

Chapter 2 - Story 20: Flaw

Everything proceeded as Yoash had intended.

His objective was to examine Souma himself.

And in addition, if possible, not in a state where he was fully prepared, but just how Souma really is.

For the Shapiro Company that was the exact reason why Yoash had been deliberately made to stay for a long time at the Lazareph's place who's no more than a worthless small fry.

It was obvious that Souma's group would run low on funds due to Jeboa's merchant guild beating down the prices on wheat. If they are somewhat intelligent, Souma's group would either attempt to improve their relationship with the merchant guild or try to raise some funds by exchanging

Holmea's young nobles in order to break through this situation.

Either way, they would have to look for an intermediary to negotiate with Jeboa or Holmea.

And it was simple to predict that their choice would fall on Lazareph. After that Yoash only had to infiltrate Lazareph's place by using the Shapiro Company's name and lie in wait after laying his traps there.

And then Yoash successfully managed to appear in front of Souma.

However, even though things have gone as he had predicted, Yoash was disappointed.

The highly rumored 「Divine Son of Destruction」, who made his debut while taking it this far, was the very picture of a common boy.

'While chatting, I observed the reactions of the boy called Soma that names himself 「Divine Son of Destruction」 in detail, but it doesn't seem as though he has a particularly sharp mind or cleverness. Besides, even if I look at his body build and physiognomy, I cannot possibly believe him to lead the zoan, who are called atrocious, or to have defeated Darius who was hailed as Holmea's best general. Once he considered whether he might be a human that specializes in strategies like a staff officer or a tactician, that seemed to be wrong as well. After all, he didn't even know the name of the famous imperial general from a hundred years ago, Inkdias, where it's said that anyone, who leads soldiers on this continent, has encountered that name in documents at least once.

'Just what does such a mediocre boy possess for the members of many races, starting with the zoan, to lift him up into being their leader?' Yoash couldn't comprehend at all.

'Also, speaking about unknown things, it's the same for this boy's origin, too.

At the same time of being a merchant, Yoash is also that much of a sailor that he can brag about having spent more time at the sea than on shore. In an era, where almost every person spends their entire life at their birthplace without ever leaving from there, humans, who visited as many countries as Yoash, are rare.

Saying that he's able to derive a conversation partner's origin based on their pronunciation and bias in knowledge because of those experiences was Yoash's secret conceit.

However, even using his own discernment, Yoash couldn't guess the background of this boy called Soma.

'I don't know about the thing called 『Heyskool』 mentioned by him, but since he said that his job was to study, I guess that he's very likely some kind of scholar. In this case he must be the second or third son of a noble household or a prosperous mercantile family, who can't succeed the the house. Or so I thought, but then he suddenly mentioned that his father is a person who receives salt as salary.

Moreover, he mentioned that his father, who seems to be a low-ranking soldier who's paid with salt, liked to travel and that he often took him along on those travels. Putting aside if it's a noble or a merchant, I never heard about a low-ranking soldier who goes on trips that cost a huge amount of money.

‘And not just that, he even spoke of incomprehensible stuff such as them getting on an flying iron bird called 『Errplain』 and traveling to the snow-covered northern provinces or to a southern island of everlasting summer within a mere day.

'Does this guy suffer from a severe case of megalomania and the strong habit of lying? Or is he an extraordinary swindler?

Either way, Yoash couldn't think of Souma as anything but a common boy who only spouts big lies. 'Very likely someone, who lifted this average, lying boy into his position, has been pulling the strings from behind in the chain of events that started with the zoan's rebellion,' is Yoash's deduction.

And, who Yoash judged to be one of the masterminds is Eladia — the elven court lady. Even Yoash had heard the rumors about Enchantress Eladia, who drove countless imperial nobles and wealthy people into ruin. 'If the rumors about her are true, it's not impossible for her to lead this boy called Soma around by the nose and for her to freely manipulate the zoan, dwarves and dinosaurians, whose brains seem to be made out of muscles.

'And, as if to substantiate that assumption, Soma's eyes unconsciously turned to Eladia as if depending on her, once I deliberately used questions that are difficult to answer. Moreover, as soon as I removed her from the negotiation table, the boy sure enough started to become discomposed.

'I guess she was this boy's puppeteer after all,' Yoash believes.

'Even though I expressly came all the way to a city like this, the highly rumored 『Divine Son of Destruction』 is a mere puppet.' For Yoash, who likes interesting and rare things, it's a grave disappointment.

Saying "Don't be discouraged by this" was simply impossible.

If compared to the 『Divine Son of Destruction』 who has fallen in his evaluation, the attending zoan girl is of rather great interest for Yoash.

One time he was told by his father: "Even if your face laughs, your eyes don't. You're still too much of a second-rate merchant that seems unable to deceive with his eyes." However, leaving aside his father who's a sly old merchant, Yoash most certainly didn't expect for his acting to be seen through by the likes of a zoan girl like her because of his eyes.

Approving her to remain in this place is his petty revenge.

'From the way she acts and speaks, I could sense a deep trust in the boy. In that case, because of my mischievous mind, I will entertain myself with thoroughly trashing that boy in front of her eyes.

'Since you made me go on a fool's errand, I guess I have to at least give you that much of a punishment to have some fun.

Yoash secretly revealed a spiteful smile.



"Now then, just what are you going to request from me?"

Yoash started with this. However, without answering, Souma asks in reverse,

"Even I happened to hear the name of the Shapiro Company. It appears you are dealing in quite the big business."

Due to Souma using the established tactic of first trying to probe for the other side's intentions while flattering, Yoash responds by smiling wryly,

"Of course, you are even freely associating with Holmea's royal palace, I guess?"

'Confirming our connection with Holmea's royal palace points to it being a talk about acting as intermediary to negotiate the prisoners' ransom, as expected.

Yoash was convinced of it, but without even twitching at that, he played dumb and replied,

"The core business of our Shapiro Company is maritime trade. If I'm to speak honestly, our influence doesn't extend as far on land."

As the color of disappointment dyes Souma's face, Yoash continues his words while being shocked that he's a boy that can't properly lie in this situation.

"—Having said that, if you speak of the Shapiro Company, it's a prominent company in Jeboa. My father, who's the company's president, has even received a honorary peerage. Even if I request an audience with the Holmean king, I probably won't be turned down."

Souma feels relieved that Yoash possesses the requirements to serve as intermediary. However, next he has to ask about various crucial parts. And thus he opened his mouth while feeling nervous again.

"Mr. Yoash. As I want to negotiate the ransom of Royal Prince Vultas with Holmea, could I possibly ask you to act as intermediary for that?"

Those words were just what Yoash had anticipated.

He doesn't answer right away, though.

He lightly closes his eyes, pretending to consider something, and rhythmically taps the table with the fingers of his right hand while a smile formed at the corners of his mouth.

What Yoash did is only that.

However, due to Yoash's silence, which even possessed an air of danger as it was a complete change from his frivolous chattering up until now, Souma's tension was stirred up. Even the sound of tapping the table at a fixed rhythm irked the nerves of Souma, who was on edge due to his excessive nervousness, the wrong way.

'Did I say something wrong? Did I end up saying something rude?'

Such jumping-at-shadows is festering in Souma's mind.

And that was all according to Yoash's plan.

'A character that considers the other side carefully even going as far as overdoing it.'

Yoash analyzed Souma's character to be like that. Even during the silly chat until a little while ago, Souma immediately apologized or was shaken if he felt like he made even the slightest error. That's the indication of such a character trait.

'It might also be a virtue. Especially for people, who were tyrannized as slaves, a kindness that carefully considers their needs is nothing more than the spring sun which they found after persisting through a long, freezing winter.'

'However, at a negotiation table it's a fatal flaw.'

And then Yoash opened his eyes.

"Tell me, why should I do something like that?"

Souma darts his eyes around, apparently bewildered by Yoash, who tossed such offensive words at him, contrary to his superficial attitude so far.

With Souma in such state, Yoash shed the gentle tone and suddenly attacked him with a verbal blade.

"Let me be frank with you, our Jeboan merchant guild doesn't think well of you."

He was well aware of that, but being told that directly into his face, Souma ended up flustered.

"Don't you know how many merchants you made cry by conquering this city?"

Yoash even further tortures Souma by giving examples.

"It's not just about passing through the city. Recently the number of fleeing slaves is increasing in Jeboa. Of course, they do it for the sake of taking refuge here. No, it's not just slaves. Even brigands and bandits run away to this place in order to escape the hands of Jeboa's constables. Furthermore, due to the deterioration of the public order, the expenses for hiring escorts have gone up. Good gracious, there's no end to it, is there?"

Yoash suddenly shrugged his shoulders as if to demonstrate his disappointment.

"Our Jeboan merchant guild faces grave hardships thanks to you. So why should I cooperate with you despite all that? Tell me as I don't have the slightest idea."

It's Yoash's unforeseen preemptive attack.

Souma simply believed that he would take control of the talks by giving a clear explanation at the time of the negotiations - no matter how much ill will there might be - since Yoash is a wealthy merchant after all. If one looks at the results of that, it's a sudden denunciation. Souma ended up unable to say anything due to this unexpected situation.

"By all means, I'd like you to teach me, what kind of opinion do you have about these circumstances?"

Once again Yoash presses for an answer to not grant Souma any time to regain his composure.

"I have heard that the city's traffic has been disturbed because of me."

Even so, Souma frantically grasps for words.

"But, I plan to get rid of this city's traffic toll in the future. Can't I have you yield with this?"

Souma suggested, wondering whether he can't achieve a compromise with that as he will remove the city's traffic toll if the transportation expenses for the merchants increase thanks to them being unable to use slaves for carrying the baggage.

Eladia, who attentively listened to it all in the adjoining room, bites her lower lip.

The flaw of Souma, she was afraid of, had already emerged.

Japanese, who are vague in everything, are said to be unskilled at negotiating.

One of the reasons for that is their careful consideration of their negotiation partner's standpoint.

Japanese society is said to have a such a deeply rooted consciousness of considering each other, making mutual concessions and cooperating with each other that it's even called a society of

harmony and compromise. Hence the Japanese try to avoid dispute by finding common points for

compromising with each other, even during negotiations. As part of that, they indicate common ground by saying "Given that I will concede this much, I'd like you to concede that much." However, the only ones comprehending that are Japanese.

If you show the stance of conceding at a stage where the negotiation hasn't even really started yet to a negotiation partner who's not a Japanese, it will be regarded as weak attitude. Once that happens, it's only reasonable for the other party to try force their own claims through to make their opponent concede beyond their indicated common ground.

"Yoohoo! That's wonderful!"

Yoash raises his voice in admiration.

'An abolition of the traffic toll. How very magnificent. It's warmly welcomed. But——

"But, going by the way you said it just now, it doesn't seem to be meant as privilege to Jeboa's merchant guild. Then it's meaningless. Isn't it? I'd like you to let me hear about something more substantial."

Even though he secured the term of a full abolition of the traffic toll, Yoash demands even more terms.

"O-Of course, if I can have you act as intermediary with Holmea, I intend to pay you a reasonable reward."

Yoash sighs in his mind upon Souma trying to suggest a term even though having become incoherent. 'Don't think that such obvious thing is going to become a negotiation card.

"Are you going to be able to compensate the loss of our entire merchant guild with only that much? It seems you aren't aware of our business' scale."

Yoash delivered a scathing retort towards the useless resistance of the cornered Souma.

The details of the losses incurred by Jeboa's merchant guild due to having become unable to pass through Bolnis, and the money it cost fluently stream out of Yoash's mouth.

Souma didn't know whether those numbers were true. It might be a simple bluff. But, Souma, who doesn't own the knowledge to judge that, was simply washed away by the flood of huge numbers raised by Yoash.

"I'd like you to not consider something like that as a negotiation term."

Yoash's words delivered at the end were even packed with pity.

And just when that happened, Souma realizes.

That he has no card that could become his weapon.

Until now he was always on the attacking side. At the time when he persuaded Garam and the other in the Fang Clan's village, he hid the method to drive away the humans' military forces in his chest. At the time when he persuaded Zurgu after capturing the fortress, he had the conviction that the zoan will perish if they don't leave the plains.

Souma was always on the attacking side at the negotiation table, using that as his weapon.

However, the negotiations with Yoash are the opposite. Having to ask a merchant of Jeboa to serve as intermediary for a negotiation, Souma was on the side that's attacked.

Souma, who realized that, ends up completely cornering himself on his own accord.

His throat is painfully dry due to his overwhelming nervousness. The heart in his chest rages with a banging. Blood rises to his head and his brain is filled close to bursting, causing his thinking to dye completely white. At last his body was about to fall off the chair due to the optical illusion of the ground swaying irregularly.

Souma tries to open his mouth while not even knowing himself what he wants to say.

Due to that, Yoash leaks a dejected sigh, saying "Even though I thought I could enjoy it a little bit more."

And then Eladia tries to force her way through from the adjoining room.

But, at that moment...

...a piercing metallic sound echoed within the audience hall.