Rain poured from the sky, turning the road into a river.

The sky was dark and overcast, which made it hard to tell where the potholes were under the water. Every time a wheel sank into one, the HMV would lurch heavily.

Once they got bogged down in mud, getting out would be difficult. Itami judged that carrying on in the rain would be too dangerous, and so he turned off the HMV’s engines to take a break.

“The rain around here’s really heavy. Even though it was clear in the morning, it ended up like this in an instant...”

After hearing Yao say that, Itami decided to wait for the weather to improve before moving on.

The noise of the engine was gone, and only the splashing of raindrops remained.

Itami opened the door, causing the rain pooled in the roof canvas to wobble around. The sides of the HMV were open to the elements, so the wind and rain blew in from there. Since the sun in this region was quite strong, having the sides open was just nice.

The rain came in from both sides, but fortunately the vehicle was big and the interior was not too soaked. The passengers watched the storm outside their windows and waited for it to stop.

Itami took a map and a compass from his backpack, in order to confirm their next direction.

“Our current location is PDG・34・RE249.487311.”

Because the latitude and longitude of the Special Region was not determined yet, the mapmakers drew arbitrary lines on the aerial recon photos for use in navigation.

Along the way, Itami asked Yao about the route she had taken to Arnus, in order to learn what lay ahead of them.

She set out from Modabarden Village, then curved south around the base of Mt. Colro, passing through the Terilia Plains, then going past Metabal, Gremina, Hebrae and Tongut.

Itami drew a curvy line that connected all the places Yao mentioned. They would backtrack along this route to Yao’s home.

It was not far in a straight line, but the mountains and valleys in the way meant they could not travel that way. However, the path Yao had taken instead went in a great big curve around the countryside, which was why she had taken a month to reach Arnus.

“It couldn’t be helped, I was chasing the rumors of the Men in Green. If I’d known you were in Arnus from the beginning, I wouldn’t have detoured so much.”

Rory and Lelei stared mutely at Yao.

If what she said was true, that meant she would have been collecting rumors from streets and villages, and then after that she would have reached Arnus a month later. From that point of view, the time she spent in Arnus would have been very short.

“We’re now on the Terilia Plains,” Itami said as he checked the location off on the map.

“After that, I went around the base of Mt. Colro in order not to be noticed by the Dragon, and then I followed the stream forward. Well, it doesn’t matter whether you’re coming or going, it’s difficult in both directions.”

They could only travel by daylight, and they could not move quickly where there were no roads.

Although it was called the Terilia Plains, it was not nearly as flat as it sounded. Itami had hoped to make some progress, but the huge boulders everywhere forced him to steer around them, so in the end, they only moved a little faster than normal.

Itami looked at the map and calculated how long it would take to get there.

Two thirds of the cargo bed was taken up by fuel cans and crates containing LAMs (110mm antitank rocket launchers) large quantities of explosives, all sorts of equipment, ammunition, food and water.

There were other things as well. The girls had piled things onto the HMV like they were running away from home, and currently, Tuka was asleep on a thick fur blanket in the crevices between all the other items. She looked all right, but Itami knew he did not have much time left.

Tuka had gotten worse ever since they set out from Arnus. Then again, it made sense when one thought about it. How could Tuka’s father operate a complicated HMV so naturally? It must have caused a huge conflict in her heart.

Because Tuka would occasionally be tormented by intense headaches, Lelei put her to sleep with magic. Thanks to that, they could speak about things that they could not let Tuka hear.

“Yao. The Dragon was sighted in the Schwarz Forest, right?”

Itami indicated a point on the map, and Yao nodded. She traced a circle around that point with her finger.

“Strictly speaking, its territory appears to encompass the entire southern area, which also includes the Schwarz Forest.”

“That big?”

“If you want to find the Flame Dragon, head south from the Schwarz Forest to the Lordom Valley. The Flame Dragon hunts in the same place. We can ambush it there.”

The Lordom Valley was where Yao’s tribe was hiding.

“Our objective is to let Tuka avenge herself on the Flame Dragon, not to save your people.”

“However, the people there know where the Flame Dragon’s lair is.”

“That’s true,” Itami nodded. Then he decided to head for the ravine where Yao’s tribe was.

Yao smiled in satisfaction, and Itami felt like hot nails had been hammered through him.

“Let me get this straight. I’m not going to fight there. If the Dragon can fly around freely, we’re at too much of a disadvantage.”

“Then what should we do?”

“Right now, the plan is to set up an ambush in its nest. The specifics will depend on the local terrain.”

“What terrain would be good?”

“For example…”

The Dragon could not turn freely in narrow spaces. If its nest was not a place like that, they would have to pick another battlefield, lure it there, and destroy it.

“If you need a decoy, let me know. I can get my people to help.”

Yao spoke lightly, as though it was really that simple.

“Something feels strange about all of this. Why didn’t you just run away?”

Much like how Coda Village’s residents had abandoned it. There was that choice.

Yao answered, “Humans can do it, but Elves cannot.”

Elves could only live on land that suited them.

Humans could move around and build streets and settlements, but elves could not. They could not leave the Schwarz Forest that they were accustomed to. It was hard enough for them just to hide in Lordom Valley.

“Travelling is fine, though.”

Yao smiled, as though she were mocking herself.

Itami understood their situation as being able to travel on a boat, but not being able to live on it. Some people could live on the sea, but they could not. Much like how humans could only live on land, Dark Elves could only live in the forests.

Come to think of it, Tuka was taking good care of the forests at the foot of Arnus Hill. To her, it must have been a necessary environment.

“Still, is this all right?” Rory asked as she looked at the sleeping Tuka.

Of course, they could not tell Tuka the true purpose of this journey. All they had said so far was that they were heading south, towards Yao’s village.

“Ah. I was planning to bring her in front of the Flame Dragon, then tell her ‘This is the enemy who killed your father’.”

“She’ll definitely be mad at you for tricking her.”

She would be. But the fact was that using Tuka’s fantasy and pretending to be her father was already tricking her, in a sense. Itami smiled and said, “Why are you saying this now, after everything we’ve been through?”

“If that’s the case, we’re all accomplices,” Lelei said.

“Well, it can’t be helped. She can scold us all together,” Rory grinned, before patting Itami’s shoulder.

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The Schwarz Forest was a vast domain that was often called “a sea of trees”.

It was far deeper than anyone could have imagined. In its furthest reaches, fallen tree trunks were covered in piles of rotting leaves, and over them grew the branches of gigantic trees. The roots on the ground overlapped each other so thickly one could not see the ground, while above them the sky was blocked out by the spreading tree canopies. It was like stepping into a different world.

Of course, walking through here on foot was a difficult task, to say nothing of actually driving a vehicle in. They had no choice but to go around it. After making some progress toward the South, they decided to rest for the night. The next day, they followed the edge of the forest westward, before finally reaching Lordom Valley.

The Dark Elves were hiding in the caves here.

At a glance, this looked like pretty good terrain for a fight.

Like the name “valley” would suggest, the flat land was sliced open by the flow of a river into a narrow, twisting ravine. If they could get the Dragon to descend into the bottom of the ravine, they might be able to carry out an ambush on it. However, this place was far too narrow for the Dragon to squeeze in.

Come to think of it, this place was a place for the Dark Elves to hide. If the Flame Dragon could fit in here, they would be done for.

The bottom of the ravine was quite narrow. The river had scattered large and small rocks all around, and it looked like a good spot for fishing. However, there was no way for the Dark Elves to gather enough food from this place. They would need to leave the Valley eventually, and the Flame Dragon was counting on that.

In addition, the sudden, torrential rain would raise the level of the river until it seeped into their caves. They had to struggle every day so their possessions and food would not get washed away. It was a hard life.

“Please, stop here.”

Yao was waiting for Itami and the rest on top of a cliff. Hardly affected by the muddy ground after the rain, she nimbly descended to the bottom of the valley. After passing through a narrow passage which could only fit one person, she descended another slope and reached the bottom.

Itami shut off the engine.

And just at this moment, Tuka woke up, stretching her arms like she was cheering “banzai” as she stretched. Then, like a child, she rubbed her eyes in a very adorable way.

However, she immediately grimaced and said, “the petrol stinks”.

Tuka was sleeping amidst the petrol cans and the ammunition and explosives boxes, so it was only natural she would say that. The HMV did not have glass except for the windscreen, so when in motion, the air from outside would ventilate the interior. However, when the vehicle was stationary, the fumes would sear the nose, though it was not harmful.

“Did you have a good rest?”

“Mm, I did.”

After Tuka said that, she dismounted.

Then she stretched again, taking in a lungful of the fresh air outside.

After surveying the landscape, Itami took his pistol and got off the vehicle. Since this was Flame Dragon territory, he had to be prepared. That said, 7.62mm rounds were useless against it. Still, he surveyed his surroundings with his binoculars. He paid close attention to the sky.

“Where is this place?”

In response to Tuka’s question, Itami said, “This is Lordom Valley. Yao’s people are taking refuge here.”

“I see, so we’re here at last. We can finally get rid of that Dark Elf.”

Tuka’s opinion of Yao was difficult to explain in words. As for Yao, she was home at last, so she could breathe a sigh of relief.

“But to think, she lives in a place like this…”

Tuka nervously looked down into the ravine, at the river flowing far, far below her.

Elves loved the green of the forest, but there was none of that to be seen here.

The valley only had rocks and sand. The closest thing to vegetation here were a few shrubs and the weeds that covered the ground.

“Why did they choose to live here?”

It would seem she had let herself forget about how Yao and her people had been attacked by the Dragon. She had completely excised everything related to the Flame Dragon from her mind. Therefore, all Itami could say was, “Who knows? There should be a reason for it.”

Even while he was talking, he did not fail to watch the sky.

“Who are you and what are you doing here?”

Suddenly, seven to eight dark elf men and women appeared out of the landscape. They were holding bows, and they surrounded Itami and the others.

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“Yao, you have returned at last. But have you forgotten why we sent you out?”

This was a cave at the very bottom of the valley, where sunlight could not reach. Yao was on one knee, lit by the dim light of the nearby lanterns. She was surrounded by seven of her tribe’s elders in a horse-shoe shape. Face toward the ground, she carefully replies, “No, I have not forgotten.”

“It has been two months since we sent you forth. Many of our people have died in this time. We have lost contact with the others who scattered to other lands.”

“We had started to think you had given up your quest after not having come back for so long.”

Yao looked up to the three most important ones among the elders and said, ”I have brought a Man in Green back, in order to help defeat the Flame Dragon.”

“Ohhhh!”

The elders exclaimed as one.

“Well done. Mm. Well done.”

“Then, then where is the Man in Green?”

“I left them at the entrance of the Valley, because bringing them here would cause unnecessary trouble,”

Yao’s answer made the elders frown. Then they asked her in a surprised tone, “Why did you not invite them here? Guests who have travelled a long way should not be made to wait. It is rude.”

“Indeed. A lack of etiquette will reflect poorly on our tribe.”

The elders rose at once and made to leave the cave. But Yao darted in front of them, saying, “Please wait, please wait,” as she prepared to explain the situation.

“What is the reason for this?”

“This is the reason the Men in Green refused to defeat the Flame Dragon. I have committed a grave sin.”

Yao told them what she had done in Arnus. She paid particular attention to what she had done to Tuka, narrating it in extensive detail.

“From our point of view, we were indeed asking you your reasons, as well as the purpose of what you did. However, what we wanted to ask was, is this matter really important?”

Yao was asked about her actions because the elders did not understand them. She had expected to be rebuked for what she had done. After all, Yao felt that she had committed both an unethical act and a grave sin against Tuka.

But the elders did not care about that. This made Yao feel that there was something wrong with her moral values.

“So you are saying that this Itami person came to save that Elf.”

“Yes. This Itami is also one of the Men in Green.”

“A wise and considerate person may decide to leave a friend to die if he determines there is danger.”

“However, a compassionate person may step into danger, perhaps even break the rules, to save a friend.”

“Mm, he must be quite a man. If he is unmoved by fame or fleshly desire, he may well be a person worthy of our trust. Then, that Elf has come along to exterminate the Flame Dragon?”

“Yes. Itami plans to bring Tuka before the Flame Dragon and tell her the truth.”

The elders saw Yao’s tortured expression. They sighed and looked at each other.

“Yao, you seem unable to accept what you have done. Were we in your place, we would have done as you did. This was a necessary action to complete your mission. Regardless of what people say, we must use any means necessary to do it. That is the virtue of us Dark Elves.”

“Indeed. Even trickery is permitted. You have done well, Yao.”

After reflecting on Yao’s actions and her lack of morality, they heaped praise on her.

“Do you find the actions you took to carry out your mission unbearable? However, this guilt is not yours alone.”

“Indeed. We ordered you to use any and all means to complete your task.”

“You were simply following orders. We will all share the responsibility with you.”

The elders viewed Yao’s actions as representative of the entire tribe, and then they began discussing the appropriate compensation for this task.

“However, all this was the result of my actions. If compensation is needed, should I not be the one to offer it?”

The elders replied in depressed tones to Yao, who was insisting that she should offer to be the compensation.

“And what do you intend to do?”

With an eager look on her face, she replied, “Please leave it to me.”

“As for you, casually betting your life is disgraceful. It is not atonement. It is merely taking the easy, despicable way out, and that will only compound your sins.”

“That does sound like something you would say. Then, if you truly wish to atone, then you cannot choose an easy path. You must take the longer, harder path, and you cannot carry that weight alone.”

“Then what should I do?”

“Obviously, you must help defeat the Flame Dragon. In addition, you must defend that Elf who is so precious to that Man in Green.”

“Naturally, we will gather our warriors to help.”

“Also, I believe the Man in Green left his army and came here on his own. In order to prevent him from returning to a messy situation, how about offering gifts and our thanks to his superiors?”

“The gratitude of the Dark Elves alone will not be enough. The Flame Dragon has scourged many kingdoms and tribes. If you gather them all to offer their rewards and thanks, it might be enough to appease the wrath of his superiors.”

“Mm. I shall do this.”

The elders decided on their plans for the future. At the same time, they drew up plans that Yao herself had not even thought of.

Yao’s way of thinking had been swiftly demolished by the elders. At the same time, she also realised that she alone would not be able to restore Itami’s reputation, so she stood aside and waited.

“Then, let us go welcome the Man in Green.”

“Oh. We shall go receive the Man in Green who once drove off the Flame Dragon.”

Tao followed the elders out of the cave.

But at this moment, a shockwave came from a thunderous explosion in the valley.

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“Shit! It’s the Flame Dragon!”

The shouts of the Dark Elves rose from all around them.

The Dark Elf male who had approached Itami and his group to check them out was snatched up by the swooping Flame Dragon. His legs thrashed from between the gaps in the Flame Dragon’s fangs, and the huge beast chewed and swallowed him in one gulp.

“Aaah, ah, ah, aaaawaah, aah, ah—”

Tuka had seen the whole thing from start to finish, and she froze up. Standing still in front of a Flame Dragon was nothing short of suicide.

The other elves began fleeing for their lives, and some of them raised their bows to fire on the Flame Dragon. However, their arrows were useless against the Dragon’s armor-like scales.

The Flame Dragon completely disregarded the Elves. Instead, it focused all its attention on the frozen Tuka. Then it opened its blood-stained maw and lunged at Tuka.

Just as Tuka was about to consumed by the jaws of death, a great crash of stone shattering echoed throughout the Valley.

Like a black petal borne on the wind, Rory Mercury charged the Flame Dragon and struck a mighty blow with her halberd. The massive slab of steel struck the Flame Dragon square on the jaw.

However, even that mighty blow could not shatter the Flame Dragon’s resilient scales. Still, the heavy impact of the attack smacked the Flame Dragon’s face away.

It was as bizarre a scene as an ant uppercutting an elephant.

And then, the Flame Dragon collapsed onto the ground. It threw up a cloud of dust that flew everywhere. The impact of its fall shook the ground and rang like thunder.

“So strong…”

The Dark Elves stared in awe.

“duge-main”

Right after Lelei cast her spell, a series of rings made of magical light formed in front of her.

Lelei snapped her fingers. In response, the powerful blast wave surged out in a straight line and struck the Flame Dragon’s body.

However, the ray of magic power bounced off the Flame Dragon’s scales and buried itself in the ground.

The Flame Dragon nimbly got back to its feet with the help of its flapping wings. It knew it was at a disadvantage on land, and it kicked itself off the ground and soared into the air.

Rory attempted to pursue, but the Flame Dragon’s breath drove her back down.

The Apostle of Emroy, God of War, swung her halberd so forcefully that the wind of its passage cleaved the high-temperature exhalation apart. However, the Flame Dragon took advantage of her lowered guard and followed up with a swipe of its sharp claws.

“Kya~an!”

Rory managed to evade the claws, but her small body was still sent flying by the Flame Dragon’s paw.

She landed with both feet on the ground, her momentum digging two trenches into the ground as she slowed to a halt. Then Rory grabbed her halberd in a power stance, wiped her face clean of mud with the back of her hand, and licked at the blood flowing from a small cut on her lip.

“Not bad.”

The battle was a stalemate. Neither side had struck a decisive blow against the other.

Lelei created a second series of light rings. The Flame Dragon understood what it was and got out from in front of her.

The light rings were very hard to re-orient once formed, so all she managed to do was carve out a hole in the ground. Lelei clicked her tongue in frustration.

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“Ha, haa, haha, haa, haa…”

Tuka was having trouble breathing, and she shuddered uncontrollably.

Itami grabbed Tuka and bore her down to the ground as Rory smote the Flame Dragon mightily.

“Ah, ah, awa, naa…”

Itami said to the panting Tuka, “Tuka, look carefully, look carefully at that....”

He embraced Tuka from behind and pressed both his hands on her face and forced her to look at the Flame Dragon.

“That’s the Flame Dragon that killed your father. Do you understand?”

Tuka closed her eyes and tried to turn away, but Itami used all his strength to stop her.

“Look! Look at it! That’s the Flame Dragon that burned your village! It’s the one that killed your father!”

“No, no way, Father’s not dead, because father—”

“I’m not your father. I’m just a stranger. You’re not my daughter!”

“Hiiiiiiiiii, no, why are you saying these cruel things? Somebody save me!”

Tuka’s heart was being torn apart. Itami’s words and the cold reality before her eyes assaulted her relentlessly.

The battle of the Flame Dragon versus Lelei and Rory was finished in an instant. Now, the Flame Dragon surveyed the scene. It seemed to be looking for an enemy from its memory.

Tuka saw the arrow stuck in the Dragon’s eye.

What she saw next was the image of her father fading away as she plunged into the well, and the sharp teeth of the Flame Dragon jaws behind him.

“That, that is—”

“That’s right, that bastard killed your father! Shoot it! Take it down, kill it! Let it all out!”

“No way! I can’t do it. Nobody can beat a monster like that!”

Still holding Tuka, Itami got off the HMV and grabbed a LAM from the pile in the back. He did not know when the enemy would show up, so he prepared one of them for use at any time.

“This LAM took out one of its arms!”

As Tuka saw the LAM, the Flame Dragon howled and kicked off the ground, flying up into the air. The great cry robbed her legs of strength. Since Itami had been through this before, he didn’t freeze up completely.

“Shit, that bastard remembers the spanking it got from this!”

Once the Flame Dragon took to the air, Rory’s halberd would not be able to reach it. Lelei’s magic was useless against fast-moving targets.

Rory tried to jump up and attack the Flame Dragon several times, but she was driven back by either its right paw or a stream of flames.

Lelei’s magic was very destructive, but it was not instantaneous and thus easily avoided.

And then, the Dark Elves arrows did no damage even if they hit.

They thought that all they could do was wait for the Flame Dragon to leave.

The Flame Dragon soared up into the sky, where Rory could not reach it at all, and leisurely spread its wings to keep it hovering in the air while it turned its back to them.

However, Itami raised the LAM and held Tuka rightly from behind.

In order not to let her run away from reality again, he could not show his powerlessness in front of the Flame Dragon.

He took aim at the airborne Flame Dragon’s back, and pressed Tuka’s finger on the trigger. She had to do this herself.

“You can do it. Look carefully. That’s the enemy. Use your strength and pull the trigger. Do it!”

Itami was shouting into Tuka’s ear.

“I can’t, I can’t do it!”

Itami forcefully restrained the crying Tuka, who was trying her best to struggle out of his grasp, while adjusting the LAM’s aim so that it would not miss.

“That’s enough, pull the trigger!”

Frightened of the voice shouting into her ear, drifting into a hazy dreamscape, Tuka rightly squeezed the handle.

She pulled the trigger, and a jet of flame roared forth from the rocket engine, driving its antitank warhead downrange.

As expected, the shot missed. However, it hit the side of the valley wall. Its thunderous explosion sent a shockwave through the Valley.

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Once they heard the Flame Dragon had been driven off, all the Dark Elves emerged. From where they were hiding.

“The Men in Green came! And there’s Rory Mercury and the wizard girl!”

To the Dark Elves, who had been one-sidedly hunted and preyed upon, this was wonderful news. Now was the time to exterminate the Flame Dragon and return to their peaceful lives in the Schwarz Forest, so they all raised up their weapons.

They had heard of how the Flame Dragon was driven off. The Man in Green could do it. And he had the aid of the Apostle of Emroy and a wizard of the Lindon school.

And so, the Dark Elves hiding in the nearby hills, plains and the mountains gathered in Lordom Valley with vengeance in their hearts. By midnight, the narrow valley was filled with Dark Elves. Even more people arrived by the time the sun came up.

The elders were thinking, “To think there were so many people”, or “To think so few were left”. How long had they hidden? However, the days of waiting for extinction were over. The battle that would decide the fate of the Dark Elves was nigh.

They opened the precious food stocks to welcome Itami and the warriors. The cooks did their best with the meager ingredients they had in order to produce good dishes.

Elsewhere, Yao, who had brought them here, was showered in the praise of her friends and people.

Yao, who had once been nicknamed “Unlucky”, had never received a welcome like this before. She simply could not calm down.

Yao did not feel she was worthy to receive everyone’s praise, at least not before she had atoned for her sins. Yet, her idea of atoning for her sins was discarded by the elders as taking it lightly, so now she did not know what she should do.

Although she was safe now, a lot of people had gotten the wrong idea from her absence.

“What happened to Todorom?”

“He got eaten. Happened right after you left.”

“How could that be, even he died?”

“He was the one competing with you to be the messenger too. Ah, what a shame.”

A quick glance revealed that there were much fewer people of her age than before. After realising so many people had died, even Yao, who was used to misfortune, could not help but droop her shoulders.

“Yao, you idiot! Why didn’t you come back sooner? If you did, Medosa… Medosa…!”

Yao mutely bore the cry of despair from one of her friends, who had lost her lover.

“Yao, you idiot! You…!”

Anyone seeing Yao silently endure the unfair castigation from her friends would be inclined to forgive her. But to Yao, that unrestrained abuse was what she deserved right now.

In addition, there was the man who ran off with her friend. Now he came before her and said his wife was dead.

In truth, Yao did not mind embracing him again. However, she could not forgive her first love who had run off with her best friend. She should have refused him. However, she felt that it would be alright to grant him the comfort he sought. And then, she was surprised that she felt this way.

She realised that she was quite the masochist.

However, Yao was no longer in a situation where she could decide what happened to herself.

Yao thought of that, and thus she said, “I, I belong to the Man in Green.” And then she turned around and fled from her friends.

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Right now, Itami looked very demoralized.

“Dammit.”

Tuka was curled up by the fireplace, asleep on Itami’s lap. She was tired out from a bout of crying.

The Dark Elf elders who came to check on her felt that she had sealed off her heart to maintain balance in her spirit. When she suddenly understood what was going on, her pent-up emotions burst forth all at once. The pain was worse than normal, and Tuka was unable to bear it. Therefore, she ran away from reality and let Itami become her father.

Now, one false move might lead to an irrecoverable situation. The rest she was taking now was a warning sign of that.

Itami grabbed his head as he wondered how to deal with Tuka.

“Itami-dono, are you troubled?”

Itami sighed in response to Yao’s question.

“I’m thinking about Tuka. Her whole mind is filled with Father this, Father that, and no matter how I try to deny it, she won’t listen. I feel so… powerless.”

“Once, when I lost my fiance, I was depressed for several months. My heart still aches from time to time when I think about him.”

“What, you had a fiance?”

Yao pouted slightly and replied, “Yes, is that strange?”

Itami shook his head to indicate that was not the case, and then he turned the topic back to Tuka.

“Forget it. No matter, what, I need to bring her in front of the Flame Dragon again, even if I have to drag her.”

Yao nodded in response to Itami’s idea.

“I belong to Itami now. I am ready to obey any orders you have.”

After Yao said that, she sat down beside Itami, as though waiting for instructions from him.

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“Ahhhh, what a pain, the halberd’s edge won’t harm it at all!”

Rory grumbled as she sharpened her halberd’s edge.

She had considered just using the halberd as a bludgeoning object. Who knew, she might be able to lay it out with a good whack. Of course, the Dragon would not stand there and let her use it as a punching bag. Even with one arm, it was still strong and agile enough to keep up with Rory.

She did not think she would lose, but she did not think she could win either. The Flame Dragon was one of the worst matchups for Rory.

“Beating him to death’s not fun at all…”

She disliked the feeling of crushing people to death. Cutting people up in one slice was much better. Just as Rory was muttering to herself, a Dark Elf elder came before her.

“Your Holiness. We are deeply grateful that you have come to this unsightly place.”

Rory stopped polishing her halberd, and pointed it at the elder.

“That’s fine. I didn’t come for you.”

“I understand that clearly. However, I pray you will not stay here. Please, come inside.”

The elder ushered Rory into a cave. “It will be more comfortable here than by the riverside.

However, Rory shook her head in refusal. She had a look of disgust on her face.

“You know I can’t go underground, right?”

“I heard you had a dispute with our god before, is that why?”

“...”

“No, I pray you will not be angry, but… I heard it was not a good thing.”

“Why do I have to be that fellow’s bride? Besides, all she wants is to use an enfleshed demigod as a pawn. I don’t want to waste my remaining 40 years on boring stuff like that. Well, I did manage to meet an interesting man as a result.”

“Oya? May I know who Your Holiness has her eye on?”

“I plan to stay with that fellow until he grows old and dies.”

The Dark Elf’s line of sight followed Rory’s to Itami.

Itami was now seated down, and Tuka was sleeping on his lap.

And Yao was standing beside Itami, talking to him.

“Still, why did Hardy open such a big hole at Arnus?”

As Rory said that, Yao sat beside Itami. Rory frowned, and then she stood up.

“A hole? Arnus?”

The abandoned elder had no idea what Rory was talking about.

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Lelei was frustrated at the weaknesses of her magic.

Once her target started moving, it would be very hard to take aim.

The Flame Dragon could not possibly stay still while she was preparing her attack. That meant that it would not work unless she could pin it down.

Of course, given Lelei’s current skills, she could not do it.

Lelei felt that she needed Itami and Rory’s help, so she began looking for him. Then she saw him sitting down, sandwiched between Yao and Rory while Tuka slept on his lap. It made Lelei nauseous, and she stood up.

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Nobody knew when it had started, but people were starting to gather around Itami.

While it was natural for Rory, Lelei and Yao to stay by his side, the Dark Elf elders and the warriors of the various tribes began clustering nearby.

The elders told Itami that the warriors from the tribes would accompany him when he moved out. However, to Itami, knowing the location of the Flame Dragon’s lair was good enough. Therefore, he tried to explain to the elders about the dangers of the place they would be heading to, as well as many other things. The elders simply smiled to him in a way that suggested they could not accept no for an answer.

“Tomorrow morning, then.”

“Sorry about that. Then, I need your people to help me carry some things.”

“That’s fine. Everyone who wants to go with you to exterminate the Flame Dragon is already here. Let us know if there’s anything else you need help with. Nobody will refuse you.”

“Indeed, indeed. All the young ones are prepared for this. Everyone feels that tomorrow will be a special day.

“Well, you say that, but we might not be able to finish it in one day. Just getting to the objective will take two to three days, longer if something happens.

The elders smiled at Itami’s words.

“We understand. Since you plan to attack the empty nest, you won’t be able to do anything if its master is home. However, the Men in Green are quite adept at cunning tactics, it seems.”

Itami’s plan to attack the Flame Dragon was to plant 75 kilos of C4 plastic explosive into its nest and blow it up when it came home to roost. It was an evil and despicable plan.

Itami was not interested in fighting it head on like a traditional hero. After all, Itami’s specialty was running away from difficulties and finding ways to run away from difficulties.

If that was not enough to kill it, they would ripple fire LAMs into it. The Flame Dragon would take a fair bit of damage in the process, and it could push the situation in a favorable direction.

The elders had no idea what Itami meant by “explosives” and “explosions”. They simply thought that if the Men in Green spoke of them, they must be very powerful.

“Why not let the young ones watch and learn?”

He said that, but when Itami looked at the people whom the elders considered “young ones”, they were all older than him.

For example, Yao looked like a bewitching 30 year old, but in truth she was 315 years old. Itami had had mixed feelings about this when he first found out. But when he thought about the age problem, he recalled the very young-looking Tuka and Rory, and decided to think of something else.

“Speaking of which, the way the Flame Dragon keeps hunting in the same places doesn’t seem very intelligent to men. Could it be that it’s not very smart?”

Lelei answered Itami’s question.

“The Flame Dragon has very long active and hibernation cycles. The more food it acquires and consumes, the longer it stays in hibernation. We do not feel that should be a problem.”

“I see… and how long is it active?”

“By rights, it should not have woken up for at least another 50 years.”

“And what does it do when it hibernates?”

“Well, it sleeps the way some animals hibernate in winter. There are records in scholarly books.”

“When it’s active it eats. When it’s hibernating it sleeps. What a pleasant life it leads. If only I were a Dragon…”

Itami was quite envious of it. To Itami, whose life was one long break, being able to add playing into that cycle would be his ideal form of life.

“It’s hardly a pleasant way of life. All living creatures have a lot to do during their active period. For example, besides catching food, they also have to build nests, fight over territory, and so on.”

Lelei’s words made everyone freeze.

In this world, there were some people who would frighten you if you went “Ahhhh” when you met them.

For instance, when a dentist wanted to drill your teeth.

For instance, when an assistant hair stylist snipped his scissors.

To a customer, they would normally relax and leave the haircut to the hairstylist. But if they heard the word “Ah”, they would panic.

Or perhaps when the captain of a passenger flight was talking to his passengers and was cut off half-way by a “This plane isn’t flying normally.” Anyone would feel a chill down their spine.

Similarly, Lelei’s words made Itami and the Elves straighten up.

There was a fatal flaw they had not noticed, but which would be soon brought to light. Their bodies shuddered in fear.

“What’s wrong?” Lelei asked nervously.

“Yeah, so like an animal, it reproduces during its active period and raises kids.”

“Oi, oi, oi don’t say that, I don’t want to meet Flame Dragon cubs.”

“Well Young Dragons shouldn’t be as bad as Flame Dragons.”

“Then how bad are they?”

“Ancient Dragons > Young Dragons > (mature subspecies) > Wyverns.”

The situation had not changed at all. As Itami heard this, he suddenly stood up.

“I forgot something, I‘m heading back to get it,” Itami said as he began the preparations for going back. Yao was sobbing beside him, “How can you do this after coming all this way?” and the elders were in a panic.

Rory, who was holding Tuka, spoke to Itami.

“How about this girl?”

Itami exhaled deeply.

“Dragons only lay one or two eggs at a time. In addition, Ancient Dragons only reproduce once a century.”

Lelei continued explaining, as though to calm everyone down, and Itami relaxed, in more ways than one.

“That’s right, the chances should be pretty low.”

“Indeed, Itami-dono. I’ve only ever seen one Dragon.”

“That’s true. I doubt we’ll really be that unlucky.”

Itami felt more relieved as he said that.

However, the surrounding Dark Elves all shuddered and looked straight at Yao when Itami said “unlucky”.

“What? What happened?”

Itami could sense the change in the room, and asked about it.

“Nothing, that, it’s nothing… ahahahaha…”

Yao had broken out in a cold sweat since someone mentioned the word “unlucky”.