

## **Chapter 349 - Gramps Ton and his Friends + Blood Stench**

There are all kinds of responses from Grasping Perception, but...I can't feel any magic sources of huge monsters. Still, the smell of blood is fairly dense.

Then again, it's different from <Inhalation of Odor Technique>. I sense a blood pulse and smell a rich blood stench. A strong smell of sulfur also hangs in the air, but is there a hot spring around here or something?

It's kinda impossible for the river to be a hot spring, but under the current circumstances, I don't really feel like leisurely searching for a hot spring to take a bath.

...Okay, in this situation I'm going to judge the blood stench as dangerous. I think we should avoid taking a rest right now. Things are different from the time when I was traveling with Rollodeen and Higlia. If I had only experienced adventurers with me, I might have had the leeway to enjoy working as a normal adventurer while exploring things, regardless of some smell or not, until we've reached Quiche's village.

At that point I look at the people I've brought with us when Arry and Taack...exhaustion is written on their faces.

An ugly human man who looks like he'd commit any debauchery he could, a good-natured old man, a fat elven woman with plenty of red pimples on her face, a karamnian with a leech-like tongue, a thin human girl resembling the past Rubia, a human boy or girl with one leg and arm covered in bandages all over, an old human lady wearing Indian-styled clothes endowed with mana, and all kinds of other men and women from various races.

To be blunt, I don't have any duty to rescue all these people. But, now that I did save them, I'll do the least necessary work to keep them alive. That's also why I'll get Rollodeen to transform into her Huge Lion form, and use her to carry all of them to Hekatrail or Quiche's village which is on the way.

As I'm considering those two options, I politely explain to everyone, "...Everyone, proceeding any further as happily as going on a walk comes to an end here. In other words, I'm thinking about directly taking you to Hekatrail or a village that's being reclaimed by a friend of mine in the Sea of Trees. Which do you prefer?"

In response, an old man who likes nuts, bites in a nut while saying, "...Now then, a thought is a book of hundred lines. Your concern is appreciated, but the place where we live is the interior of the Sea of Trees where the illusionary currymino nuts rain from the trees like a waterfall, you know? Bringing us to a city...is a crazy idea, I think."

Countless creases run across his head, and a long beard grows from the tip of his slender jaw.

"...I agree with Cooking Master Ton, known for mumbling enigmatic things each and every time. Lad, you have my thanks for having rescued and protected us. But, bringing us directly to Hekatrail from here? You do realize that we're deep in the Sea of Trees, right? How are you going to bring us to the city?"

A middle-aged karamnian asks something very reasonable. Or rather, that gramps wasn't a nut otaku who likes knowing all kinds of stuff?

While thinking that there's apparently all kinds of scaly skins, I laugh shortly, and then look at Rollodeen who's been listening to my words in front of me. She's sitting there as a black panther, totally still like a doll. Even though her posture betrays her vigilance, she's properly listening to my words that are echoing throughout the forest.

However, she's being pranked by Arry who tickles her nose with a twig. Rollodeen looks like she's about to sneeze any moment... But, without minding the meddling, she stares at me.

"...Don't worry. It's not like my head got messed up by the forest's energy, some phytoncides, or mysterious scales of the Death Butterfly people. My partner——" Timing it, I extend my arm, and point a finger Rollodeen.

"——Fufu, you mean Rollo-chan?"

Arry shifts from the twig in her hand to the rabbit tail, and uses the fluffy material to tease Rollodeen's nose once more while asking me. The amulet left behind by Azora as a cat teaser...she's a truly mischievous girly.

"...Correct." I nod at Arry while putting a smile on my lips.

Rollodeen still hasn't sneezed. She's keeping up a cool beast face. Is she staying cautious of the blood stench? At least it doesn't look like she minds Arry messing around.

Just when I think that I should go on while looking at Rollodeen's dignified appearance, Arry speaks up, muttering with a somewhat disappointed voice, "I wanna have the cat powder Shuuya-anchan is carrying around. I want to see Rollo-chan rolling around while purring...", but I pretend to not have heard her.

Anyway, I guess I'll continue speaking to everyone.

"...Right now Rollodeen looks like a black panther. But...as a matter of fact, she can also transform into a form similar to a griffon or dragon. And it's also possible for her to grow out wings, or in short, Rollo can fly. It's because she's a true divine beast. That's why I planned to have all of you get on her back to carry you out of here."

A short break follows my words. And then everyone's eyes focus on Rollodeen while blinking in wonder.

"...Ooohh——", that exclamation of astonishment reverberates into the Sea of Trees.

"——If that's true, it's really amazing."

"If an-chan is the one saying it, it's probably true."

A part of the rescued people mutters amongst themselves, repeatedly mentioning a divine beast, and

then they raise their voices in admiration.

As of yet, Rollodeen plays innocent, looking indifferent while playing around by swinging her tail. She doesn't transform, though.

Some of the people are also scared as if they got afraid after hearing the term 'divine beast.' On the other hand, Higlia is overjoyed. She looks awfully proud. While folding her arms in front of her bulging breastplate, she nods her head with a determined expression as if saying that it's only to be expected.

Once I look at her, she notices my stare, glances my way, accompanying it with a pleasant smile. And then she averts her eyes in embarrassment, before turning her blue eyes my way again.

Is some kind of female psychology in the works here? No clue, but she sure is a busy fellow.

Suddenly, a tall human man asks, "...Hekatrail, eh? Can we live in such a huge city after going there all of a sudden?"

"Even if you ask me..."

I've got no connections in Hekatrail, so the most I can do is to introduce them to dark guild work...

"...I've been cultivating a field in the village. I'm a guy who can't do anything but that. Something like finding work in a big city is kinda asking too much."

"I've been cutting wood. It's because it was a village where a small number of lumberjacks lived and where you could occasionally catch sight of an orc, goblin, tandel aborigine, or a monster. But...even the village got completely razed to the ground by the vampires..."

"I'm the same as Mauric and Ebe. The villagers of Todelfell all became vampire food."

I guess all of them come from different places.

"Aren't there any people hailing from the same village here?" I try asking.

"No. The ones who have survived are...only people whose race and village name we don't know."

It's a male dwarf with conspicuous wrinkles who agrees with the human farmer Mauric and the lumberjack Ebe. He must be a farmer since something like seed bags are attached to his waistband. I suppose this seed-loving dwarf is similar to Mauric.

"Setting that aside, all of us are fellow inmates of the same jail, right?" Mauric blurts out as if reacting to some butt-loving woman.

It's great that Helme isn't around.

"You're right. We're comrades who've spent our time together in the same cell. I'd like to do my share for the sake of the nameless adults and children who died. However, even if I say so..."

"Riedel, how about simply rejoicing that your blood hasn't been sucked out?"

"Paru...you've got a point. But, it's not like I've got the strength as I had when I was still a lively child like Arry or Taack....I can't handle a needle either, you know? Only gathering small straw...I can't do any proper reed cutting like a man either...that's why I'm worried. Even if I can go to Hekatrail as he says, I'll only end up a vagabond in the New Town I've heard about in rumors, or if I'm lucky, spend the rest of my life as prostitute..."

Riedel is the thin girl that entered my field of view earlier. But she's right, she doesn't look like she's suited for being a tailor. She got an atmosphere as if she'd ask, "Is money necessary to take lessons?", even if I got her employed at a tailor in Hekatrail.

Everyone seems uneasy about living in Hekatrail. Then it'd be best to bring all of them to Quiche's village, wouldn't it?

"If you slide out, you live; if you go in, you die...as long as people keep living, there'll be times where they will move to dangerous places while moving around..." The nut-lover mutters something philosophical after hearing Riedel's lamentation.

"...Gramps Ton, we've heard plenty of that in the cell already, so give it a rest with the incomprehensible stuff." Mauric glares at Gramps Ton while frowning.

Still, I wonder, just who's Gramps Ton? That's nothing an ordinary person would ever say.

"...What, after hearing Riedel's words, I just felt like saying that body and mind are one." He tosses up an acorn nut in front of himself, catching it with his mouth.

His outward appearance suggests that he's simply a nut-loving, old gramps.

"...Don't state the obvious."

"Hmm, rather than that, Mauric, did you express your thanks to our great benefactor?"

"I did."

Being told so by Gramps Ton, Mauric turns his eyes towards me.

"Let me say it once more. Thank you from the bottom of my heart..." Gramps Ton follows Mauric's eyes and bows his head at me while thanking me.

It's kinda embarrassing.

"...No, it's fine. No need to thank me so much."

"You're a great, strong warrior...completely different to Mauric and Riedel."

"Whaa~? Well, you're not wrong about it..."

"Gramps Ton..."

Both are unhappy about Gramps Ton comparing them with me.

"Basket on top, shame at the bottom...all people have blood rush to their face when they suffer disgrace. Don't lose sight of yourself. Look at the wall and yourself. Turn the wall into a mirror and look at yourself. Just be happy to have been saved in good health. We got saved in this chaotic world...equal to darkness, just like the stars twinkling in the night sky, right?"

"What are you trying to tell us, Gramps Ton...? In short, you're saying you can eat tasty nuts?"

"...A whirlpool is the place where good fortune comes from, good fortune is the hiding place of whirlpools..."

"...Gramps Ton, we're already out of the jail. Didn't the whirlpool turn into good fortune?"

Mauric's statement follows after he interprets Gramps Ton's words like that. But, who's that Gramps Ton anyway?

While looking at everyone, I speak up, "...I'm sorry to disturb you while you're talking, but I've been thinking about heading to the pioneer villages run by my friend Quiche. How about that?"

"Village Chief Quiche? I've never heard about a pioneer village. Are they going to accept beings like us over there?"

Beings, huh? The one asking is the old dwarf. He places a hand on a seed bag hanging at his waist. I don't feel mana or anything like that from the bag, but...maybe it contains some important seeds?

Also, I don't think he needs to abase himself that much. But, as for heading for Quiche's village...I still haven't explained all these people to her. Of course it can't be helped since it's a sudden development, but...I simply didn't think about anything else but saving Arry and Taack.

"...Actually, I haven't talked to the village chief about anything but saving the children. We haven't talked about you people at all. But, either way, I'll head over to Quiche's village, okay?"

"How pushy." The old dwarf says with a grim look.

But, I can tell that he's laughing.

"That's only natural. I promised Quiche that I'd rescue Arry and Taack, you see? I'll keep that promise."

"She your woman then?"

"She's my friend. I don't know...whether my friend Quiche is going to take you in. Thus, please do your best in negotiating with her about the necessities of life."

It may sound cold-hearted, but this is as much as I can do for them.

"Shuuya-an-chan, it'll be alright." Taack raises his hand.

"Will it?" I ask.

"Yep. Arry and I, no, in reality it's Quiche who leads us, have been hunting the aborigines living in Gendal of the **【Rose Forest】**."

"Yeah! We also hunt maaany of the goblins living in the area from the **【Horse Cliff Rock】** and the **【Plemos Basin】** to close to the pretty **【Crystal Pond】**!" Arry cheerfully adds to Taack's comment.

"Arry is quite decent at killing goblins. The goblins have nests over there, and we're also hunting them as a prayer to Water Spider-sama. That's why we've already gathered all kinds of materials and ingredients at the village!"

"Taack is right! Cydale has nuts, and there's lots of space to build houses. It's just there's no houses as we have only one adult with us."

Arry and Taack explain happily. Though I don't know any Water Spiders.

In other words, they want to say that Quiche is going to accept these people, right? Well, it's a bit vague, but for some reason or another I've been thinking that she might be willing to take them in.

"Also, there's lots of mysterious holes below. It looks like there were big homes there in the past. It's a place heading underground, but Quiche told us to not go in there."

"Yep, yep. We've got many caves that make weird sounds. Taack likes adventures, so he wanted to go in there, but Quiche told him that's absolutely forbidden to do so, scolding him with a very angry look. She mentioned something about her ancestors, a Befasomething empire, and some lost altar or similar."

"Ya, it was my first time to see Quiche so angry." Taack supplements while looking slightly scared.

Underground? Empire? The elven empire? Hmm, I guess I won't be able to get Quiche to tell me the details... An expression he's seen for the first time? Like the one when she looked at the starry sky?

"...But, Quiche-onee-chan is a gentle person who accepted us as well. So she should happily accept all of you as well."

As I hear Arry's statement, I recall Quiche with her nice hair ornament. I feel like she's appeared in front of me with her jade green hair and eyes.

I smile, and say to Arry, "...You're right, it's because it's Quiche we're talking about here."

"Yes! Quiche-onee-chan always says that personnel is important. Me as well... It's not just the strong Nemus and Moga, but I also like the good friends Riedel and Gramps Paru. I also like Gramps Ton's talk about nut gathering, cooking, and all kinds of things! I also love Granny Bang's story about scary spells! I love all of those who got captured with us! So, I'm sure it'll be alright!" Arry says full of confidence.

The other people all have gentle looks as they listen to Arry's words. The smile and brightness befitting her might have given hope and salvation to those people inside the jail. They've all relaxed a bit.

And then the scenery of Quiche's village crosses my mind. I recall the old, stone stairway-like construction leading high up to a place where rocks similar to tombstones are lined up. It's an open land with trees sticking out at the sides. I feel like it's a place that has been formed by carefully panning countless rocks with machine tools.

Maybe these people here will be able to play a major role in developing the village. And, Quiche hometown is kinda like a historic ruin, isn't it? It's a place that had existed before it was destroyed by the evil dragon king - the village where Quiche's clan lived in the past.

Also, Arry and Taack said that Quiched would accept those people. Well, if it's about going shopping and paying for food, I can help out as well. If they keep at stockraising, it'd also be an option to bring Popobumu over. Making money with the milk of Popobumu...

No, Popobumu's home is in Pelneet. My servants like Mimi use him for shopping and above all, they really cherish him, so let's stop that train of thought.

Thinking about all that has woken the wish in me to see Popobumu again!

"...With that said, everyone, we're going to head to Quiche's village." After taking a breath to calm my thumping heart, "As a matter of fact, it's also a base that's being protected by my cherished friends. So, Quiche's village should be slightly safer than the place we're at right now. And, once we get back, I'll also help fortify Quiche's place...this is before I head out on a journey though...but still, I want to contribute a bit as well."

"I see. With you, a great man who doesn't spare any effort to help others and a strong fighter who can properly tell his own fighting capabilities as you continue through a sage's idleness of chaos...and your excellent subordinates...it should be possible to give us a peace of mind." Gramps Ton says with a polite tone.

He seems to be a nut-loving cook, but...I'm ending up feeling indebted to him... I don't feel any Magic Combat Style-like power from him, but...I can sense a strength coupled with dignity and humbleness from his words and attitude. I think you could even call him a person who's as big-hearted as the sea.

"...Haha, you're exaggerating. I'm an outlaw, and not someone as grand as you make me out to be."

"...You're a splendid person. Once we reach that base, I'd like to treat you to my eight delicacies."

...Cooking, huh? I'm happy, but I think I'll choose the safe approach here and bow my head...

Once I do so, a smile, as if the wrinkles on his face are being smoothed out, forms on Gramps Ton's lips.

Now then, the all-important Rollodeen is...oh, seemingly having understood that the talk has finished, she's bumping her head against my waist.

"...Nn, nyaa~" She meows.

And after playing around with me and the children, Rollodeen extends some tentacles from her torso, and makes them turn around and around in the air as if creating the grip of an umbrella, before turning the tentacles and her tail towards the Sea of Trees which is extending across a river.

Trees tower on the other side of the river. It's a place with a thick stench of blood wafting in the air. But, the movements of her wriggling tentacles as they entwine her tail are funny. ...I'm sure I won't get tired from simply watching that.

"Rollo-chan, are you curious about that place?"

"Shuuya-an-chan is looking there as well."

"Yeah, because of the smell" I agree with Arry and Taack to tear my eyes off Rollodeen's tail and tentacles while looking towards the other side of the river from where the stench of blood mixed with sulfur originates.

Going by Rollodeen's behavior, she apparently wants to scout...

Each and every single of the trees has a weird shape as you'd expect from the Sea of Trees. I don't think it's because of the moonlight, but they look different from the trees growing in the Whirlpool Forest of Demonic Fog. But, the abundance of nature is a common trait shared by both forests. The murmuring of clear streams and the narrow paths leading deeper into the forest make me think of haiku.

I can also see intersecting animal trails underneath the trees. Flower bags emitting a faint light like paper lanterns are drawing in all kinds of bugs, buzzing around them like mirages. In front is a sloping embankment with moss and vines hanging down from the trees like a curtain. Even the water surface flowing at the bottom of the slope seems to emit a mysterious glow.

Maybe blinking, glowing bugs? Or monsters? They also look like butterflies. But wait, don't tell me...?

As I think so...I keep staring at the river together with Rollodeen who's moved next to me.

Coupled with the moonlight which gives me the impression as if its weakening the dense stench of blood, it's a very beautiful scenery. My eyes are naturally drawn to the river's surface. The river's path looks like a dancing, silver snake.

This scenery must also..., but Rollodeen shows no reaction. She only keeps gazing at the surface like back when she stared at the water surface's patterns of the Heim River a long time ago.

Rollodeen apparently has judged the blood stench worrisome, just like me. Her head is pointing in the direction from where it wafts over. She starts walking towards the waterfront while her tail sways as if telling me, 『This way ~nya』.

It's because of the abnormality of this blood stench which also has the smell of sulfur and iron

added to it. But, we won't explore it.

I turn towards the proudly walking panther, and tell her, "Rollo, wait. Just like we talked about before, now's not the time for explorations."

"Nya?"

"Please turn into your huge divine beast form. We'll head straight for Quiche's village through the sky."

"Nnn, nyaaa~" She happily meows as if humming a melody while shaking her tail.

After turning around, she begins to run. Then, as she leaps into the air, she transforms. She's also fond of hunting down blood stench, but...she usually likes sky trips as well. She completes her transformation, by changing from a panther to a griffon-like appearance.

"——Uuaaaahh!"

"Oooohhh!"

"She became huge in no time!"

"——A big Rollo-chan!"

"Hey, Shuuya, I haven't heard anything about this."

"W-What is that?"

"Hyaaa~"

"...God Wolf Hurley-sama?"

"I am, Nemus!"

Of course everyone is startled out of their wits. Some flop down on their bums, others spit out the nuts in their mouth.

"...Everyone, sorry to interrupt your astonishment, but——"

Just when I'm about to tell everyone to get on...a bell rings from the river.

A huge stone? A coffin appears. It's not like huge coffins are streaming down rivers like Momotarou or peaches. It's floating very unnaturally atop the river. Various old, religious paintings are drawn on its surface.

In the midst of all this, I suddenly notice four men wearing black suits. They have silken hats on their heads, but they aren't Paulsen. And, the sulfur smell is really intense...

Well, the smell is amazing, but I can also sense a huge amount of mana from inside and outside the

coffin. Is that big coffin a monster? An enemy? Speaking of coffins...maybe it belongs to Hoffmann?

When he fought the Death Butterfly woman with the white hat...such a coffin appeared from the blood mantle-like half of his body.

A huge arm with a reddish color appears from the coffin's side. That arm touches the coffin's upper part.

"——Everyone! Stay away from us and the river!"

"Eh? Okay."

"Got it, everyone, step back."

"...What's going on?"

"I'm, Neeemus!"

"Nemus, we're the rear guards. Leave the weird coffin to Shuuya."

"...I, am, Nemus."

"Step back? Sure, but..."

I don't think they're careless, but everyone is acting too slowly. With the feeling of releasing a part of my blood power, I say with a vampiric face, "Moga, Nemus, please take care of everyone. And all of you, get back...further——"

In the next moment, everyone starts to run so as to get away from the river. Only the scared Higlia is left behind.

"Rollo, you ready?"

"...Nya."

Rollodeen is now a divine beast. As soon as she hears my words, she gestures with something similar to a nod.

"Garurururu."

With a beastly growl, she leaps into the air above the river. Floating up there, she throws her mouth wide open like a dragon.

The huge coffin answers that by wriggling vehemently. The coffin's big lid slides to the side. It's trying to open itself while releasing some eerie, slithering sound.

Rollodeen threatens that coffin. She glares at it while growling. A bunch of tentacles extend from her torso like a peafowl's feathers. The swarm of tentacles sways around like countless raven

feathers. If she uses those tentacles, she can instantaneously unleash a violent barrage of attacks.

But, Rollodeen doesn't move. She's surprisingly calm while strengthening her glare. As of yet, she doesn't try to launch an attack against the coffin. It's because there are people she has to protect, even if they've taken some distance.

No, it's because Higlia is still around, huh?

Even while I ponder about this...I put Murasame's hilt back into my waist. Then I spread my arms, summoning Baldok and Ganghis. While sensing the touch of the spears in my hands, I leap, and land on Rollodeen's back.

While the mass of tentacles extending from the back of her head flutters around within my line of sight...I continue staring at the coffin which is floating above the river.

Going by its huge, red arm, the main body should be quite gigantic, huh...? Is this going to turn into a battle?