

Chapter 2 - Story 21: Smile (Beginning)

Once they shifted their attention to the origin of the sound that resounded in the audience hall, it came from Shyemul. Her unsheathed machete had fallen down at her feet.

"I'm sorry. It looks like the string tying the machete came off."

Shyemul nonchalantly explained and showed the untied string dangling from her waist. Once she picks up the machete from the ground she deliberately spends time on carefully re-affixing the string.

"Excuse me for having caused such uproar. —But, now it will be fine."

Yoash is fed up at that, thinking 'How useless.'

There's no way that this had been a coincidence. Even though he would have been able to draw out fatal concessions from Souma in a little bit more time, the string ended up being fully undone at that moment.

'But, at most it's a stopgap measure.

'At this point in time gaining a short breather is meaningless. It's obvious to anyone that Soma will fall with a little further push.

For the sake of rounding up these boring negotiations, Yoash shifted his attention to Souma in order to deliver that final push, but suddenly he had an uncomfortable feeling.

'Was it my imagination? It felt as if Soma's atmosphere had completely changed.

Without noticing that quizzical look of Yoash, Souma was fully focused on pondering about Shyemul's action just now.

Even Souma noticed that Shyemul had dropped her machete on purpose. 'In any case, for a zoan warrior a machete is the soul of a warrior which has been handed down by their ancestors. It's unthinkable for the proud Shyemul to treat such a valuable machete roughly.

'What did Shyemul attempt to do by going as far as dropping her cherished machete?

What came to his mind foremost when pondering about it was her brief comment, "it will be fine."

To Souma it sounded like something said in his direction. 'No, that's what she actually did, didn't she? Shyemul told me, "It will be fine if it's you."

The moment he understood that, the tension suddenly escaped from his stiff shoulders.

"I'm very sorry for her causing such a disturbance. Let me apologize from my side, too."

While filling the silence with an apology, Souma recalled a certain remark.

『Do not openly show your fear and impatience as a chief who leads warriors. Calm down a bit.』

That was Garam's warning towards him when he lost his composure before the battle against General Darius.

'That's right. First I have to calm down.

While instructing himself like that, Souma ignored Yoash, who tapped the table with his fingers as if pressing for an answer, and sipped some of the cool tea in his bowl to moist his dry throat.

『Lord Soma, you always pull back right away if the other party applies pressure, but that is wrong. Especially a careless apology will become a clue for the other party how to attack you.』

It's Eladia who taught him that. 'She has said that taking advantage of my side's mistakes, denouncing me and then increasing the demands is an old trick during negotiations. He recalls that he was told, "You must never admit your own mistakes at a negotiation table. Going as far as being considered shameless is just the right balance."

"Like me, she was probably surprised by me being charged with outrageously false accusations."

That's why Souma plays dumb.

"I'm charging you with false accusations, you say?"

Yoash acts sullen, using not only his expression and tone, but also faint gestures. Until not long ago Souma might have gotten scared by that, but it doesn't work anymore.

'Even the now reliable Zurgu was so terrifying when we first met that I thought of him as a monster. His rock-like, huge and burly build, and his ferocious beast face. Compared to those, Yoash's angry face is cute.

Once he comes to think like that, he unintentionally lets a small chuckle slip out.

As reaction he senses the pressure coming from Yoash sway slightly, though it might also be his imagination.

'Come to think of it, Dvalin often says, "If you drink booze, eat meat, sing cheerfully, dance happily and laugh loudly, most things will work out one way or the other."

'As expected starting to drink, eat, dance or sing in this place is impossible, but I will at least smile. Deciding that, Souma consciously puts up a smile.

Once he does, he felt like the fingers of Yoash, who constantly tapped the table in a rhythm like the drum of a beater driving on the beasts, got slightly out of tact.

Trying to smooth over that, Yoash lightly coughed and said,

"To call it false accusations, that's wholly unexpected. In reality, we are troubled as we are unable to pass through this cit——"

"I haven't ordered anyone to not let you through, neither did I tell you to not pass. Let's keep that part clear."

Interrupting Yoash's words, Souma declared strongly.

However, contrary to his forceful tone, he maintains his smile.

'Occasionally there are times when Jahangil stares intently at me. If you are watched carefully by a dinosaurian with their lacking expressions, you will end up worried as you don't know what they are thinking. Having an unreadable expression like Jahangil is impossible, but in that case it will fine if I keep smiling, no matter what happens. I will hide my emotions by smiling.

"I see. It's just as you say. Certainly you haven't ordered anything like that. —What are your thoughts about the escaped slaves then?"

Seemingly pressured by Souma's smile, the initial sharpness in Yoash's tone was missing.

"That's a false accusation, too."

Souma flatly stated.

"Did I demand from you to release your slaves? Did I tell the slaves, who live at your place, that it's fine to run away? Notwithstanding that, us being blamed even for the escape of your slaves is intolerable."

"However, isn't it a fact that there's a great number of escaped slaves inside your territory?"

Just as Yoash said, there were many slaves of other races in Bolnis, who had escaped from Jeboa and Holmea. It's not official, but Souma has also ordered to provide work and housing to make it possible for those slaves to live.

"Even if you tell me that, my hands are tied. Certainly, there might be many of such people here. But, we don't check each and every single person coming into this city by asking them 『Are you a fleeing slave?』. Do you check all the people coming into your country in Jeboa?"

"...We don't."

'If he had admitted that there are escaped slaves in his territory, I could have made him take responsibility, but being told nothing more than that it's a possibility with "might," I can't do that either. I don't know whether it was intentional or not, but he evaded the trap in my words.' Yoash clicks his tongue within his mind.

"However, slaves are fully-accepted property. In other words, escaping slaves are similar to thieves who stole the property of their master. Are you saying that you allow such outlaws to do as they please?"

"I don't intend to allow outlaws to have everything their own way."

Without it being an act, Souma smiles bitterly.

Actually, the outlaws made Souma wrack his brain as well. Because of the former bandits and brigands, who heard that Souma started a rebellion against Holmea, having flowed into the city that made a name for itself in the battle against a country, situations, which threatened the city's public order, repeatedly occurred.

"Ah, right! Can I have you circulate something like wanted posters?"

Souma thought it would be great if they ignored the escaped slave by making use of wanted posters for bandits and brigands, but unexpectedly this turned into a counterattack against Yoash.

Just as Yoash said, slaves are valuable property. Naturally the managerial liability lies with their owners. Them having their slaves allowed to escape despite that places doubt on the owners' ability to manage their slaves. It would be one thing if it was a surefire method to have the slaves come back, but revealing the escape of their slaves without such a firm guarantee is no more than piling shame on top of shame. Even Yoash couldn't reply anything concrete except for "I will keep it in mind."

Finally Yoash notices that he had misread the other party.

It's no mistake that Souma relied on Eladia until the negotiations began. Souma unconsciously sought her reaction for even the slightest problems or questions. You might as well say that he clung to her. And, the more someone relies on another person, the more brittle they become when they lose that support.

That's why Yoash removed Eladia from the negotiation table at the very beginning.

And, just as he had planned, Souma visibly began to lose the presence of his mind as soon as Eladia was gone.

What Yoash perceived inside Souma in addition to the character trait of being very considerate to others, is his intelligence being high enough to understand that it would be foolish to turn Jeboa into his enemy in his current situation, and his sincerity which is visible from the way how he managed his territory so far.

'If I take these traits into account, I will be able to gain convenient terms for Jeboa, if I torture him by loudly blaming him that the consequences are probably his fault.

That's what Yoash believed. And it was correct, too.

However, it's different now.

'I feel something like a strong heart from the current Soma. Very likely he came across something non-yieldable within himself while being cornered to this extent.

So far he could sense a weakness from Souma that he will try to settle the negotiation even if he has to compromise. Therefore Yoash confidently applied pressure forcing him to concede unless he wants the negotiations to break down. However, that weakness is gone from the current Souma. He could feel a strong will that Souma won't even mind if the negotiations fall through as long as it's for the sake of that non-yieldable something.

'Just what changed him so much?

Wondering that, Yoash fleetingly glances at Shyemul who stands behind Souma.

'It must be this zoan girl!

Yoash was convinced.

'I hadn't realized when Eladia was present, but now it's obvious.

'The tremendous trust placed into the boy by the zoan girl. And, the boy's spirit that recovered while being supported by that trust, and now attempts to face his enemy with his own determination.

'The one I should have removed first wasn't Eladia, but this zoan girl!?

Yoash noticed his own blunder.

"Good grief. As you seem unable to understand the predicament of Jeboa's merchant guild, any further talks makes no sense."

For the sake of ascertaining his own conjectures, Yoash implicitly hinted at a break-down of the negotiations.

Once he does, Souma only smiles wryly a bit and firmly replies, without showing any kind of agitation,

"It can't be helped since even I cannot afford to allow for such false accusations to stand."

Due to that reply, Yoash was confident in his conjectures not being mistaken.

'Now that it has come to this, I can't attack him in the same way as until now. If I imprudently infringe on that non-yieldable part, the current Soma will likely put an end to the negotiations.'

Even Yoash doesn't wish for that to happen. What Yoash seeks is not dispute, but only profit gained through negotiations.

"Please don't misunderstand. By no means does our Jeboan merchant guild desire a conflict."

As Yoash says, Jeboa, where the merchant guild's influence is strong, has no ambition to expand its domain by invading other countries. What they want is freedom of trade and their own interests.

"It's the same for you as well, right?"

Souma nodded towards Yoash, who completely changed from his high-handed attitude to flattering.

"I also want to be on good terms with Jeboa's merchant guild."

Souma also comprehends their current situation.

Even if they had defeated General Darius, Holmea's military force still overpowers Souma's group. Once Holmea recovers from the heavy blow in the Decisive Battle over Bolnis and the chaos due to General Darius' dismissal, it won't be strange for the raging King Warius to come attack at any time. Making enemies of even Jeboa in these circumstances is suicide.

According to what Marchronis and Michena said, it didn't seem as if Jeboa would take direct military action, but there are as many indirect methods as they like such as dispatching mercenaries and providing military materials to Holmea.

Having confirmed that Souma is properly aware of the present state, Yoash presented an idea.

"Even if we dig up issues that have already happened, it won't lead to anything. Accordingly, how about this: if you are able to directly demonstrate your friendly intentions towards us, I will also stop complaining about past problems."

While cautious towards Yoash, who suddenly softened his attitude, Souma inquires about the details.

"Friendly intentions, you say?"

"The retraction of the slave emancipation."

As expected, even Souma forgets to put up a smiles and angrily frowns at those words. Seemingly having anticipated that reaction, Yoash grinned and said,

"—is impossible I guess. So how about having you declare that you won't accept fleeing slaves from foreign countries in the future instead?"