

Chapter 1 - It seems We Spotted Something Right Away

"Renya, just what is that?"

The one noticing the abnormality was Croire, the only who didn't pay any heed to the uproar around her.

In the end, Renya won the contest of strength against Az. Although he put up a lot of resistance, Az quickly fainted after Renya firmly seized and put the screws on him. At present Liaris was desperately nursing him.

Almost all of the others wondered whether it was really alright for the dragoon to let go of her dragon's reins, and fully concentrate on the care of her lover, but since neither she nor Dra-kun seemed to mind, no one mentioned anything.

If you gave this a lovely and beautiful description, you could say both didn't need any reins or words as they were connected by deep bonds. However, if you were to be blunt about it, one could ask whether Liaris' presence was actually necessary at all.

'As expected, officially her presence is indispensable for situations where it becomes necessary to pass on Dra-kun's words to someone, huh?' Renya judged. Just as he was curiously looking at Liaris, who was bedding Az on her lap, while harboring such thoughts, Croire's voice pulled his attention back to reality.

"Even if you ask me, what do you mean with 'that'?"

The elves's racial trait was an exceptionally good hearing ability. It was considered to stem from their lives mostly taking place in forests. And in proportion to their good hearing, elves also possessed good eyesight. The most plausible theory about the elves' eyesight was that it had developed alongside their hearing, because it'd be pointless to be able to just hear something without being able to actually see it.

According to Croire, the elves connected to the royal family had especially good hearing and eyesight even among the elves, apparently because of their bloodline.

Renya had quite a bit of confidence in his own ears and eyes, but it was impossible for him to match Croire who appeared to have very fine senses even for an elf. The ones who might give Croire a run for her money were Frau, who boasted abilities outside any norm, and Dra-kun, whose race was in a different league altogether. However, seemingly not wanting to interrupt Croire unnecessarily, both of them didn't show much of a reaction to Croire's remark.

And given that Shion and Rona had decided to see where this was heading from the very start, only Renya was left as conversation partner.

"You can't see it, Renya? I mean 'that', look, it's just over there!" Croire appealed while raising her voice.

Renya strained his eyes, looking in the direction of her finger, but he couldn't find anything that

would justify Croire making such a big deal out of it. All he could perceive was Croire pointing in a slightly different direction from Dra-kun's flight path.

"It looks like something similar to a settlement, but smoke is rising over there." Croire explains to Renya who was starting to get irritated over his inability to see it for himself.

Carefully scrutinizing her words, he tilted his head in confusion as he couldn't find anything unusual in what she was saying. A settlement meant that people, demons, or something similar would live there. If someone were to live there, it'd be only natural for them to cook. He couldn't spot any abnormality in the fact of smoke rising from there.

The silly idea that elves might never have seen cooking smoke since they were living in forests crossed Renya's mind. However, there was no way for such an idiocy to be true. And even if it was, it'd have been impossible for Croire to not have seen cooking smoke since she had been living in Klinge for quite some time now.

"Smoke rising at a place where people live isn't anything unusual, is it?" Renya asked back in a bewildered manner while himself feeling that it was weird for him to become so worried about her insisting on something natural as being strange.

However, Croire shook her head, "It's not that kind of smoke. Umm...ah! Flames are blazing up!"

Croire, who had been fretting over the difference in eyesight between elves and humans, suddenly cried out in surprise. It seemed like the things she was talking about were currently occurring within her own visual field, but none of the human party members could confirm what she was saying.

"What are we going to do, Renya?"

As Shion asked him about his instructions, Renya started to ponder. Their goal on this trip was to find and secure Emil. Everything else was of no interest. He might get scolded if anyone heard his thoughts, but at present even the demon king didn't matter to Renya. Following that train of thought, it seemed to be the most reasonable choice to ignore the settlement and proceed onwards.

'However,' Renya thought, 'even if we plunge into it blindly, I feel like it'll work out one way or the other anyway. Besides, isn't it necessary to examine things now that we went out of our way to come to the demon country?'

"Dra-kun, Dra-kun," Renya called out to Dra-kun while slapping the back of Dra-kun with his hand.

Normally he should talk to him through Liaris, but she was currently absorbed in nursing Az, and didn't look like she had heard any of their words just now.

"I'd be sorry to interrupt your mistress in the middle of her business, so I'm asking you directly. Could I have you make a little side trip?"

Considering it normally, a mount with a master wouldn't ignore its master and listen to the orders of others. Much less so, if the mount were to be an intelligent dragon.

Renya had asked while expecting that his request would only have a chance of 20% to get accepted.

However, Dra-kun only looked back, glancing at Renya, roared powerlessly to show his reluctant compliance with the request, and slowly changed his flight direction according to where Croire's finger was pointing.

Renya couldn't really believe that any dragoon would be really fine with this, but since it was more convenient like this for him right now, Renya refrained from making any retorts.

"Eh? Huh? Dra-kun?" Seemingly having noticed that her dragon had begun to change its flight direction, as might be expected of a dragoon, Liaris was puzzled, but after sinking into silence for a short while, she agreed with a tone that sounded somewhat resigned, "Ah, if it's Renya-san's request, we've got no choice, I guess."

"No choice...?"

"You know, so far as it goes, you guys are the officially strongest combat force of the Trident Principality," were the words on the tip of Rona's tongue, almost slipping out.

That assessment had the attribute 'officially' attached to it. If you excluded that attribute, it was quite possible at the moment for Dra-kun's combat force to fall behind Rona's, depending on the situation and conditions. And yet it was very difficult to officially declare that the saint was stronger than a dragon if it came down to a showdown of single blows. It was also extremely difficult to talk about if one considered the mental image it'd produce. At the very least it was something that would never leave Rona's mouth.

Even while Rona was brooding over such matters, Dra-kun changed his flight path, heading towards the settlement indicated by Croire.

Thanks to the distance to their new target shrinking down after some time, Renya could also spot something like a settlement with his own eyes. That, which looked like a town when comparing its scale to what you'd find in human lands at the same scale, had definitely black smoke rising, just as Croire had mentioned.

"It doesn't really look like they are cooking something, does it?"

"Since the smoke is black...probably not."

"Since Croire mentioned flames blazing up, wouldn't it be some kind of conflagration?"

"Yeah, so?"

Renya was confused by Rona's guess. After all, the smoke, visible in the distance, gradually gained in thickness and force.

"They're demons right? I'd imagine that they can quickly put out such a fire with sorcery if needed?"

Quite a few spells usable for fire fighting existed. And even assuming that the fire wouldn't be controllable with sorcery, there were still plenty of ways to prevent a fire from spreading, Renya believed.

"Going by its appearance, it somehow looks like a fire that has been left to burn."

"...I can't see any people trying to extinguish it."

As expected of Croire who had better eyes than any of the humans present, she was apparently able to even see the situation on-site by now. It was just a tiny bit, but a faint trembling had crept into her voice, apparently because she understood just how abnormal the situation was.

"Even though it's burning so brightly, I can't see any people trying to escape or fight the fire."

"That sounds a bit too silly, doesn't it?" Az said, obviously unable to believe what he heard, while getting up from Liaris' lap.

When Az noticed how Renya looked at him with a gaze that implicitly indicated that Az sure understood the situation well despite having recovered consciousness just moments ago, Az nonchalantly but quickly stared in the far distance, trying to avoid Renya's eyes. That reaction in itself already served as confirmation of the doubt harbored by Renya, and it also resulted in the other members somewhat being able to grasp the situation, but because of his panic reaction, Az didn't realize that Renya had already noticed what was going on.

"Well, since it'd be troublesome if a living space were to burn down, even if it's that of demons, there's no way that they could ignore a fire."

"Still, according to Croire, no one is rushing over to extinguish it, nor is anyone running away from it."

"Wouldn't that simply mean that no one is there?" Shion mumbled under her breath.

It was an answer all of them had somewhat felt to be a possibility, and one they didn't really want to put in words as they didn't want to consider the implications.

"Huh? Did I say anything weird?"

"In case Shion-ane-sama's thinking proves to be correct, I can only think of two patterns ~nano."

While all of them sank into silence with frowns on their faces, Frau raised two fingers of her right hand.

"First, a fire broke out in a town that was uninhabited to begin with for some reason." Frau lowered one finger. "In that case, the question would be how the fire actually started ~no. The best outcome here would be a natural fire, but the chances for that are rather slim ~nano."

Reluctantly, Frau lowered the other finger, "Second, it was a normal town inhabited by people ~no."

"Eh?"

"That would be the truly nasty case ~no. In short, it'd indicate that all the residents disappeared for some reason within a time period where the town hasn't burned down completely while a fire was

still raging ~nano. Since that's definitely nothing that would happen naturally, it means that something, which erased all the residents, is in the vicinity of that town ~nano."

Shion envisioned the figure of something she somehow didn't quite understand herself. That figure suddenly appeared one day, somewhere in a town that had been peaceful until then. And then the demons, who should surpass humans by leaps and bounds if only speaking of their abilities, were attacked from below, behind and the front, being soundlessly annihilated by getting dragged into the ground, swallowed, and devoured. All that was left in the end was a lifeless, empty town.

"R-Renyaaa..."

"Come to think of it, Shion, you were really bad with ghost stories, weren't you...?"

Renya scratched his head with a troubled look as Shion clung to the hem of his clothes with teary eyes. The grip strength and physical power of Shion, which hadn't been so strong before, had recently reached a level you couldn't scoff at all. For Shion, who hated ghosts, the current situation of them heading to a town that might have something like that prowling within posed enough of a reason for her to completely lose her calm.

"Let's not go there, Renyaaa! It's a town full of ghosts! You can't cut ghosts down!"

"Let go of me, Shion!? Don't shake me! You're going to tear my clothes...hey, don't cling! It's not said that it's ghosts yet...it might be some kind of monster you can only find in the demon country, an outbreak of slimes, or some other reason... My neck! Don't pull on my neck! It's going to break! You're suffocating me!"

Because Shion tried to cling to Renya while making full use of her brute strength, he tried to somehow get away from her as he felt danger to his life.

Rona, who had been sitting next to Shion, had sensed the danger before the situation escalated, and had crawled on all fours along Dra-kun's back in order to distance herself from Shion.

On the other hand, Frau, who had been sitting on her usual spot between Renya's legs, was dragged and jostled around by their rampaging, but as she apparently intended to defend her place at any cost, she didn't show any intention to escape despite looking annoyed.

Shion put strength in her slender arms, which would make anyone wonder just where all that strength could be hidden, twining them around Renya's neck so as to not be shaken off while tightly pressing her eyes shut. Renya started to gradually look pale as he was strangled by Shion.

While sighing over a second uproar taking place on his back, wishing that they'd finally give it a rest with all the racket, Dra-kun kept flying towards the apparently deserted town just as he had been asked to, since no one stopped him from doing so.

