

Chapter 2 - Story 26: Head Priestess

"Hoh, so this is the sacred land Rollo, huh...?"

Souma raised his voice in admiration at the place ahead of Shyemul's finger.

The zoan's sacred land is a huge, crimson rocky mountain.

Its maximum width is around 190 melt, and its height is around 82 melt. It's one big rock.

However, what's worthy of mention is not its size.

If you look around the world, you will find several huge monoliths boasting sizes several times as big as the sacred land Rollo. What astonished people about Rollo was its shape.

If you tried to express it in words, the best might be the image of a round whole cake placed on the large plate called plains. Also, the famous adventurer of modern times, Henry Goss has illustrated it with the term: "Fossil of Yggdrasil's Stump."

If you look down on it from straight above, it has a shape close to a perfect circle. And its sides are almost vertical to the ground. Rollo truly has a form similar to a whole cake or a stump.

Rollo's true identity is that of a volcanic plug, made out of basalt and located on the lava vent of a volcano that existed in distant, ancient times. The mountain vanished after being whittled down over a long time by the erosion through wind and rain, but Rollo, which was made out of hard basalt, has kept its shape.

It's really a miraculous shaping produced by the coincidences of nature.

Furthermore, this Rollo contains a lot of iron. Through oxidation, the rock has become crimson. The sight of it towering over the plains, which are covered by fresh, green grass during summer, and being dyed in a vibrant crimson thanks to the madder red evening sun stirs the heart of anyone who sees it.

One can easily agree with the ancient zoan having turned Rollo into a sacred place.

And now zoan tents, which were decorated with multicolored embroideries as if blessing the surroundings of the mysterious, huge rock Rollo, filled the vicinity all around it.

"There are quite a few impatient fellows, aren't there?"

Zurgu says in astonishment, seeing the scenery of many zoan having already gathered even though there are still many days until the grand festival Borollo. At that Garam replies with a bitter smile,

"That's just natural. It's the first time in 30 years for the Borollo to be held. Many zoan only know of it from the stories they heard from their ancestors."

Even Garam and Zurgu feel a strong longing for the Borollo which they never experienced since their birth. They couldn't help but feel deeply emotional that they had reached a point where they could hold the Borollo.

However, they couldn't stay just deeply moved.

Garam and Zurgu had everyone stop at a distance.

Beyond this place it's Rollo's backyard. If they suddenly brought along dwarves and a wagon pulled by a huge creature the zoan have never seen before, it would very likely trigger a pointless uproar. Having judged so, the two first dispatched warriors to give a forewarning, and then walked towards the sacred land ahead of the others to check the security after having stopped the dwarves and wagon on the spot.

And then, once they come close to the outer ring of tents surrounding Rollo, they discovered a crowd big enough that they couldn't count them, waiting for them.

'Due to the unfamiliar wagon and dwarves, the zoan have been more cautious than expected.

Thinking so, the two strengthened their alertness, as it would be best to avoid groups that act rudely. And, once they reached a distance where they could be beckoned by the crowd, both stopped.

"I am the clan chief of the Claw Clan, one of the 12 zoan clans, Zurgu, son of Binaga! My nickname is 《Mad Claw》!"

First Zurgu gave his name.

"I am the clan chief of the Fang Clan, one of the 12 zoan clans, Garam, son of Galguss! My nickname is 《Ferocious Fang》!"

Next Garam introduced himself and then yelled,

"We are visiting the sacred land Rollo upon the invitation of the Head Priestess! Make way for us!"

And then both glare at the crowd, filling their whole bodies with the spirit of "This won't end nicely for you if you intend to act up!"

However, the crowd gave such loud cheers that they even drowned out Garam's very loud voice.

"Ooh! It's 《Ferocious Fang》 and 《Mad Claw》!"

"It's the arrival of the plains' two heroes!"

"The Beast God's honor to the Great Clan Chief, 《Ferocious Fang》!"

With those yells as start, the crowd rushed towards the two, completely engulfing them. While the men cheer and raise their fists overhead, the children touch them all over. And the mothers, who hold their infants in their arms, hold out their babies asking them, "Please hold this child in your arms by all means." The two hold one baby after the other while being confused.

"Jeez, just what are those two doing...?"

Even though she wanted to grant Souma, who was exhausted from the long journey, a rest as fast as possible, Shyemul saw in the far distance that Garam and Zurgu weren't making any progress at all. She clicked her tongue once and then ran towards the two who were being pushed around.

"Hey! Open the way! Don't you see that we can't get through!?"

Shyemul undauntedly shouts, despite the loud noise caused by the crowd. Once she does, they gradually quieted down after noticing Shyemul. The zoan became quiet like an ebbing tide, but in exchange Shyemul sensed a swelling, silent zeal.

"I-Idiot! Don't show up here!"

Garam, who finally realized that Shyemul had come due to the surroundings having calmed down, becomes all flustered.

However, Garam's warning was too late.

"It's the Divine Daughter~!"

Starting with that scream, even crazier yells than before with Garam and Zurgu well up from within the crowd.

"Eh? Huh? W-What!?"

In front of the perplexed Shyemul men raise delighted cheers and women cry tears of gratitude. Not only that. One sensitive young girl after the other faints, overcome with emotions. Deeply religious old people immediately begin worshipping Shyemul on both knees.

"This is bad.

Thinking so, Shyemul quickly turned on her heels, became four-footed and escaped towards the covered wagon with Souma.

But, it's not a crowd that will be appeased by that.

It's the appearance of not only the two great warriors, who recovered the plains which was the dearest wish for the zoan of the plains for the last 30 years, but also the great Beast God's Divine Daughter whom they can meet only rarely. By now they had already lost control over themselves due to their excessive excitement. The crowd began to chase after Shyemul with bloodshot eyes. Later on Shyemul will describe the situation at this time as follows:

"Their eyes were those of starved wolves."

Shyemul, who jumped onto the wagon, tightly grasps the canopy with her hands behind her back and closes it. Immediately afterwards the wagon is surrounded by an agitated mob. The accompanying zoan warriors hurriedly form a wall to protect the wagon, but it seems as if there will be a breakthrough anytime soon. The warriors shout, trying to soothe the excited mob, but in front of their loud, repetitive calling of Shyemul's name in order to snatch a glance at her, it's bound to fail.

"You're really popular, Shyemul!"

Souma yelled towards Shyemul while plugging his ears due to the unbroken, loud shouts. The mob surrounding the wagon screamed so loudly that he had to do so.

"T-This is no time for joking. Do these guys intend to eat me after catching me?!"

Shyemul, who firmly overlaps the canopy with her hands, had all her fur stand on end.



That turmoil was somehow suppressed by the Eye Clan's warriors who rushed over with great haste, having been caught off guard.

"When we tried to open a path for your arrival, the news of your visit spread like wildfire instead, resulting in this kind of uproar. We are truly sorry for that."

Being guided by the Eye Clan warriors after an earnest apology, Souma's wagon was let through until next to Rollo. The area close to Rollo had been reserved for the important people like the clan chiefs and the priestesses. Due to the division, the crowd couldn't reach this place either. Thanks to that Souma's group took a breath of relief at last.

"Still, I was surprised."

Even though Garam is known for his valor, he was scared out of his wits by the previous wild enthusiasm of the crowd. Zurgu strongly agrees with "You can say that loudly" as well.

"I had my hair pulled out by several people."

Since a while Zugur was touching his body all over, seemingly feeling prickling pain from the spots where his hair had been pulled out by zoan who want a share of the great hero's good luck.

"I'm terribly sorry that it's so quickly after your arrival, but the Head Priestess has been awaiting you on top of Rollo. —But, Rollo is the zoan's sacred land. The ones allowed to go up there are 《Ferocious Fang》, 《Mad Claw》 and the Divine Daughter. And, the human who will become the Clan King."

Once they conveyed the warrior's words to Dvalin and Jahangil, Dvalin briefly returned, "I don't mind," and Jahangil only yawned, obviously not interested. Souma, who asked the two to move the cart and the wagon to the place allocated to them together with the other dwarves, is finally guided towards the mountain path leading to Rollo's summit .

"We are going to ascend this...?"

It's understandable that Souma verified the fact in such way, obviously wishing to be spared from that.

What Souma saw at the entrance of the mountain path were wood stakes that had been driven into Rollo's side wall, which might as well be called precipitous cliff for the most part, in the shape of a stairway by making sure for them to draw a spiral. In short, it was a mountain path in name only. Of course there's no handrail. If a wooden stake breaks in worst case or incase one falls due to being sent flying by the wind, that will spell their end.

Once he looks up, the summit is in the far distance. If you speak of a height of 82 meters, it's the height of a building with 25-30 floors in modern Japan. Since he has to climb such a place with his foothold only being such logs, it's natural for Souma to falter.

"Soma, I'm behind you. Hurry up and climb."

Souma, who was pestered by Shyemul, looks over his shoulder with a face that's close to crying. Once he did, Shyemul was stunned by his misery.

"Thanks to your blessing you don't have to worry about the foothold breaking, so isn't that great?"

'No, that ill-natured goddess will calmly say, "You don't call it breaking as long as the log simply falls out."

Although he thought that, he didn't voice it out. Souma began to ascend Rollo while on the verge of tears.

"I have been awaiting you, 《Ferocious Fang》, 《Mad Claw》, 《Noble Fang》, and Lord Soma."

The one who greeted Souma and the others, who finally stood atop Rollo after taking half a toki

since beginning the ascent, was Shunpa, the Head Priestess' younger sister. Shunpa lets a chuckle slip out due to Souma being unable to answer as he's breathing heavily with both hands placed on the ground due his fatigue and nervousness.

"Are you alright? Today the wind is actually weak, allowing for an easy climb."

With the wind howling in his ears even now, Souma wanted to complain, "Just how is this supposed to be weak?", but he simply didn't have the energy for that.

Being urged by Shyemul with "Get a grip already," Souma stood up at last, and started walking after asking Shunpa to guide them to the Head Priestess.

Rollo's summit was flat as if it had been carefully planed by the hands of people. It's surface is red, bare rock with no plants, except for a few lichens, as taking root appears to be impossible thanks to the strong wind.

While surveying that summit, Souma asked Shunpa as she was walking at the head,

"What kind of person is Lady Head Priestess?"

Even after asking Shyemul and the other zoan, there was no one who personally knows the Head Priestess since she's usually secluding herself in the Eye Clan's sacred land. As he was going to meet her very soon, Souma wanted any background information he could get a hold of, but upon that question Shunpa suddenly stopped.

"...Come to think of it, for all of you it's the first time to meet Lady Head Priestess, isn't it?"

Due to her somewhat odd way of speaking, Souma exchanges looks with Shyemul.

While carefully choosing her words after beginning to walk once again, Shunpa started to talk.

"Lady Head Priestess is someone you can't describe with words at all. You can call her bold, oblivious to the worries of others, or rather egoistic..."

'Somehow the used words are rapidly becoming worse.

"All of you must not be bedazzled by the illusion of her position as Head Priestess. Her position and her character don't conform with each other at all. I have troubles understanding why a person like her had been appointed as successor by the previous Head Priestess."

Souma and the others become uneasy, sensing the agitation in Shunpa's way of speaking.

'Just what kind of person is this Head Priestess?

While harboring such a worry, Souma's group was guided to the eastern tip of Rollo. Over there a huge, pillar of the ancestor spirits which had carvings added to it while using a round, big tree that had been cut and brought over from the mountains. At the very top of the pillar the engraved face of the Beast God seems to be lording over Souma and the others from far above.

A large tent had been erected at the base of the pillar. Resplendent embroidery had been applied to the tent, which was as big as the tent of the clan chief where Garam lives in the Fang Clan's village.

One can easily guess that it's being used as place for rituals rather than as living quarters.

Once Shunpa coughed in front of the two woolen sheets hanging at the tent's entrance, a listless, female voice asking, "Who's there?", could be heard from within.

"The two clan chiefs of the Fang Clan and the Claw Clan, the great Beast God's Divine Daughter

«Noble Fang» and the Divine Son of that goddess, who will become the Clan King, have come visiting."

"...Ah, I waited for them. Send them in."

Sunpa claps her hands twice upon that answer, and after bowing to the priestesses standing guard on both sides of the tent's entrance, she opens the sheets hiding the entrance to the left and right. Inside the tent, which was visible when looking past the sides of Shunpa, an altar carrying fruits, hunted cow and rabbit meat as offers had been set up, and on the other side a wooden figure modeled after the Beast God had been enshrined.

And, in front of the altar a single zoan woman, whose own fur was directly decorated with countless ornaments that used jewels, animal fangs and bones, is slovenly laying on top of a sheet that covered the surface.

'Since she's Shunpa's older sister, she is very likely approaching her forties.' Given that she's the sister of the calm, intellectual Shunpa and also called leader of the priestesses, Souma harbored the image of the Head Priestess being a middle-aged lady.

However, after actually seeing her, Souma realized that she is a zoan woman with a bewitching aura that makes him, who even now can't differentiate a zoan's gender by just their face, feel something akin to mature sex appeal.

With the ornaments all over her body jingling, the Head Priestess exhaled tobacco smoke, which she had inhaled from a pipe that closely resembled a Japanese smoking pipe, through her pursed lips.

"You did well to come here. —I just finished the dance of offering. Excuse me for this getup."

However, in the next instant Shunpa's expression changes and she shouts,

"Lady Head Priestess! Just what are you wearing in front of important guests!?"

Souma was startled by Shunpa, who always gives off a composed aura, raising her voice.

However, as Souma is baffled, not understanding why Shunpa is so flustered, Shyemul suddenly puts his head between her hands from behind, and makes it forcibly turn sideways.

Souma was surprised, wondering what's going on, but seeing Garam and Zurgu averting their faces in embarrassment, he finally understands.

Thanks to the fur it was hard to perceive for Souma, a human, but the Head Priestess' current appearance is equal to being nude for the zoan.

"Everybody, prepare the Lady Head Priestess' clothing at once!"

Due to Shunpa's yelling, the priestesses that were on standby in the vicinity hurriedly move into action.

"Eh~. Once there's another ritual, I will become nude again anyway. Isn't it fine like this? Besides, clothes are heavy and difficult to move in..."

"Lady Head Priestess, please shut up!"

While listening to the exchange that was just like the conversation between a sulking child and its mother, who reprimands the child for its prank, behind them, Souma's group is greatly perplexed

how to react to this.

After a while they heard Shunpa clearing her throat with a cough.

"We are very sorry for showing you such very unsightly scene. I shall introduce you to Lady Head Priestess anew."

Once Souma and the others turned around again upon her words, the Head Priestess, who's once again being threatened by Shunpa baring her fangs after she teased her with "Just where's my nude body unsightly?", sat there fully dressed up.

Contrary to the white attires of the other priestesses, the Head Priestess wears a garment with detailed embroideries applied with red strings. What's covering her head is not a hood, but a huge, round hat similar to a goldfish bowl or the helmet of an astronaut. The hat, which was fully covered with red strings like her garment, is decorated with golden and silver chains, jewels resembling agate and lapis lazuli, and a bird feather that was stabbed into it.

The Head Priestess welcomes them by spreading both arms widely, causing the decorations to jangle.

"I'm the Head Priestess. I'm sorry, but I have discarded my worldly name. Please call me Head Priestess or Great Priestess."