It was clear that everyone did not know much about the Flame Dragon, but even so, they had to take up their weapons and fight. That was what it meant to be a warrior.

The Dark Elves equipped themselves with the gear that they were familiar with — sabers, katars, bow and arrows, and their trademark black leather armor.

There was something… special about the tight-fitting bondage armor they wore. It would have been one thing if only the women wore it, but more than half of the group were men and they wore the same armor that their female counterparts did.

I don’t want to be seen with these guys... Itami thought as he glanced around like a wary herbivore.

“Itami-dono, the nine of us will accompany you on your mission.”

Yao greeted Itami as the representative of these men and women. Perhaps she might have understood how he felt. After that, they began introducing themselves.

From the males, Crow looked like a human man in his 40s, while Meto, Ban, Fen and Nokk looked to be about the same age as Yao. Kom looked like a teenager. After listening to them talking among themselves, Kom seemed to be the youngest of their group, at a mere 154 years old. For some reason, he felt that he had to respect them all as his elders. As for the females, Seimy and Nayu looked slightly younger than Yao.

In any case, they gathered together and said, “Please take care of us”, and then Itami began distributing the gear on the HMV. Said gear referred to the LAMs and the plastic explosives, as well as reels of detonating cord.

“Is this what they call the ‘Rod of Steel’...?”

The long metal tube looked weighty and potent to the Dark Elves, and they enthused over it.

“I’ve heard that this is not a magic item, but something called a weapon… but how do we use it? We should be able to use it too, right?”

“Ah, yes, I’ll teach you how to use it now.”

Since the Dark Elves were intelligent beings, not only did Itami have to distribute the equipment among them, but since he was entrusting them with weapons, he had to teach the Dark Elves the proper way of using them too. If they were horses, there would be no need to worry about them accidentally fiddling with the gear, but since they were sentient, if they made a mistake or fiddled around with it carelessly, there was a risk of an explosion which would blow them all up.

To that end, Itami carefully explained the operation of the LAM 110mm anti-tank rocket launcher to them.

Once the Dark Elves learned how to use it, they might think, “We can beat the Flame Dragon now”. It was obvious from the looks in their eyes that they hated the Flame Dragon bitterly, and there was a risk that they might be overcome by their emotions and wildly discharge a rocket the moment they saw it, especially since the possession of the weapons made them think, “We have to kill the Flame Dragon this time, no matter what”. Still, that enthusiasm was useful, although their final objective was to defeat the Flame Dragon and let Tuka deal the finishing blow. The first two points he drilled into them were “Do not touch the trigger if you’re not ready to fire” and “Do not fire if anyone is standing behind you”.

First, they would need to extract the LAM from its transportation package by pulling it out by the warhead, slowly and carefully. After removing the protective covering from the launcher tube, they would have to attach the firing assembly and weapon sight. The Dark Elves were not familiar with tools, so it would be faster for Itami to do it himself. While Itami was setting up a LAM, he could hear the Dark Elves around him cracking dirty jokes.

The person to Itami’s side that said “If such a thick thing went into me, I’d break” must have been Seimy, and Ban proudly retorted “Mine’s bigger”. It would seem the Dark Elves were a sexually open tribe. He did not know if this was a good or bad thing, but if he got embarrassed, people might think he was a weirdo.

The Dark Elves could not read the instructions and warnings on the launcher tube. Therefore, Itami got around this problem by personally demonstrating how to set up the launcher. First, he pulled out the long probe on the tip of the warhead, removed the protective cover, and then turned it in the direction the arrow pointed. Then he explained that against tanks (or armor), the probe would need to be extended. Against humans, it could stay as it was. Naturally, against the Flame Dragon they would need to pull it out.

“Then, how do you make the thing on the front shoot out?” Fen asked as he lifted the LAM. He was muscular and much more physically imposing than Itami, so when he put it on his shoulder, he looked pretty cool.

“When the warhead touches something, it will explode. Just telling you is troublesome, so I should probably let you experience it. Also, in order to counteract the weapon’s recoil, the LAM sprays out a countermass from the back with great force when you fire it. It’s very dangerous, so make absolutely sure nobody’s standing behind you when you fire it.”

“Mm, I see…”

The Dark Elves picked out suitable targets and began practicing firing postures. Since the warhead was very heavy, everyone realised that tracking a mobile target was difficult.

“Then, what about those crates and that rope?”

Kom, the Dark Elf who looks like a boy but who was 154 years old, looked at the rest of the gear. Counting the weight of the LAMs and the other stuff, each of them would be carrying 20 kilos of equipment.

“Oh, that’s the explosive and the primer. You can carry those normally. Honestly speaking, that explosive is more important than the LAMs.”

After camouflaging himself with grass and leaves, Itami began climbing the Tyuba mountains. He had even painted his face in green and brown camouflage paint, while all the metallic parts on his weapon were wrapped up to prevent them from making noise when they bumped into something. While he did not know much about the daily life of the Flame Dragon, it was a wild beast, so it should have keen senses. It would be best to take the appropriate steps against it.

After that, Itami carried the sleeping Tuka on his back.

“Father, I’m scared. Something’s coming,” Tuka said.

Because she seemed completely terrified, Lelei put her to sleep.

However, Tuka was quite obvious in her usual clothes, so Itami draped her in his bulletproof vest. It served to camouflage her, and the titanium alloy trauma plates would protect her from danger. Then again, it was questionable how useful it would be against a Flame Dragon attack.

Behind him was Rory, Lelei and the nine Dark Elves following them. All of them camouflaged themselves, like Itami did.

“Ugh, this smells gross.”

Crow pinched his nose as he grumbled. Yao replied, “Itami-dono told us to do this, so it can’t be helped.”

That was why everyone slathered all the exposed parts of their body in animal oils.

“I know this is supposed to hide our scent, but won’t the smell just make us more obvious?” Nokk said as he climbed.

There were no trails on this mountain and the terrain was rough. The HMV could not drive through here, so they had to go on foot. They kept low as they moved, until they were almost rubbing against the ground, and they moved through trenches, depressions, and the shadows of big trees. They changed camouflage to match their current terrain and camped at night, only moving the next morning.

Slow as walking might be, they would reach their objective eventually if they just kept moving forward.

On the evening of the third day, they finally reached the slopes of Mt. Tyuba. The smell of sulphur hung heavy in the air, negating their scent camouflage.

Everyone changed into a sand and rock-type camouflage pattern. Itami blackened the mud that he and Tuka used to camouflage their hands and feet, in order to hide the obvious green color.

Itami ordered everyone to go prone, and then signalled with his hands for Crow to come to the head of the group. Crow had been here before, so he would be their guide.

“What’s wrong?”

Crow squatted beside Itami.

“Does the Flame Dragon enter from that crater?”

“Yes. Its nest is on one of the outcroppings protruding from the side of the volcano’s mouth,” Crow explained.

He had come to this place before to gather the sulphur found near the volcano. When burned, the smoke from the sulphur would preserve dried fruits for a longer time, and it would look fresher as well.

Although he had only come to gather sulphur, he chanced upon a cave during his searches. That cave led to an outcropping on the interior of the volcano, where the Flame Dragon lay sleeping.

“I had a bad feeling when I saw it, so I ran.”

Itami questioned Crow about the interior of the volcano, particularly the condition of the air within.

According to Crow, the volcano’s mouth was apparently bottomless, so he did not know anything about what lay below. However, the interior was well-ventilated due to the cave leading to the outside, and unlike the exterior, which reeked of sulphur, the air quality inside was very good.

“So the Flame Dragon’s nest is inside the cave?”

Rory seemed quite shocked when she heard it, but she quickly shut her mouth.

“No, it’s inside the volcano’s mouth. The cave simply connects the outside to the inside.”

“Then, what if we descended from the summit of the volcano?”

“Not possible. The interior of the volcano’s mouth is a sheer cliff. I don’t think we could climb down from up there.”

Rory frowned, because she could not go under the earth. Itami smiled and said, “Don’t worry.”

“That’s fine, Rory can stay outside. All we’re doing is checking if the Flame Dragon is in. If it comes back, she can contact us.”

According to the plan, they would enter the cave and check if the Flame Dragon was there. If it was gone, they would plant the explosives, and if it was in, they would immediately fall back and wait for it to leave. If things went well, Rory would not need to do anything.

“Shouldn’t we stop it from leaving?”

“Mm. We don’t want to make it suspicious. We’ll hide and wait for it to leave first.”

Itami muttered, “Does Rory know how to use this?” as he fiddled with his earpiece and headset mike. Rory hurriedly pulled her mike to her mouth and Itami tested the wireless connection to Lelei and Rory.

“We’re going in.”

Itami let Tuka down. His plan was to go in with a rifle. Just as he was about to do it, however, Yao and the other Dark Elves urged him to stay.

“Let us handle these trivial tasks.”

Itami was only too glad to let Yao and Crow go in instead of himself.

It took a while before Yao and Crow got back, and Itami directed the others to take a rest, while they had a dinner of dried travel rations. The smell of food would be covered up by the smell of sulphur, but that same smell made it difficult to work up an appetite.

Still, considering what would happen soon, they did not know when they might next get the chance to eat. Fortunately, everyone understood this, and they ate with gusto regardless of their current location.

Lelei and Rory each took out a set of JSDF Type II Combat Rations (beef curry / tuna salad / pickled vegetables / rice) as well as just-add-water heating packs. The Dark Elves had dried fish from the valley, dried fruits, beans and the like, but they were fascinated by Rory and Lelei’s processed foods. They were quite surprised with how the heating packs immediately produced steam when water was added.

Tuka quietly slept by the side of the group.

Itami had been carrying her all this while, but she was so light that he hardly felt fatigued. That said, the tension was tiring him out. Since he didn’t feel too hungry, he ate slowly.

“You should let Tuka eat too, otherwise she’ll cry when she wakes up.”

“Oh well, what can we do?”

Lelei said that as she took a spoonful of curry.

Just then, Yao and Crow returned.

“What’s it like?”

“Mm, the cave and the volcano shaft are connected, and there’s a nest on an outcropping of rock. The Dragon’s not in, it must have gone.”

“Excellent.”

After hearing Yao’s report, Itami picked up Tuka.

At last, they were going into the cave. Everyone tensed up, knowing that they were going into enemy territory. They even spoke more quietly.

“Then, Rory, we’re counting on you.”

“All right, I’ll keep a lookout near the volcano’s mouth.”

Rory tapped her mike. “Is this thing on?”

“Reading you loud and clear. Ah, screw the comms protocols. Okay, I hear you.”

They bid farewell to Rory at the entrance to the cave.

Clutching her halberd tightly, Rory vanished up the side of the brick-red mountain with nimble steps, while Itami and friends headed into the cave after they parted ways with her.

The interior of the cave was so large they thought that they must have been dreaming.

Lava flowed, and became solid when it cooled. After that more lava would flow out, and solidify as well. After countless repetitions of this process, the layers of stone looked like a staircase.

The way the layered stone spread out looked like the stairs leading up to a shrine. The walls were not one solid sheet; they looked more like a giant set of curtains. Calling this place a shrine would not be out of the question. It boasted a long corridor, a high viewing platform, and even an altar-like structure. The power of nature was not to be underestimated.

If they brought a holy man here, he might set up a church on the spot.

Itami lit up his surroundings with a flashlight, then left the not-altar behind, and went deeper into the cave.

The Dark Elves lit their surroundings with flaming torches. The echoes made by the close quarters and the flickering shadows made by their light sources contributed to the spooky atmosphere.

“Itami-dono, this way.”

Itami could see light coming from ahead of him.

He put Tuka down, and nervously advanced, holding his rifle. Above him, he could see the starry night sky through the mouth of the volcano. The light was coming from the mouth of the volcano.

There was an outcropping here.

Though it was called an outcropping, it was actually quite broad. The caldera of the volcano was about the size of a baseball field, and it was roughly bowl-shaped. In its center, a hole led down to the main shaft, and the outcropping was located here.

The outcropping was roughly the size of two basketball courts, and the way sand and rocks were mixed here resembled the seaside. The Dragon’s nest here looked like a formation of stones on a beach.

Crow confirmed that this was the Flame Dragon’s lair, and the Flame Dragon had been resting here earlier.

Although they had never seen a Dragon’s nest before, this layout was far too simple, and it made them suspicious.

Still, when they stood there, they could believe that the vast thing before them was where their enemy made its lair.

There were fragments of what looked like broken eggshells scattered over the ground, as well as enormous footprints that could only have been made by a Dragon.

“The eggshells are fresh. It looks like the young dragons hatched recently, and that they left the nest right after hatching.”

Lelei’s conclusion after inspecting the fragments put everyone at ease.

There were things which looked like rocks on the sand, but a closer look revealed that they were the remains of what had once been helmets. Nobody knew how long these things had been here, but they also found sparkling weapons like swords and the like, half-buried in the sand.

“And this is?”

Yao picked up the helmet and the sword, feeling them in her hands.

“I think these belonged to the heroes throughout history who came to challenge the Flame Dragon.”

“Well, this is a magic sword, after all.”

Nokk’s eyes were sparkling as he focused on that sword. He breathed, “This would be worth a lot if we brought it back…”

The Dark Elves closed their eyes in silent prayer for the ones who had borne these weapons and armor. The weapons and armor that belonged to those brave enough to bet their lives against the Flame Dragon must have been the work of a master.

“All right, let’s get to work. Lelei, help me look after Tuka. Everyone, help me light up the surroundings.”

After hearing Itami’s instructions, they brought their equipment over.

Itami unpacked what looked like blocks of cheese from the boxes. In total, there were 75 kilograms of it.

“It looks a bit like cheese.”

The young Kom was fascinated by the things Itami was unpacking from the boxes. He pinched off a piece to put in his mouth, but Itami smacked it out of his hand.

“This stuff is poisonous. Don’t even lick it.”

Frightened by the mention of poison, Kom immediately put the piece back.

Itami picked up the piece, and brought it near Kom’s torch. The white substance quietly burned as Itami stuck it into the torch’s flame. This unexpectedly peaceful reaction was unlike the common impression one might have of explosives.

“This stuff will only burn if you light it. You need to do some work to make it explode.”

Itami laid a tarpaulin on the ground and put the white substance on it, as though he were a sculptor.

In the movies, when planting C4, the actors would stick electrical detonators into the wrapped explosives, but that would result in an incomplete detonation in real life. In order to fully bring out the plastic explosives’ power, it had to be kneaded well. Without sufficient kneading, the explosives might even fail to detonate.

Itami’s hands turned a pale yellow after kneading the explosive.

It would be far too much to expect one person to knead 75 kilos of C4, so everyone chipped in. In the end, they molded it into bricks.

Itami touched the ground and took out a small device. It was called an electronic detonator.

He touched the ground to discharge his static electricity. This was because enough static electricity could initiate a detonation. By touching the ground, he grounded himself and removed his static electricity charge.

The next part required a lot of specialized knowledge. Only Itami could do it. He took out the cable reel and a pair of pliers, cut off several lengths of wire from the reel, and then began turning them into auxiliary circuits.

He stripped off the cable casing at the end, and then he joined the wires inside onto the contacts of the detonator.

Itami worked in silence, while Yao held a torch above him to provide light.

“Is there anything we can help with?”

“Yes. Dig a pit in the Dragon’s nest. About this deep.”

After receiving their instructions, Ban, Fen and Nokk started digging.

Itami’s forehead was slick with sweat, but he produced good work, without any mistakes. He spliced the lengths of cable, and then joined them to the final detonation circuit.

Usually, only engineers would study these techniques of rigging explosives. However, they were part of the basic curriculum within SFG, and Itami had learned them. He was hardly a diligent student, but much like it was in school, he felt that “failing at your tasks means failing at life”. His determination helped him to master this skill, and this determination was now a part of him.

Suddenly, he recalled the memories of his instructors cursing him out and knuckling him on the head.

Itami stopped his work, gently put down the detonators, and pressed his mike’s switch.

“Rory, can you hear me?”

He called Rory several times, but there was no response. Perhaps the wireless signal could not penetrate the thick rock. If that was the case, there was no point in making her a sentry.

Damn. Still, they were close to completion. Might as well finish it up in one go.

“Cheh, this is going to be a pain... Everyone, eyes to the sky. Lelei, the reception here seems pretty bad. Try and raise Rory.”

After saying that, Itami went back to work.

Then he turned off his mike’s switch and took off his headset. Electronic switches could cause sparks, and he broke out in a cold sweat as he realised he had been handling the explosives and detonators with the headset on.

What would the others think if they knew how close he had come to blowing them up? He looked around to gauge the others’ reactions.

Fortunately, nobody seemed to get Itami’s meaning. They simply went “huh?” in confusion.

After that it was time to set the processed explosive.

He stacked the blocks of C4 into the hole Ban had made, layering them on top of each other. Then, he plugged the detonators into the bricks. Then he carefully unrolled the cable from the reel, so as not to tangle the detonation cord in anything.

“Give me that sword over there.”

“?”

Yao and the others tilted their heads as they watched Itami place the magic sword on top of the explosives.

When terrorists used plastic explosives, they would often sprinkle them with screws in order to increase their killing power. The fact was that a normal explosive was not as powerful as people thought it was. The fragments caused by the shockwave of the explosion were what caused a lot of collateral damage. They were layering the magic swords and other masterwork weapons on the explosives for the same reason. If it worked, the swords of the warriors who failed in their quest would wound the Dragon, earning their departed masters a small measure of peace.

The explosives were covered in a thin layer of sand and dirt, and another layer erased their footprints. They paid out the wire from the reel and headed back to the cave from the outcropping. Of course, the wire could not be exposed, so it had to be shallowly buried.

Finally, they joined the wire to the detonation trigger.

And so, the preparations for the demolition were complete. What Itami thought had only taken a while had actually taken close to five hours, which shocked him when he checked his watch.

His shoulders and waist ached from all the squatting he did. He took a deep breath and said, “Okay, job’s done.” However, when he looked around, everyone was frozen stiff.

“What’s wrong?”

He wiped the sweat off his head and looked behind, and the Flame Dragon loomed before him.

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Rory was assigned to look out for the Flame Dragon near the volcano’s crater. However, she wound up looking at the sky full of stars once the sun set.

Not long after, she spotted a Flame Dragon in the night sky. It was flying close to here.

Since they had a plan, the plan had to be followed. Rory hid herself so that the Flame Dragon would not spot her and she tried to warn Itami about the Flame Dragon. However, there was no response.

“Mm? Is this really all right? What if I didn’t get through?”

A chill ran down Rory’s spine.

Come to think of it, Itami was also responsible for this. Most of the time, he spoke the same language as Rory, so eventually he began treating her like a Japanese person. For a Japanese person using the wireless handsets, if the reception was poor, the accepted practice would be to move to a place with better reception, such as a window. Perhaps the only place for people on the top and bottom of a volcano’s mouth to communicate would be at the lip of the volcano’s crater. However, Rory ran toward the cave in order to get closer to Itami. Doing that increased the thickness of rock the signal would have to go through, which only worsened things.

“Oi, answer me!”

Rory desperately shouted for Itami. However, the Flame Dragon neared the volcano’s mouth, and it descended into the volcano..

If this went on, the Flame Dragon would attack the defenseless Itami and the others. What should she do?

It was pointless to stay on the outside. Rory decided to try and directly warn Itami of the impending danger, and so she quickened her pace and ran toward the cave entrance.

However—

“................No way!”

Rory was shocked speechless by the sight before her.

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Itami locked eyes with the Flame Dragon, its wings spread.

The unexpected encounter froze Itami and his friends in their tracks. The Flame Dragon had not expected humans to show up in its nest, and stared in shock at these uninvited guests.

It felt as though they could feel the heat of each other’s breath. But in truth, both sides were not that close to each other. It was a purely psychological effect.

Itami slowly, slowly backed up, nervously reaching for his pistol in its thigh holster. Itami knew that he might as well be waving a toy gun around in front of a Dragon, but he had placed his rifle elsewhere while he was working.

The place was so quiet that he could even hear someone else gulping. If they moved, they would die. As the old saying went, at that moment everyone thought the same thing and they stayed still.

Nobody knew how much time has passed. It might have been an instant or it might have been an eternity. If a second had 75 instants, then including the time spent on each breath, when one reckoned it as instants, it would have been a tremendous number.

Kom did not know how long this would last, but he was unable to bear the way both sides were staring each other down. He screamed like a madman and lifted up his LAM.

“Uwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

By that signal, the silence was broken by clamor.

Itami ran.

Lelei dragged Tuka back to the cave to protect her.

At the same time, Yao ran to protect Tuka.

After that, the Dark Elves and Kom raised their LAMs.

The boy fired his LAM, at such short range that he could not possibly miss. After the brief ignition of the rocket engine, the anti-tank warhead struck home on the Dragon’s throat and exploded, flooding the crater with blinding light and clouds of thick smoke.

“Got him!”

Suddenly, the Flame Dragon and its right claw emerged from the smoke, aborting their short-lived joy. The boy’s body was torn in half in a swipe, and his upper torso flew into the distance.

What splattered on the wall was no longer recognizable as an Elf.

Worse, when Kom fired his LAM, there had been people behind him, who were severely injured by the backblast of the weapon. Ban and Nayu died instantly, their bodies shredded by the countermass ejected by the LAM at point-blank range.

The people slightly further away were also affected, and they collapsed on the ground. This was good news for them, however. The Flame Dragon’s tail sweep should have hit everyone, but the fallen people were not hit. Only Kom’s lower body was smashed away.

The Flame Dragon roared, shaking the interior of the volcano’s mouth.

The Dark Elves stood up again, shouldering their LAMs. They had forgotten everything Itami taught them amidst the dragon’s thunderous roar.

Nokk did not flip his safety from S to F. In his panic, all he did was blindly mash the trigger.

Crow remembered to turn off the safety, but he forgot to pull out the probe, and his attack was not effective. In order to achieve the Neumann effect and breach the Flame Dragon’s tank-like scales, the probe had to be pulled out. In addition, the detonation of the warhead at short range would not only injure himself, but his teammates as well.

“The probe! Pull out the probe!”

Nobody heard Itami’s voice through the Dragon’s roar and the explosions. Lelei dragged Tuka to the cave, while Yao noticed Itami and shouted, “Get to the cave!”

Itami ignored Yao and grabbed the LAM she was holding.

At this moment, a Dark Elf died, and soon another one followed.

Nokk was chewed through by the Flame Dragon’s sharp fangs, while Meto was pulverized by a swipe of its paw.

Of course, the Flame Dragon was not unhurt. The explosion of the LAM caused it intense pain, but sadly that was all it did.

Then the Flame Dragon breathed fire at the people who were desperately fleeing it, planning to wipe them all out.

The reason why normal attacks could not deal a lethal blow to a Flame Dragon was not just because its scales were sturdy and tough, but also because they overlapped each other. This gap between the scales and the body was like spaced armor on tanks, which cushioned impacts.

To the Flame Dragon, this bunch of hateful little creatures were cradling black staves, which created a tremendous impact which stunned, but they were nowhere as potent as the power which destroyed its left arm.

Its shock lasted only a second, and then the Flame Dragon determined that this object was no threat to it. What it wanted to do was to chase away the maggots infesting its nest.

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Itami pulled the probe out, twisted it in the direction of the arrow, and then locked it in place.

He raised it on his shoulder, and held his breath as he aimed.

He swivelled the safety from S to F.

And just as he was aiming the LAM, Seimy was thrown into Itami.

He fell to the ground, cushioning Seimy’s fall. Itami could not rise for a time, having taken the full impact straight on. Seimy was slightly hurt, and she reached for the dropped LAM.

“Idiot, don’t shoot!”

Itami was right behind her and he ran as fast as he could. In what might have been a stroke of luck, the fired LAM warhead struck true on the Flame Dragon’s leg.

Shortly after, the Flame Dragon’s howl of agony rang through the volcano.

The missile’s explosively forged projectile warhead pierced the Dragon’s scales — whose hardness was over 9 on the Mohs scale — and ripped into the Flame Dragon’s thigh.

Mangled scales and flesh flew everywhere, and the Flame Dragon thrashed in pain.

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“Tuka, wake up.”

The girl’s comfortable rest was interrupted by her father’s voice.

“Father, what happened?”

Tuka rubbed her eyes as she woke up.

She looked around, and found that she was in her home, which filled her with nostalgia. Radiant sunlight flowed into the room from the windows, and she felt that today would be another peaceful day.

Her father’s voice also warmed her heart. Her head was still a bit fuzzy, but her father’s gentle voice made her feel happy. As she remembered the terrible nightmares she had earlier, her happiness grew deeper.

The sounds of footsteps came from outside the window, as well as the sounds of shouting and explosions. However, that seemed like it was happening in a faraway world. Right now, all she wanted was to enjoy her conversation with her father.

“Father, what’s wrong?”

She looked around, but she could no longer see her father. Instead, she saw the Flame Dragon chewing through the body of a young girl in an instant.

“Yuno!”

Her best friend, so close as to be family, was devoured in an instant. Tuka did not know when she had picked up a bow, but she made her decision in an instant, nocked an arrow onto the bowstring, pulled it taut with all her strength, then aimed and loosed. But sadly, her arrow was knocked aside.

She was not the only one firing arrows. The Elf warriors around here loosed an endless hail of arrows at the gigantic Dragon. They exploded when they hit, but thanks to the robust protection of its scales, the Dragon was unharmed.

The female Dark Elf Seimy was chewed to pieces by the Dragon, and the Flame Dragon’s roving eye lighted on Tuka, selecting her as its next prey.

As the Flame Dragon looked right at her, Tuka’s entire body shivered in terror.

She wanted to run, but her feet would not move. She wanted to scream, but her voice was gone.

At this moment, Tuka froze, as though her soul had been stolen away. Or rather, it was more that she wanted to flee, but her mind had not gotten the message. Why had she challenged this monster? She must have made a mistake. Even if she directed her hatred and anger at this monster, she would have no chance of victory. Thus, Tuka cursed her foolishness.

“Tuka, run!”

Her father protected the stunned Tuka.

“You just need to hide here, listen to me!”

And then, Tuka was dragged into the cave by Lelei and Yao.

In the instant before she entered the cave, she saw the form of the man who had replaced her father, snatched away by the Flame Dragon — she saw him die for her, and the sight of her father being eaten by the Flame Dragon.

She desperately reached for him, but touched nothing.

Her father’s shape drifted away and away, further and further away.

Father died for me.

It’s all my fault. It’s all my fault. It’s all my, It’s all—

“You’re wrong.”

Lelei’s voice spoke into Tuka’s ear.

“You did not kill your father. The Flame Dragon did.”

“But—”

“Itami got it wrong. For someone like you who could live for so long, wounds of the heart would be trivial matters. After ten, a hundred years, your soul would heal. All you had to do was wait until your self-loathing faded away. Therefore, there was no need for him to save you. Only humans, with their short lifespan, are driven to solve every problem they encounter. It is how they live.”

Tuka carefully considered the words Lelei said.

It would seem she was just griping. Lelei let out a series of sighs, and then looked straight at Tuka.

“You decided on your own that you could not defeat the Flame Dragon, so you turned your anger at a far more accessible target — yourself.”

“But, we can’t beat it… or can we?”

“If a member of one’s family is killed by a thief, then one should hate the thief. But people will misaim their hatred — why should they go to where the thief hides? If one loses a family member to sickness, then one should hate the disease. It is not the doctor’s fault; yet people will hate the doctor.”

“Then what should I curse? Who should I vent my anger at? In the end, it all comes back to me!”

Just as Tuka was shouting, the female Dark Elf blasted through the Flame Dragon’s thigh.

The shockwave of the explosion and fragments swept past Lelei’s face. She slumped like she had been slapped.

“All right! We did it!”

The survivors, Crow, Fen and Yao were breathing hard, and their bodies were stained with fresh blood. Carrying their LAMs, they forgot their fear in the midst of their excitement. Each of them was hurt in different ways.

“This is the turning point between success and failure. You just need to—”

Lelei raised her head. A rill of blood streamed down from her forehead.

“I’ll take down that Dragon. You just need to keep it still.”

Lelei rose, holding her staff. She began incanting what was known as the one-man chorus, and began the “Initiation”.

Lelei’s hometown had been destroyed by the Dragon, and many of the people she knew had been killed by it.

“Abru-main!”

As Tuka watched Lelei rushing forward, she finally realized that what was happening before her eyes was not a dream, nor a fantasy, but reality.

“Rihommun!!”

Lelei levitated a sword with her magic, and launched it.

The sword flew like an arrow, but its sharpness alone could not pierce the sturdy scales. With a hollow clang, the sword bounced away. Accelerating it with magic did not work. It was futile.

Its leg was hurt, and the Dragon, helpless before this onslaught, sought to escape the LAM’s explosion. In the process it bashed into the cliff below the volcano’s mouth. After it regained its balance, it spread its wings.

The Dark Elves were delighted by the turning of the tide. They grinned as they saw the Flame Dragon cowering in fear of the LAM.

“We can do it!” Crow shouted, but there were almost no more LAMs left.

Fen picked up the LAM under Nayu’s body, pulled out the probe, and shouldered it. The process took only a few seconds, but the Flame Dragon would not miss this chance. Ignoring the fact that it would be attacking its own nest, it breathed a sustained stream of flame at Fen, who turned into a walking pyre.

The burning Fen ran toward the Flame Dragon, and then at point blank range, he pulled the trigger.

The Flame Dragon took its second wound from Fen’s dying attack.

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Lelei thought — how could she accelerate the swords until she could pierce the Dragon’s scales?

Then, she remembered how Itami had placed the swords on top of the C4. Indeed, using the force of the explosion would be enough.

Lelei picked up a sword and a tiny series of rings surrounded the sword’s hilt.

She launched the sword with magic, and when it touched the Flame Dragon, she detonated the rings. The explosion of the rings drove it deep into the Flame Dragon’s belly.

To the Flame Dragon, preparing to swipe at Yao, this was a mere flesh wound. For something its size, being pierced by a sword was like being pricked by a thorn. It hardly hurt.

However, pain aside, the sword had pierced its scales. It was an intolerable blow to the Dragon’s pride.

Its heretofore invulnerable armor was no longer an absolute defense. The Flame Dragon turned its gaze to Lelei, and then to the tiny prick on its body. A look of disbelief spread over its face as it parsed this inconceivable event.

A roar that sounded more like a wail rang past Lelei, and she smiled darkly.

“Fufufufufufufufufu, die, you shitty lizard!”

Lelei levitated all the swords in the area — the rusted sword, the ruined sword, the magic sword, the nameless sword, the gem-encrusted sword, the greatsword, the razor-sharp sword, the divine sword, the barbarian sword, over ten, no, more than twenty of them.

The spirits of the countless warriors who had challenged the Flame Dragon and died in despair now inhabited their weapons. And now, they floated above the Flame Dragon’s head, moved by Lelei’s full power.