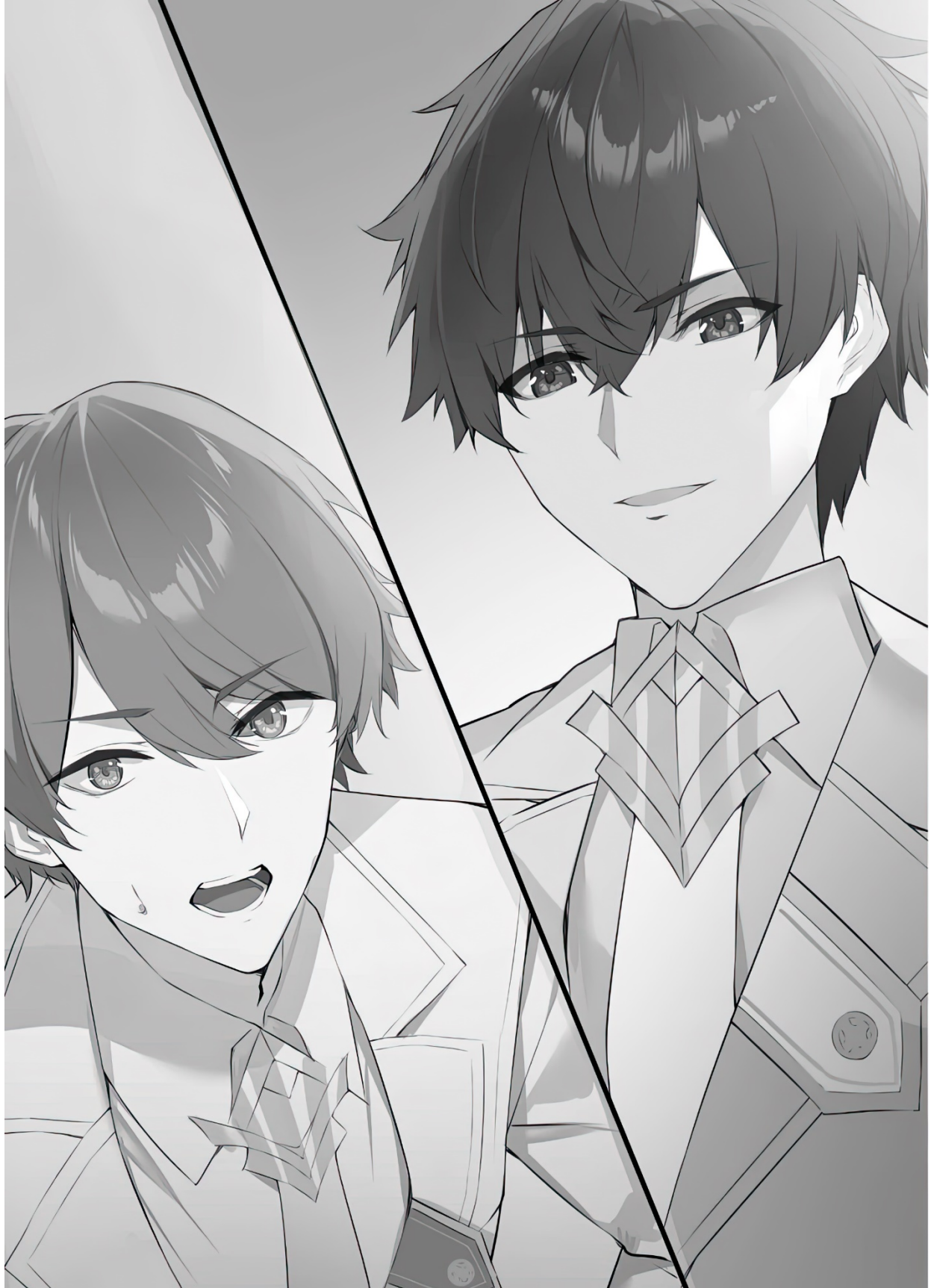


Chapter 2 Part 4



Distant sounds of battle had reached their ears. Listening intently to the sounds, Elria nodded slightly.

"Reid seems to be having fun."



"Um... I can clearly hear some explosive and dangerous-sounding noises, though...?"

"It's surprising that Reid would willingly take on Lord Welminan."

"True, he was the one most at odds with Faregh-san."

"Mm... I think people tend to care more for the troublesome ones."

Recalling the image of Reid holding a sword and smiling happily, Elria had spoken.

"In his previous life, Reid couldn't teach anyone his techniques."

"Is that because Reid-san was unreasonably strong?"

"Yes. I think he taught broader concepts like tactics and strategy, command, and reporting—things beyond combat. But no one could learn how Reid himself *'fights'*."

Although once called a 'Hero', Reid's feats had been due to his robust physique, making it impossible to pass on his techniques to others. However, nowadays, the world has been filled with 'Magic'.

While they couldn't reproduce that *'power'* itself, with body strengthening magic and magic equipment, it should have been possible to recreate at least the 'movement'.

"I think Reid sees potential in Faregh."

said Elria with a slight smile.

"Also, he's cheeky, so Reid probably wants to straighten him out."

"That sounds more like Reid-san."

"My magic equipment probably won't escape unscathed, either..."

With that, the three nodded in the direction where the explosions were heard.

In any case, Elria was also responsible for the two of them. It wasn't just for her own examination, but also because she wanted to teach them as much as possible for their future as mages.

"So, let's confirm your roles again."

"Yes! I'm in charge of defense, battle support through barriers, and guarding bases!"

"As for me, I'll use magic equipment for reconnaissance and information gathering. Based on that information, I'll take command, assess the situation, and participate in the front lines as needed."

Listening to their answers, Elria nodded approvingly.

In contrast to her usual demeanor, Millis had shown an exceedingly high magic power during the magic power measurement check and had been invited as a scholarship student by the academy.

Having a lot of magic power was simply advantageous. It had allowed her to create stronger offensive magic or protection magic that could block numerous attacks. And it was not only about the amount of magic power, but also the fact that she could handle four different magic power systems.

While using multiple magic power systems had given her an edge in battle, effectively utilizing them required experience and judgment. Still, as a support role, she had been able to adapt easily, using a broad range of magic to handle various situations. And while Millis had rejected the idea, pre-prepared defenses would have given her room to think and make better decisions.

Wiesel could handle two types of magic power systems and had an average amount of magic power. But because he could prepare multiple magic equipment himself, he could perform a wider range of roles than an average mage.

Mages who were skilled in reconnaissance and information gathering had been rare and hence a significant asset in conditional examinations, which were conducted in various situations, and in comprehensive examinations, where the main focus had been on interpersonal combat.

Facing the two of them, after pondering the most effective form of teaching, Elria had concluded—

"Let's have a mock battle."

"Ahh... This is the worst part about Elria-sama...!"

"Why are both Reid and Lady Elria so eager for combat...?"

Elria was enthusiastic, but the two looked up to the sky with looks of despair.

This was not their first mock battle with Elria. Having grown accustomed to Alma's training and found some room to breathe, they had conducted several mock battles during their free time, under Elria's proposal that *"real battle teaches you more"*.

Of course, Elria had been using magic restrictions to a significant extent—

"Come to think of it, ever since our mock battles with Lady Elria, the training has felt lax..."

"Yeah... Compared to being tossed around nearly a hundred times without magic..."

The primary focus of their training in the mock battles was on 'body utilization'.

If they could move their bodies efficiently, the magic power consumed for body strengthening would decrease, which would improve the efficiency of magic usage, quicker movements, and intuitive actions in close-quarters combat.

That was why Elria had been utterly merciless. She had been freely tossing them into the air and slamming them to the ground, using pure martial arts techniques whenever they showed an opening.

"But if it hurts, you'll never forget, and you'll learn faster. It's the most effective and strongest method of learning."

"Your words sound nothing like the wisdom of a sage. It's muscle-brained learning at its best...!"

"Just recalling it brings the taste of blood into my mouth..."

"In my time, there was a saying, *'You're not a full-fledged adult until you spit blood during training'*."

Before their pale faces, Elria nodded, as if it was only natural.

After all, failing to train as if their lives depended on it during that wartime period could have actually cost them their lives.

To quickly cultivate mages capable of opposing Altein, Elria had them undergo severe training herself. For some reason, only Tiana seemed to be enjoying it.

Once called a 'Sage', the core of Elria's philosophy was militaristic.

"Don't worry, both of you are getting better. You should be fine with half as much this time."

"So, we'll be tossed around fifty times, then."

"Should we stock up on some poultices before dinner...?"

Just as they were mentally preparing themselves— a large, dark shadow spread over Elria and the others. The moment she saw it, Elria reflexively looked up. There, a massive shadow loomed in the cloudless blue sky. It was— a jet-black dragon with massive wings which soared through the sky.

Elria recognized that dragon.

"—Eh? Where is everyone from my class?"

A red-haired girl peeked out from the back of the dragon with those words. Then, the dragon landed with the earth quaking, and the girl hopped down onto the ground.

"Hey, hey! Which tower's class do you all belong to?"

"Um, we are from the East Tower class, I believe."

"Ehhh? That's the complete opposite of the West Tower class! Rafika said it was definitely this way, so I trusted her!!"

Saying that, the girl patted the black dragon's leg, and the black dragon let out a groan, lowering its head apologetically. It seemed that '*Rafika*' was the name of the black dragon.

As she patted the black dragon, the girl suddenly turned her gaze to Elria.

"Ah! It's the person who took the same examination as me!"

"What, do you know her?"

"I-I know her, but... we're not acquainted."

Hiding behind Millis's back, Elria answered.

She was— Rufus Rylus, the <<Dragon Princess>> of the Serios Federation. The girl who was described by Philia when Elria took the entrance examination with Reid.

Elria had never seen her up close because she was riding a black dragon during the examination, but she looked to be around 12 or 13 years old, not just young but also smaller than Millis.

"Hey, hey. Why is she hiding?"

"Ah, she has a habit of hiding when she sees people she doesn't know."

"Heehh! She's like an animal!"

With her light red eyes sparkling, Rufus started circling around Elria, appearing very interested, which made Elria feel troubled.

"Could it be, are you Elria Caldwen!?"

"Y-Yes... I'm Elria..."

"That's why you could cast such powerful magic! I'd heard there was someone in Vegalta who was so strong that they were called '*the Reincarnation of the Sage*' in Vegalta. So, I was looking forward to meeting you!"

"T-Thank you...?"

"Yep, yep!"

Rufus showed a big smile, grabbing Elria's hand and shaking it enthusiastically. She seemed to be a very friendly girl, and not a bad one at that.

"But you know, I'm just as strong!"

"Right. I've heard you've contracted with the 'Guardian Dragons' of Serios, and I genuinely thought that was amazing."

Serios Federation was a composite country made up of seven islands to the west.

Although the land was home to numerous magical beasts due to the abundant nature and overflowing magic power, they also possessed a unique language that enabled communication with these magical beasts. After the widespread adoption of magic, the country realized a symbiotic relationship with the magical beasts through specialized summoning magic.

Among them— the four types of dragons called 'Guardian Dragons' symbolized the nature of Serios, referring to the dragon species that stood at the pinnacle of numerous magical beasts.

The <<Sky Dragon>> ruled the sky from its stronghold atop steep mountain peaks; the <<Sea Dragon>> governed the seas from the dark depths; the <<Fire Dragon>> claimed volcanic regions as its territory; and the <<Mountain Dragon>> lived in symbiosis with the abundant nature and beasts on the surface.

Through the dominance of these four dragons over the surrounding magical beasts, they maintained the natural order and balance, enabling a symbiotic relationship between the humans living in the Serios Federation and the magical beasts.

The 'Guardian Dragons' were a species that stood apart from other magical beasts to such an extent that even as young dragons, they could overpower other magical beasts. By the time they became adult dragons, they gained intelligence equal to or surpassing that of humans.

For this reason, it was nearly impossible for humans to command the 'Guardian Dragons'. This was because the 'Guardian Dragons' considered humans to be inferior beings, just like the other magical beasts.

Summoning magic involved negotiating with magical beasts to be recognized as 'equal beings', after which a contract was made. The soul of the contracted magical beast was then bound to a vessel created through magic power, enabling a sort of pseudo-summoning.

In the past, much older than the previous lives of Elria and Reid, dating back to an era of war, there had been records stating that some 'Guardian Dragons' had entered into contracts with humans to protect the Seven Islands of Serios. However, there had never been a single person who managed to form contracts with all four 'Guardian Dragons'.

"I've read about 'Guardian Dragons' in books but never seen one."

"Is that so?"

"Yes. But I heard they're commonly seen in Serios."

"Yep! They fly and hop around freely!"

"That must be enjoyable to watch."

"It's really fun! Etankyles naps on the clouds, Marefikams floats with only its head sticking out of the sea, Flamavaits races while gliding on lava, and Magnifimos sunbathes in the forests and plains!"

"Everyone seems more laid-back than I thought."

Excited that someone had taken an interest in her homeland, Rufus had eagerly talked about the usual behavior of the 'Guardian Dragons'. The names Rufus mentioned were the scientific names given to the 'Guardian Dragons' by the people of Serios.

The fact that she could easily name them showed that, despite being young, she had carefully studied and gained a deep knowledge of magical beasts.

"But...! My absolute favorite is this one!"

Saying this, Rufus pointed to the black dragon standing behind her with a big smile.

"That is... a flying steel dragon, right?"

"You know about it!?"

"Yes. I don't know their scientific name, though."

"It's Volaresferum, a large dragon species of the flying steel dragon genus!"

"You're quick to answer."

"But you're amazing too, Elria-chan! Flying steel dragons have become rare over time!"

".....I happened to read it in a book."

Confronted by Rufus's dazzling eyes, Elria looked away slightly.

What Elria had known was that the flying steel dragon had been a magical beast commonly seen a thousand years ago. At that time, they were treated as Serios's dragon mounts, possessing scales as strong as or stronger than steel due to their unique internal organs, which maintained a robust physique and stamina.

They had great flying capabilities and were proficient in attack methods like fireballs and fire breath. However, their numbers had decreased due to military use back then, making them rare today.

"Rafika has been my friend since childhood! So, for me, Rafika is more important than anyone else!"

As Rufus proudly introduced her friend, the black dragon lowered its head toward Elria as if to bow. It was very well-mannered.

"Hey, hey! What other magic can you use, Elria-chan?"

"Mm... I can also use summoning magic, but..."

As she answered, Elria glanced toward Millis and Wiesel.

After all, she was in the position to teach the two.

Though talking with Rufus had been intriguing, considering her role and duty to teach the two, she needed to wrap up the conversation here. That was what Elria thought, but—

"Ah, it's okay to forget about the mock battle with us and continue the conversation."

"Just watching the two of you talk and use magic is educational for us. Please don't worry about it."

The two looked relieved, as if they had been saved. It made Elria a bit sad to think that they were that reluctant to have a mock battle.

"Elria-chan, were you about to do a mock battle?"

"Yes, I was planning to toss these two around a lot."

"Then let's have a mock battle with me!"

".....With you?"

"Yep! I want to see your magic, too!"

Saying this, Rufus energetically hopped onto the back of the black dragon.

"And besides—Rafika and I won't lose to anyone."

Saying so, a smile had spread across her lips.

Feeling something in that smile, Elria responded—

"—Alright. I understand."

She had deployed her magic equipment, brandished her staff, and driven it into the ground.

"Watching you two makes me want to fight alongside a friend for the first time in a while."

Forming an image with her magic power, she gripped the staff firmly.

The moment she pulled out the staff, a 'chain' was raised from the stone base. A heavy metallic sound rang out as an entity connected to that 'chain' emerged from the abyss.

"Come forth—Shehri."

What had appeared was—a giant wolf with pure white fur.

The giant wolf, adorned in a golden mask and armor, was pulled up to the surface by the 'chain'. Immediately after, its fearsome fangs had aimed to bite Elria. However, as if she foresaw this, Elria used the 'chain' to bind its jaw.

Not only its mouth, but its whole body was tied up and its freedom snatched away. Despite this, the giant wolf tried to bite Elria, gnashing its teeth and clawing at the ground with its front paws. Observing this, Elria nodded in satisfaction.

"Yeah, Shehri is as lively as ever today."

"L-Lively? It looks like it's about to eat you at any moment, you know...!?"

"It's just a mischievous child. Want to pet it, Millis?"

"Sorry, I plan to die of old age in one piece...!!"

Watching the giant wolf gnash its teeth and drool, Millis quickly retreated while sweating bullets. It was a shame; the giant wolf would have enjoyed being petted. However, Rufus narrowed her eyes at the sight of the giant wolf.

"Heehh... A <<Mana-Eater Wolf>>, huh? Bold choice to make a contract with that one."

That was not just Rufus's opinion; anyone proficient in summoning magic would say the same.

A <<Mana-Eater Wolf>> was a magical beast that only inhabited Vegalta, known for its ferocity and territorial nature around areas where magic power flowed. And as the name suggested, it was a magical beast that feasted on magic power.

Its aggressive nature had not only targeted other magical beasts but also humans with abundant magic power. It was known to attack indiscriminately and had even been known to devour its own kind.

The aggression of this magical beast was also directed at the mages themselves, and there were anecdotes of them often not listening to commands due to their moody nature. Even Serious's mages, who could communicate with magical beasts, had given up trying to tame them.

However—

"That's because this child is really smart."

said Elria while petting the chained giant wolf.

"—This child understands that it will never be able to defeat me, no matter what."

Upon hearing this, Rufus smiled gleefully.

"Yep, this is going to be a lot of fun!!"

Saying so, Rufus mounted her black dragon, which then flapped its enormous wings.

Looking up at the black dragon soaring into the sky, Elria lightly swung her staff. And then, she released the 'chain' that had bound the giant wolf—

"—Go, Shehri."

She whispered, and the giant wolf turned its pointed snout toward the black dragon.

With a howl to the heavens, the wolf rushed toward its 'enemy'. However, the black dragon was already rising into the sky.

No matter how massive the magical beast had been, it could not have reached that distance by leaping. That was why Rufus had chosen to fly in the first place. However, the giant wolf jumped toward the black dragon without a care. Kicking off an invisible foothold, it had risen rapidly into the air.

"Wha—!?"

Seeing the giant wolf gracefully leaping through the air, Rufus looked astonished. However, the surprise was not because a wingless beast was approaching. Even wingless magical beasts could engage in aerial combat through the use of magic barriers and footholds, and the role of summoners was to provide that support.

Though there were minor differences depending on the country, this method of combat had not changed much. Understanding this, Rufus had intended to gain an aerial advantage and had

tried to destroy the footholds supporting the giant wolf. However, Elria had anticipated this line of thought.

If the enemy came close by forming barriers and footholds, destroying them in advance would prevent the flying enemy from approaching.

That was why Elria created an 'invisible foothold'.

Unable to see it, Rufus could not order the black dragon to destroy it.

However——Shehri, the <<Mana-Eater Wolf>>, could see everything. With a keen sense for magic power, Shehri sensed the magic and hopped onto the invisible foothold the moment it was formed.

Even if Rufus tried to read the position where the foothold was formed, Shehri had already completed its movement by then.

Since Rufus, who was giving the instructions, was burdened with the disadvantage of *'not being able to visually confirm the foothold'*, she could not destroy the foothold faster than Shehri, who could see everything.

For this reason, Elria could predict Rufus's next move——

"Rafika!! Aim your fire breath at its surroundings!!"

The black dragon, which had been retreating from the approaching giant wolf, opened its jaws, and a brilliant light shone from within.

The large area-of-effect fire breath was fired by the flying steel dragon.

If the foothold were invisible, the strategy would be to target the area where it was likely to be. Regardless of the wolf's massive size, exposure to fire would have led to injuries and hampered its agility. Should it have dodged the flames, the destruction of the foothold would still have impaired its movement.

That was why——

"——Shehri, wait."

Upon hearing Elria's command, the giant wolf immediately lain low on the foothold.

The moment the fire breath incinerated the invisible foothold, an explosion resonated.

"———!?"

The sudden blast caused the black dragon's massive body to lose balance.

What Elria had formed as an invisible foothold was *compressed oxygen* reinforced by magic. It had ignited due to the large area-of-effect fire breath, causing an explosion. Moreover, she calculated the explosion's direction to affect only the black dragon, not Shehri.

And so... due to the explosion, Rufus had completely lost sight of the giant wolf. The white smoke obscuring her vision and the blast affecting her balance worsened the situation.

By creating that situation——

"——Shehri, go ahead. It's fine now."

The giant wolf, leaping out from the white smoke, had sunk its teeth into the black dragon's body.

The sound of grinding steel dragon scales echoed as they were crushed, and the black dragon let out a scream filled with agony.

"...Rafika! Calm down, Rafika!!"

Though Rufus called out, the dragon's thrashing worsened its balance, leading it to plummet uncontrollably.

Serios's mages often rode magical beasts. This allowed them to give detailed instructions in the magical beast language, enabling precise and swift evasion and defense. However, when hit, not just the magical beast but also the mage was severely affected.

Due to the explosion earlier, her sense of hearing and sight had been significantly impaired. She could not detect the approaching giant wolf or its presence. Now, with the black dragon running rampant, she could not give accurate instructions.

——With a thunderous impact, the black dragon had crashed into the ground.

Amidst the rising dust, a giant wolf with white fur rushed towards Elria. However, as it tried to bite Elria, it slammed into an invisible wall.

"Good girl, Shehri, even today."

From behind the wall, while growling and baring its fangs, Elria stroked Shehri's face after restraining its mouth and body with chains. Feeling satisfied with that, she then turned her gaze towards the dust-filled area. There lay the black dragon, groaning in pain.

"It's best to send that child back. The wounds inflicted by the <<Mana-Eater Wolf>> drain its magic power, preventing healing. I think it ate a lot of magic power when it bit down."

For summoned magical beasts, there was no such thing as 'death'. Their physical forms were just temporary constructs created by mages, animated by the 'soul' of the creature's original form from a distant place.

However... even these temporary forms felt pain when injured. If their internal magic power were exhausted, not only would the temporary form collapse, but the 'soul' of the main body would also be affected.

In the worst-case scenario... a mage could lose their contracted magical beast.

The black dragon was clearly no longer fit to fight. Any summoner would understand that it was their defeat.

Or so it seemed.

"———It's... not over yet."

Standing by the black dragon, Rufus's murmur was heard.

Right after, Shehri started to fiercely struggle, as if about to break its chains.

"There's no way Rafika could lose——**ABSOLUTELY NOT!!**"

The moment Rufus shouted with intense emotion——the fallen black dragon raised its head and launched a dazzling fireball. And the giant wolf, Shehri, despite being chained, had lunged in front of Elria, only to be engulfed by flames.

"——**SHEHRI!!**"

Seeing the giant wolf cry out in pain from the flames, Elria immediately severed its 'soul' from the vessel.

Shehri's body went limp, transformed into particles of light, and disappeared. Simultaneously, the sound of falling metal was heard. Dragon scales, as hard as steel, had been propelled by the fireball's explosion and pierced through Shehri.

"...I can't forgive that."

With eyes filled with rage, she glared at Rufus and the black dragon.

One wrong move and Shehri would have undoubtedly lost its life.

Such actions could be natural if it had been a life-or-death battle. However, what Elria and Rufus were engaged in was a mock battle. Once the outcome was clear, Rufus should have withdrawn the black dragon.

"In mock battles, you shouldn't take actions that could kill the opponent. Whether it's against the mage or their summoned magical beast—"

"To me, mock battles and actual battles are no different."

In her light red eyes, determination floated as Rufus glared at Elria.

"No matter what happens—Rafika and I can't afford to lose."

The expression on her face did not reflect her belief in her friend's victory. Instead, tension, desperation, and impatience were all mingled in her expression.

As if heeding the words of its master, the black dragon slowly rose to its feet. Though bleeding from its wounds and staggering from depleted magic power, it continued to stand, as if to demonstrate that it had not yet been defeated.

Just as Elria was about to speak—sturdy stone pillars rained down from the heavens, encircling the black dragon. And then, the tilted pillars combined to form a 'cage'.

"—E-Excuse me... may I interrupt for a moment?"

Such a feeble voice could be heard from behind Elria. There—Philia, holding a magic tool, stood with an apologetic wry smile.

"According to the report, it seems you were engaged in a mock battle... Given the dangerous state Rufus-sama's magical beast could enter if the fight continued, I would like to conclude this mock battle here."

Rufus was about to say something in response, but upon realizing that Philia was the teacher in charge, she silently nodded.

Teachers in charge had the authority to punish their students if they misused magic, engaged in criminal activities, or took dangerous actions.

Although Rufus was a student in another class and thus not directly under Philia's authority, failing to comply with her instructions at that moment could have led to later punishment through her own teacher in charge.

"Is it fine with you too, Elria-sama?"

".....Mm."

"Y-You don't have to look so displeased...!"

While Elria was pursing her lips, her head was suddenly struck.

"Don't make such a sulky face."

".....Reid?"

"Yes, it's me. I was training with Kid Faregh when I saw you guys fighting. Since your opponent is the <<Dragon Princess>> from another class, I thought it'd be safe to call Philia-sensei."

".....What about Faregh?"

"I left him behind because he said he can't move anymore."

Reid said it casually, but Faregh had trained in magic combat since childhood. He had probably been pushed too hard or mercilessly beaten up.

"The <<Dragon Princess>> over there, if you want to settle this once and for all, better step back for now. Winning a single mock battle won't mean anything, you know."

"...For me, it does mean something."

"What I'm saying is, try to understand the '*value of victory*'. Creating a risk for your precious dragon to die just for a single win is the least valuable victory there is."

Saying this, Reid pointed to the black dragon, which was now too exhausted to resist and was trapped in a stone cage.

Rufus seemed about to say something in response, but instead, she silently released her magic.

The black dragon's body was transformed into particles of light and disappeared.

"Even if there's no value, we'll still have to pick it up again another time."

With a trembling voice, Rufus turned her back to Reid and the others. And so, she walked away, showing them only her small retreating figure.