

Prologue - It seems to be the Demon Country

The first answer that would come to Renya's mind when asked to describe his image of the demon territory would be hell. A sky carpeted by low-hanging, thick clouds all year around. A desolate land with miasma continuously gushing out. A landscape where objects difficult to distinguish as animals or plants would thickly infest the whole place with creatures difficult to distinguish as birds or reptiles soaring through the sky while croaking strange cries. All of this described what Renya would expect or anticipate from the demon territory.

However, as Renya gazed at the scenery spreading out beneath him while his hair fluttered in the wind on Dra-kun's back, he noticed that reality was significantly different from his imagination. All he could see was an extremely normal place that could as well be described as epitome of commonplaceness. Soil, plains, thickets, and forests were all present, and even mountains expanded in the far distance.

He couldn't see any mountains similar to Mt. Tsurugi, nor any swamps blowing up poisonous gases day and night.

Even if he were to be told that this is the territory of the demon king, he would just shrug it off as some kind of local joke.

"Demon territory?" Renya asked with a somewhat dumbfounded look, pointing at the scenery below them.

Both, Shion and Rona, simultaneously nodded with seriousness written all over their faces.

"Although it doesn't look demonish in the least?"

"I don't know what you'd describe as demonish, but..." Shion mutters while peering at the landscape beneath with keen curiosity. "It's definitely quite a letdown. I was pretty sure that the demon king would await us at the head of his army once we broke through the wall."

"It should have caused quite the uproar when we broke through that wall, for sure." Rona said with a somewhat demonic smile.

Renya was about to tell her that the wall wasn't intended to serve as a sandbag for them to relieve their stress, but barely managed to withhold blurting it out. On top of it already being done and over with, he believed that Rona and the other girls wouldn't really understand the term 'sandbag' either way. Instead, Renya asked Rona something completely different.

"Rona, how's Emil's response?"

"Please give me a moment."

Rona pressed both her hands on top of each other against her chest as if holding onto something. In that state, she lowered her face slightly and began to slowly chant something in a whisper with her eyes closed.

Compared to just a little while ago when she had slammed a powerful divine art against the barrier, this skill was very plain. However, if anyone were to hear that the effect of that art was capable of covering almost all of the demons' lands, they'd be plainly astonished by the tremendousness of its effect.

The figure of Rona searching for the whereabouts of the person in her mind by praying for god's benevolence looked holy in some way. Renya thought that she should always act like this, now that she had been designated as a saint. At the very least, Renya felt like he could do without a saint who looked down at everything with scornful laughter while recklessly and randomly shooting powerful divine arts in the name of god.

"As expected...of the demon country." Rona grumbled quietly with a slightly pained voice after some time had passed. Her expression was strained, and a faint sheen of sweat covered her forehead. "The use and effect of my divine arts is being obstructed."

"So you're saying that you can't tell Emil's location?"

Rona guessed that the power of divine arts, which by nature borrowed the power of the gods, might be significantly inhibited because a demon king was pretty much a being standing opposite of the gods.

'Assuming she's right about that, the gods, who lose out against a being of the lower world like the demon king, sure would be pathetic,' Renya judged. 'But, considering that the gods expressly summon heroes from other worlds as even they can't do much about the demon king in this world where gods actually exist, this might indeed be a valid assessment. Either way, it doesn't change the fact that I feel like they should put in some more energy in their work.'

"No, it's just vaguely, but I somehow have an inkling as to where to find her. I might be able to narrow it down a bit more, once we get closer." With those words, Rona pointed in a certain direction.

Seeing that, Liaris started to adjust their flight path by instructing Dra-kun.

"Hey, I'd like you to correct me if I'm misunderstanding something, but...," While Dra-kun begun to alter his flight direction in accordance to Liaris' instructions, Renya, who had been admiring the sky and scenery around them, called out to Az who seemed to be free, "...If we fly in this direction, we're going to somewhat deviate from the demon country's center, aren't we?"

"Really? I wouldn't know..."

After having endlessly flown above the Miasma Forest which lacked anything you could call a landmark, they were now flying above the mostly uninhabited demon territory. Even if Az roughly knew in what direction they were flying, there was no way for him to know whether they were heading towards the center of the demon country or to a place distant from it, no matter how extensive his knowledge might be.

"Somehow I feel like the central area is over there." Renya was certainly pointing in a direction that was slightly different from Dra-kun's flight direction.

"Do you have some kind of basis for that claim, Renya? You're certainly not going to say that you've already visited the demon country in the past, are you?" Croire laughed, adding, "Though I wouldn't be too surprised even if you had actually come here before."

Given that Croire had asked while following Renya's finger with her eyes, Renya lowered his hand, and said in a tone lacking confidence, "It's just that I feel something really bad from the direction over there. The guy with the worst presence in this country should be the demon king, right?"

Croire nodded once Renya added that the demon king ought to be in the direction of the central area.

"That makes sense."

"Isn't it great that we're heading into a slightly different direction then?" Az said after being lured to look in the same direction as Croire. "Our objective is to secure that Emil and then go back. If you had said that she's actually in the demon king's stronghold, I'd be horrified, considering that the heroes aren't with us right now."

"You're absolutely right ~no. If possible, it'd be best to wrap up this entire expedition without fighting at all ~no." Frau agreed with Az, pulling a very unhappy face as she apparently remembered something.

Frau was the only one among those present on Dra-kun's back who had actually experienced fighting against the demon king, albeit only against one of his terminals. Frau was always feared or instead loved because of her merciless personality and her outlandish abilities, but in that battle one of her own dolls was completely destroyed, apparently triggering her to harbor a strong feeling of disgust towards the term 'demon king'. But then again, although the demon king had certainly been the reason for its destruction, it would also be possible to retort to Frau that she had been the one to push the self-destruction button of her doll, but none of those present was capable of saying that into her face.

Even for Renya it'd be next to impossible to rebuke her like that. In case she got offended by it, her revenge would be disastrous, and if she otherwise started to cry, he'd feel completely guilty about it. The broken doll was apparently a product into which Frau had poured her heart and soul, and its destruction obviously had a fairly lasting effect on her.

However, Renya couldn't help but to feel that it might have been better for it to have been destroyed.

"We'll follow the basic principle of avoiding battles that can be avoided. We're in enemy territory after all."

"I don't have a shred of hope that we'll be able to avoid battle, though."

"Renya saying things very atypical of Renya...isn't that an omen for bad things to occur?"

Leaving alone Rona, who sighed anxiously, for the time being, Renya grabbed Shion, who tried to get away from him, and put her into a rear naked choke. As soon as he put some strength into his arms while paying attention to not choke her for real, Shion fainted rather quickly.

While returning the limp Shion to Rona, Renya addressed Croire while keeping a wary eye on their surroundings, "How is it? Can you see anything?"

"There's one thing that bothers me."

While letting his eyes cautiously wander around, Renya frowned at Croire's reply. It's because Renya himself hadn't been able to spot anything that would make him worry. The others besides Renya also didn't look like they noticed anything unusual. Only Croire was surveying their vicinity with a serious look.

"Did something happen?"

"I do understand that the demon population is rather low, but..."

If the demon population was as big as the elves', the world would likely fall into their hands with ease. Even if there were as many demons as humans or beastmen, the world would heavily tilt towards being dominated by the demons. And even if the demon population were to be around as big as that of the dragonoids, the world's power balance would be in a far worse state than it was now. It was a common opinion in this world that things hadn't developed into such a direction simply because there were so few demons around. This was also proof of how much of a difference in ability existed between the demons and the other races.

"Okay, so what about it?"

"I think we're making quite some distance with Dra-kun's speed, and yet I haven't spotted a single demon ever since we've entered this country."

Now that he was told so, Renya took another look at the area beneath them. Even things similar to roads were cutting through the very ordinary landscape. If this had been the human continent, it'd be possible to sparsely find travelers or peddlers using those roads, but Renya and the others certainly hadn't seen a single figure walking on the ground ever since they trespassed into the demon country.

The situation would definitely change for them, depending on whether this stemmed from some kind of abnormal phenomenon or because they simply hadn't run into one of the few demons by chance.

"Well, it's already odd that no one has come to intercept us, despite a dragon having invaded their territory."

"As expected, you think so as well, huh?"

The possibility that they hadn't been noticed was quite low, but not zero. Even if they had caused such a stir outside the wall, it didn't necessarily mean that this racket had been passed on to the inside. Although the probability of that to be true was pretty much close to zero.

And even if this abysmally low possibility proved to be correct here, they were still flying on a dragon across demon lands right now. If the demon king didn't notice as much, Renya felt like it'd be no big deal to actually kill him. In such a case it would result in an even further lowering of the

gods' reputation, seeing as they were unable to deal with such a weakling, but that would be a natural outcome.

"We broke the wall while being so noisy and flashy about it, right? If this was the elven country, the entire country would start to deal with it by dispatching armies to intercept right away. Right after the invaders entered, we'd annihilate them with all the firepower we've got. Then again, the elven country doesn't possess enough power to surround its territory with such a huge barrier," said Croire with a laugh, clearly sounding like self-mockery.

Having already woken up, probably because she was nursed by Rona, Shion said with a brooding look, "The humans would...I guess it's questionable how they'd react. Since we aren't as unified as the elves are, just making a decision could take several days."

"Even just the Trident Principality might need a day or two to act in some way." Rona supplemented, but Renya suspected that the humans would still be stuck in meetings to coordinate a common front, long after everything was over.

By the way, since the humans wouldn't be able to pull off something which was impossible for the elves, it was virtually impossible for the humans to erect such a huge barrier around their territory.

"Maybe they're watching how things are going to pan out? What do you think, Az?"

"I wouldn't know of any advantage in taking such an approach, but it might have some logic as their side might not be able to grasp our objective."

"What do you mean?"

"Simply that it would be difficult for the demons to imagine that a human like you would go out of his way to invade the demon territory to search for a demon." Az said with a broad grin, and everyone except for Renya nodded with comprehension dyeing their faces.

Being the only one left out, Renya glared at Az with disappointment written on his face.

"It's not like I'm trying to insult you here. I'm just saying that your actions are far outside the norm for the people of this world. ...I'm actually praising you, so stop it with that hand." Az started to thrash around, grabbing Renya's wrist as Renya's hand had crept upon him from behind to clutch his neck.

Renya should have the clear advantage when it came to muscle strength, but he couldn't quite get his hands around Az's necks, maybe because Az was surprisingly persistent, or because Renya went easy on him. Still, with the option of stopping apparently not existing, Renya somehow managed to slip his wrist out of Az's hold, and tried to place his hand on Az's neck.

One could think that this was the wrong place for them to dick around, but the other members didn't even try to stop the two, and merely watched the two men grapple with amused looks. Dra-kun, who experienced such an uproar on his back, secretly spat out a fire breath that could be counted as a sigh while not stopping to be wary of their surroundings.