

Chapter 4 Part 1

After that, Reid and Elria never met Rufus again. This was partly due to the teachers arranging the training schedules to prevent any contact between classes, especially after the mock battle between Elria and Rufus.

However... Rufus was nowhere to be seen, even in the dining hall.

According to what Alma had heard from the teacher in charge, *"Rufus has been applying for permission to use the training grounds after school and has been training alone"*.

Details beyond that were confidential due to inter-class policy, but it seemed that the teacher was in high spirits, so the training was likely going well.

However... not only did they have to keep their promise to Rufus, but Reid and Elria also had to face the looming exam.

"—So, let me explain the terms for this conditional exam," Alma said, standing at the lectern with chalk streaking across the blackboard.

"Well, compared to last time, it's pretty straightforward. Teams previously formed in each class will work together, and points will be added to your score based on the number of opponents you incapacitate by the end of the exam."

"A question. How is incapacitation determined?" a student asked, raising a hand.

Alma nodded gracefully and pulled out two bracelet-type magic devices from her pocket.

"Incapacitation is determined by these bracelets. When they detect a lethal spell of the third tier or higher, they activate and forcibly teleport the person wearing them. In other words, a person teleported by this bracelet is considered incapacitated."

With that said, Alma fitted the bracelet on her arm and stood in front of the students.

"Although there's no visible change, a thin layer of magic power forms over the skin of the person wearing it. It detects magic power other than its own wearer's and activates upon a certain level of impact, causing an immediate teleportation of the wearer. It's fine over clothes and shoes, but beware, it will activate even if you touch an ally's magic with your own bare hands."

After finishing the explanation, she held up the other bracelet.

This one was a gold-painted bracelet, far more conspicuous than the first.

“This golden bracelet will be distributed to one member of each team. The mechanism is the same, but... if the owner of this bracelet is incapacitated, more points will be added to your score.”

“Um... a question. Is it okay for the team to decide freely who wears the golden bracelet?”

“What a good question. Yes, the team can decide freely who owns it. The strongest person, someone specialized in defense, or someone skilled in emergency escapes... When you decide who will own it, you should also decide your team's overall strategy.”

After answering, she smiled.

“If the person holding the golden bracelet is incapacitated—that team will suffer a significant deduction in points. If the score ends up negative, it will carry over to subsequent exams.”

This meant that if a team was defeated without accomplishing anything, even an excellent score in the next exam would, at best, only offset the deficit or, at worst, leave the team with a negative score.

The fate of those who could not recover was all too clear.

“If you end the final exam with negative points, those individuals will be excluded from next year's secondary placement and will have to leave the academy.”

Being a mage was not solely about having a vast amount of magic power or superior combat skills. A mage had to possess the skills to make good judgments and decisions in all situations.

Magic was merely a means to achieve an objective under various conditions. Only those who could accurately assess their circumstances and take the best course of action were allowed to wield the powerful weapon known as magic.

“Mages cannot afford to fail. So—act as if your own or someone else's life depends on it and think until your brain burns out.”

The students, moved by Alma's words, unanimously responded with a loud **“Yes!”**.

Pleased with their reaction, Alma then tapped Philia, who was standing next to her, on the shoulder.

“Well, that’s it for my part! I have to give further explanations to the problem children, so please consult Philia about the conditional exam.”

“Y-Yes! If you have any doubts or concerns about the exam, or any minor issues, please feel free to ask me!”

As the students turned towards Philia, Alma approached Reid and the others with a deep sigh.

“That being said, here's a notice for you, the *'problem children'* team.”

“She is saying something about you, Kid Faregh.”

“Why are you throwing shade at me!?”

“Ah, it seems we’re all being labeled as problem children...”

“Let’s at least try to be the last bastion of conscience.”

“Yes, thanks for the spirited response. Now, there’s something I want to ask——” Alma began, but then she glanced at the one person who had not reacted.

There lay Elria——using Reid’s lap as a pillow, sleeping soundly.

“...Without listening to my explanation, why is she asleep?”

"If I had to explain it simply, it's due to lack of sleep."

"Is it because the exam is right around the corner and she was cramming in preparation?"

"No, not exactly. With the exam nearing, I was doing some last-minute fine-tuning, so to speak, and had been sparring with Kid Faregh. I hadn't left any note, so it seems that she had waited in our room until I returned."

"Can you not suddenly start gushing about it?"

"That’s why, struggling to stay awake, she was fidgeting in front of our room’s door. That’s the cause."

"She’s like a cat that gets anxious when its owner doesn't come home."

As Alma poked Elria's cheek with a look of exasperation, Elria's eyes opened slightly.

".....Nngh."

Then, with a strange noise, she sluggishly approached Alma and hugged her. She pressed her head firmly against Alma's chest.

".....Fluffy," she muttered with sleepy eyes, and then returned to Reid and promptly fell asleep again.

".....Eh, what was that all about?"

"Don't look for meaning in a lethargic Elria."

"So, basically, she did that without any reason?"

"If I had to take a guess, maybe she smelled something different and decided to mark it with her scent by snuggling up, something like that."

"Even I think it's a bit much to treat your fiancée like a cat."

"No, you see, Alma-sensei... Elria-sama does check for scents with females, but when it comes to males, she shows no interest in anyone but Reid-san. Ultimately, her instinct is to always return to Reid-san. It's advanced flaunting on an instinctual level."

"Must be nice, being all cheerful before the exam..."

Listening to Millis's additional explanation, Alma sighed with a look of incredulity. She then decided it was time to get back to the main topic.

"So, the reason I came was to inform you that the contents of His Excellency's exam have been changed."

"Is there another change?"

"Well, you know His Excellency can't use the magic bracelet, right? That means safety can't be guaranteed, so it's been decided to switch to evaluating another person just like Elria-chan."

"Ahh, I thought it might be something like that," Reid replied in a light tone, though it was clear that there was an intention to interfere with him.

After all, it had already been discussed that magic tools and magic equipment would be unusable, and the overview of the exam content had been created before training started. It was unthinkable that such a change would be announced just before the exam.

Moreover, it was impossible for Reid, who could not use magic, to teach magic to a substitute student just before the exam.

However—there was already someone suitable to be Reid's proxy.

"With that said, you need to do your best as my proxy, Kid Faregh," Reid said with a laugh as he lightly patted Faregh's back.

But, the person in question wore a dubious expression.

"...Are you really planning to make me the proxy for evaluation?"

"Yes. Since I unusually took the time to teach someone and even trained you to handle a sword, it's only right that you serve as my proxy."

"That's not what I mean. Besides... if I end up not being able to do anything like before, you will go through the exam without receiving any evaluation," Faregh said with a slight tension in his voice.

If Faregh, serving as Reid's proxy, fell short in the evaluation, all the criticism would be directed at Reid.

And, since Reid was unable to use magic, depending on the evaluation, expulsion from the academy could have been a possibility.

However, Reid replied without concern.

"Then let me ask you this, do you plan to receive a low evaluation in the exam?"

"O-Of course not!! As the eldest son of the proud Welminan family, it would be a lifelong shame to produce a pitiful performance and tarnish the family name!!"

"Exactly. That's why you're the one," Reid continued, his words laced with amusement.

"Those who cherish their vanity and self-esteem are mostly good for nothing. But... if they're not just all talk and can actually prove their worth with genuine effort, they're the real deal."

For this reason, he had chosen Faregh as his proxy. Faregh, honoring his family name and pride, refused to abandon his comrades and strove to save them.

"Well, think of me as just an extra. At least I've trained you enough to be useful in actual combat, and if you fail, it just means I misjudged your ability and that's that."

"Haa... Don't be ridiculous. I refuse to go through such a disgrace ever again."

With that, Faregh let out a dry laugh, and then—

"—In the name of Welminan, I shall firmly seize victory," he declared with a resolute smile.

Nodding back at Faregh, Reid then made a declaration.

"So, tell them that my proxy is Faregh Welminan."

"Alright, alright. This is going to be interesting... When those complainers hear that the notorious young master of the Welminan household is the proxy, they'll probably flip."

"...Please wait a moment, Kanos-sensei. What kind of reputation do I have?"

"Oh, you know, they say things like '*He's only good with magic and attitude*' or '*If complaining were a sport, he'd be in the tenth tier*,' all while laughing, those nobles."

"Hahahaha... Well, if that's the case, I'll have to show them my true power and shut them up...!!" Faregh said, his anger fueling a menacing grin as he flickered flames. It was mostly his own doing, but it was good that he had been motivated.

"By the way... why does Kanos-sensei refer to you, a commoner, as '*His Excellency*'?"

"Don't call me a commoner. Well, it's sort of a nickname. I was somewhat of a chess buddy with Alma-sensei's grandfather, and I was decently strong, so they started calling me '*His Excellency*'."

"That's right. I've heard a lot from my grandfather, and for me, you're like a capable junior, so I call you '*His excellency*' out of respect."

"Oh, is that so! I know a thing or two about chess, and my father loves it and plays in his free time, so I should introduce you to him sometime!"

Listening to their conversation, Faregh's eyes sparkled without a hint of doubt. Such naivety was befitting of someone from a good family, but it was concerning that he might be easily deceived someday.

"Anyway, I have something to tell both of you. May we step outside for a bit?"

"Sure thing. Elria, we're going outside, so wake up."

"Mmm..."

Rubbing her eyes, Reid helped Elria to stand up and guided her towards the hallway.

After walking for a while, once Alma confirmed there was no one around, she began to speak.

"So, it's about the investigation concerning the last incident, right?"

"Yeah. Elria couldn't sleep because she was worried about it."

Elria had been waiting for Reid because she thought he was receiving the report from Alma and had forced herself to stay awake to hear the results.

"I see. It's partly my fault for being delayed with the exam preparations, but I should have reported back sooner."

"Mm... It's okay, thank you for looking into it..."

"You're welcome."

As Elria, slightly more awake, made a sleepy bow of thanks, Alma gave her a gentle pat on the head with a wry smile.

Then, with a serious expression, Alma began her report.

"As for the last incident... the method was immediately suspected to be summoning magic, and any mage who has ever used summoning magic was questioned. People from Serios are still being interrogated under the guise of cooperation."

"Well, it's fair since the scale of it is still unknown."

The appearance of multiple 'Armament Dragons' suggested that it was unlikely the act of a lone individual.

Creating a vessel for magical beasts requires an immense amount of magic power, which increases with the size and number of magical beasts.

To summon several large magical beasts like 'Armament Dragons' alone would be nearly impossible. If it had been possible, it would likely have been by highly recognized individuals, such as special rank or first-class mages. Therefore, an organized crime by multiple individuals seemed more likely.

"Well, because of that, mages from Serios are under suspicion... but since parts of the remains have been found, the suspicion should be cleared soon."

Summoned vessels vanished once their magic power was depleted, so the remains at the scene suggested that it might not have been summoning magic after all, hence the ongoing *'continuous questioning'*.

"As for the mage known as *'Teacher'*, it's a common nickname, so there were no leads... but it's probably not Rufus Rylus herself involved, I guess."

"Mm... Got it. That's a bit reassuring."

With her concerns somewhat eased, Elria nodded affirmatively. She seemed to be fully awake now, as her speech and expressions appeared brisk.

"So, that is all for the report. Do you have anything else to ask?"

"Oh, I'll be on standby during the exam, right? What should I do in the meantime?"

"Why not watch and enjoy some tea?"

"Is that really okay...?"

"Of course. I count on His Excellency and Elria-chan as potential combatants if something were to happen. And it's easier for His Excellency to move around freely, right?"

"Yes. I also feel more at ease knowing Reid is fully prepared and on standby."

Nodding in agreement, Elria concurred with Alma's words.

"Besides, it makes me happy to know that Reid is watching."

".....Happy?"

"Yes. Because I said before, *'I'll show you something even more amazing'*."

Saying that, Elria turned around and—

"—I'll show you my true strength for the first time in a while."

She smiled confidently at Reid.