"

"Put yourself in their shoes, Reid. How would you feel if someone ordered you not to use your current strong body, but to go into battle with a far inferior one?"

"Well... if it's an order, I'll manage, but I guess there would be some discontent."

"Magical beasts feel the same. Naturally, they'd get angry if they were forced to fight with a weaker body than what they truly possess——especially a proud and superior magical beast like the 'Guardian Dragons' who would feel even more indignant about it."

As she spoke, Elria narrowed her eyes.

"If a trust relationship has been established since childhood, it's possible to form a contract regardless of the amount of magic power. So, there is a chance... However, I find it unnatural that all four types of 'Guardian Dragons' would continue a contract knowing there is clearly something wrong with the contractor."

Elria's sense of discomfort and the unnatural situation she remembered.

For now, there was not enough information to reach a conclusion, so it remained merely one of the ominous signs. However, there was one thing that was common to the recent troubling incidents.

"—Again, it involves magical beasts?"

Previously, Reid and the others had encountered the 'Armament Dragon', a magical beast thought to be extinct, in modern times.

And now... Elria felt something off about the existence of the 'Guardian Dragons'.

"If Serious was involved in the previous incident as well, it makes sense that a magical beast like the 'Armament Dragon' would appear..."

"We can't deny the possibility, but I think the academy has also suspected the use of summoning magic for the incident and investigated it. We can't really say anything until we hear about the details of the investigation from Alma-sensei."

More importantly, Elria brought up someone.

"I'm curious about this 'Teacher' Rufus mentioned."

"The one who suggested to her that she could make a contract with the 'Guardian Dragons'?"

"Yes. Unlike magical beasts like Rafika who are used to humans from the start, 'Guardian Dragons' only inhabit the wild. So, it wasn't just about making a contract. There was also a real risk of being devoured."

Yet, this person told Rufus, "*You can make a contract*".

As if—this person already knew the 'future'.

"So, when something happens, I want to trust and leave it to Reid," Elria said, looking straight at Reid.

If Rufus had been unwittingly used by someone involved in Reid and Elria's affairs, then Elria had expressed her intent to protect her with all her might.

And she trusted that Reid could handle whatever happened.

In that case—

"—Alright, I'll take care of everything."

Reid said with a strong smile, thumping his chest.

Seeing that smile, Elria also let out her own slight smile.

"And there's one more thing I'd like to ask of you."

"Sure, go ahead. Say anything at this point—"

Before Reid could finish, Elria collapsed onto the table with a thud.

Moreover, her face was pale, and she trembled.

"I want you to... carry me to our room..."

".....You overate, didn't you?"

"Yes... my stomach hurts so much, I can't move a step..."

While conversing with Rufus, Elria also progressed with her meal.

Elria was not a light eater, but apparently, her stomach had reached its limit after a light meal before dinner, followed by a second helping.

"Seriously... you could have stopped eating halfway through."

"An old habit of not leaving leftovers has backfired..."

"I'll commend you for finishing your meal, but let's get back and take some stomach medicine."

As he said this and bent down to offer his back, Elria slowly climbed on with sluggish movements.

"Reid's back is comfortable to ride."

"Well, I've carried you often enough to get used to it..."

"I'd also appreciate it if you could avoid shaking too much."

"Yeah, yeah. Leave that to me, too."

"Okay. I'll leave everything to Reid."

Elria cheerfully patted his shoulder as she said so.

"It's late to ask, but why are you okay with being carried but embarrassed to hold hands?"

"In my mind, piggybacking is like carrying an injured soldier, so it's fine."

"Your sensibilities are unique..."

With Elria on his back, Reid left the dining hall and headed to their room.