

Chapter 2 - Story 22: Smile (End)

"So how about having you declare that you won't accept fleeing slaves from foreign countries in the future instead?"

Souma hesitated because of this proposal by Yoash.

During the negotiation training with Eladia, she told him about the possibility of Jeboa requesting of him to withdraw the slave emancipation, however she didn't assume that it would be limited to no accepting fleeing slaves.

In addition, because the other side offered to reduce the demand, he hesitated whether it would be fine to still reject it just like that.

However, many of the those who are supporting him now are people who went through bitter experiences as slaves in the past. 'There no way that I can tell them to abandon the slaves who ran away while relying on us.' Judging it like that, Souma strengthens his resolve.

"I can't do that."

Upon Souma's reply, Yoash lets his shoulders fall in an exaggerated manner, shakes his head and acts very disappointed. After brooding over it for a while with a troubled expression, Yoash said in a tone as if he's really reluctant,

"Understood. —Can I have you at least overlook the usage of slaves for baggage transport then? How about only this much?"

Even Souma was aware that he couldn't push his ideal of a slave emancipation on other countries, no matter how much he touts it. 'Shouldn't I swallow a term at this level for the sake of improving the relationship with Jeboa?' Such a thought rises to the surface in his mind.

After all he was offered a reduction of the demands by Yoash, and yet he still denied it. Souma felt a strong psychological resistance against turning down this one as well.

However, this is Yoash's trap.

It's a basic strategy in negotiations to first dish out the maximal demand, which won't be accepted anyway, to make it easier for the next demand to pass as the previous one had already been denied.

And Yoash planted yet another trap within the demand itself.

He wants to make Souma believe that it's acceptable for slaves to be used for carrying baggage. If he acknowledges it once, raising various demands such as "what will happen if a slave escapes while passing through Bolnis?" will allow Yoash to pull out small concessions one-by-one. Trying to aim for all those small concessions to eventually turn into a substantial concession is yet another negotiation strategy.

"How about it? Even for me that's the most I can barely concede on."

Moreover Yoash emphasized his position of compromising a lot. Due to that, the scales within Souma begin to shake violently, starting to incline towards conceding.

However, what came to his mind at that time is the face of Shyemul who's following behind him, even now.

He remembers her gallant appearance as she tries to live honorably while protecting her vow with all her heart, and also how he held up the ideal of freedom and equality as conviction they must never yield on.

'In that case, this is something I mustn't concede.'

"I cannot do that."

Souma firmly declared.

It caused Yoash to consider this as clumsy negotiating.

'Just being stubborn is unacceptable during bargaining. Even if you do reject it in the end, it is a clever way to negotiate by starting with acting as if there's room to consider it to draw out terms and concessions from the other party. If it's refused like this from the very start, there's no reason to hold negotiations.

'However, at the same time it's also true that it became difficult to attack.

'Nevertheless, cornering Soma by blaming him for various things is easy.

But, Yoash hesitated to use that hand.

That's because of a certain habit of Souma.

It bothered Yoash since the time when they had their light chat at the beginning; if Souma gets cornered, he smiles for some reason. It's a different smile from the intentional one he started to use in the middle of their war of words. No matter how he looked at it, it didn't look like anything but a smile that's shown unconsciously.

Furthermore, now that Souma displays a deliberate smile, Yoash is bewildered even more.

'Why is he trying to stack up a smile on top of a smile? Maybe it can be interpreted as him deliberately showing an obviously fake smile to gloss over the smile he ends up showing when he's really composed.

However, that was Yoash overthinking things.

What floated on Souma's face is the characteristic smile a Japanese shows when they are troubled. Lafcadio Hearn, the famous author of "Kwaidan," a collection of folklores and ghost stories from all over Japan, has written about the "Smile of the Japanese" in his book "Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan." According to him, the smile shown by Japanese during painful and difficult times is seen as bizarre by foreigners.

And due to truly being the first on the world to witness the "Smile of the Japanese," Yoash ended up experiencing it as something bizarre.

"How troubling. No to this, no to that. We can't have a discussion like this."

Yoash complained in order to overplay that he was at a loss how to continue. Even Souma goes along with that by cracking a joke.

"But, it will be fine as long as you don't use slave to carry your baggage, won't it?"

That's the misdirected view of Souma who doesn't know the common sense of this world. Yoash was about to say "It's a problem of money" even while being utterly amazed, but slightly faster than that, Souma spoke his next words.

"No matter whether it's a merchant, a noble or royalty, as long as they have arms and legs they can carry baggage, can't they?"

To Souma that's not a line he said with a particular intention or some kind of strategy.

And yet Yoash reacted to it intensely.

Having half-risen to his feet from his chair, Yoash fixedly stared at Souma with his eyes widened in shock.

Even Souma blinks in surprise due to Yoash's unexpected reaction.

After staring at each other in silence for a little while, Yoash suddenly burst into laughter. Immediately after he frantically tries to suppress it by covering his mouth.

"W-What's wrong...?"

Upon Yoash's confusing behavior, Souma becomes worried that he might have said something weird and timidly asks. Yoash, who finally managed to suppress his urge to laugh, apologized to Souma while wiping away the tears that had gathered at the outer corners of his eyes.

"No, nothing at all. I was terrible rude to you."

Not only that. Yoash abruptly softens his attitude.

"Even if we devise a settlement of the problems here in impatience, it will probably result in something neither of us wants. —How about it? Let's prepare another negotiation venue in the future?"

To begin with, Souma's objective is to request a mediation with Holmea on this occasion. Even for Souma, who wants time to set up measures and prior adjustments to discuss the betterment of their relationship with Jeboa, it's a heaven-sent suggestion. However, he felt at a loss due to Yoash, who brought up that problem in the first place, suddenly switching his gameplan. Seemingly thinking that Souma's confusion stemmed from him worrying whether he will act as intermediary, Yoash furthermore says,

"Ah, please don't worry. I will gratefully accept the mediation with Holmea."

As if to say, "Please leave it to me," Yoash hits his own chest once.

"T-Truly?"

Due to Souma still being half in doubt, Yoash revealed a kind smile, different from the frivolous one at the beginning and the sly one during the negotiation.

"Of course I will. —Oh, but I will firmly insist on a mediation fee. Let's see...how about setting it to ten percent of the ransom?"

Even though he's not fully satisfied as he doesn't understand why Yoash completely changed his attitude all of a sudden, the condition offered by Yoash was an appropriate amount as mediation fee according to what Souma had investigated in advance, and thus Souma felt relieved.

"Let's go with that condition then, please."

Once Souma accepted, Yoash held out his right hand with a smile plastered all over his face while yelling "Yoohoo!" When Souma grasps his hand timidly, Yoash firmly squeezes back.

"It definitely won't be a loss for you. After all I will charge an exorbitant ransom."

In this world it's a very natural deed to take ransom in exchange for a noble, but Souma, who still can't escape the common sense of modern Japanese society, smiles bitterly, considering it like

speaking about an atrocious crime, once he hears about charging exorbitant ransom.

"Well then, can you pass me the prisoner list?"

Yoash demanded after having finished the handshake. Souma is surprised at that.

"This time I plan to go with just a person called Vulitas, but..."

They didn't prepare a name list since Souma wanted to begin with Vulitas, who's the most important person, first before demanding ransom for all the young nobles that are their prisoners right now.

"Yoohoo! Come to think of it, you mentioned that."

"Is there something wrong with it?"

Souma asked due to Yoash's disappointed manner of speaking.

"No, not at all. I just thought that it might be better to get it all done in one go, if we are going to do it anyway."

Upon Yoash's reply, Souma wondered whether he had done something bad. 'If I ask Eladia, who's in charge of the prisoners, I think she will be able to prepare a list of names right away. But, since we arranged for it to be only Vulitas first, I have no choice but to refuse.

Once Souma informs Yoash about that apologetically, Yoash simply told him to not mind it.

"Ah, right."

At that moment Souma hit on a good idea.

"I will pay you a part of the mediation fee in advance on this occasion."

Yoash forms a puzzled expression at that.

"We promised the mediation fee to be ten percent of the ransom, didn't we?"

To pay here in advance even though it's not clear how much ransom Yoash will be able to get from Holmea is strange. Once Yoash pointed that out, Souma insisted on paying the difference later on and ordered for the advance payment to be brought in.

Looking at the flustered state of the female official called Michena, who carried in several bags filled with gold coins after a while, it was apparent that it had been an unplanned action. Yoash doubtfully wondered why Souma said that he will pay in advance while going this far, but, being urged by Souma to check the contents of the bags, he immediately understood once he saw the gold coins stuffed inside.

'I see. I guess that means he can't be called a mere dreamer.

Yoash broke into a grin like a child who found something interesting.



When Eladia returned to the audience hall after escorting Yoash and Lazareph out of the feudal lord's residence once the negotiations had ended, she found Souma fallen prostrate on the table, and Shyemul gently fanning him with a small folding fan.

"Is something wrong with Lord Soma?"

Shyemul sighed deeply at Eladia's question.

"It looks like his brain is still overheated thanks to him being too tense."

And then she turns an astonished look at the worn-out Souma.

"Geez, grow up a bit, my 『Navel Master』"

Hearing her voice, Souma finally raises his head sluggishly.

"...I'm ashamed of myself."

After that he faced Shyemul with his usual smile and first thanked her.

"But, thanks, Shyemul. You being here was a great help."

Due to Shyemul proudly and roughly breathing out through her nose with her arms folded after receiving Souma's gratitude, a single sigh escaped Eladia's mouth.

"Normally there are various things I want to say to you as well, Lady Shyemul..."

'Next time I have to have Soma allow me to attend the negotiation as well, but then it will naturally result in Shyemul doing so, too. This time we were blessed by luck, but usually, if an attendant or guard arbitrarily interrupts such negotiations, it will hinder reaching an agreement. I have to also teach Shyemul properly so that something like this never happens again,' Eladia judged. However, once she sees Souma and Shyemul smile at each other, she feels like that can wait for the moment. Deciding to postpone the scolding of Shyemul, she showed Souma her appreciations for his effort.

"You acted splendidly, Lord Soma. It can't possibly be called perfect, but we were still able to avoid the worst case."

Souma at last felt relieved after having received Eladia's approval.

But, even Souma was aware of her marking his performance very generously. After all he only remembers points which he should reflect on once he thinks back upon the negotiation with Yoash. 'Now that I think of it there were countless methods to cope with the situation, but at that time I couldn't come up with any of them at all. It's impossible to call it anything but me having been overwhelmed by the atmosphere created by Yoash, but even that is no more than an excuse. Contemplating about that, Souma suddenly came up with a question and voiced it out.

"I wonder, for what reason did that person called Yoash come here?"

"Didn't he come here to complain since he couldn't pass through the city?"

Shyemul said while tilting her head to the side in curiosity.

When the wheat price was beaten down, Michena said that it was Jeboa's revenge for the trade route having been cut off. Shyemul wondered whether it wasn't the same reason this time as well, but Souma denies that by shaking his head.

"As for this, he did pull back readily midway through the negotiations for some reason, didn't he? I think, if he had really intended to gain the right to pass through the city, he would have been a lot more persistent, don't you think?"

'If he had truly tried to revive the trade route, this time's negotiations have been in vain for Yoash as he hasn't won anything. It was unthinkable for such an idiosyncratic person to deem that acceptable.

"You didn't notice it?"

With the expression of a teacher looking at a pupil who asked a good question, Eladia said,

"That man called Yoash very likely didn't come here as representative of Jeboa's merchant guild."

Souma hysterically yells at that,

"...Eh? Eeeeeeh!? I-I mean, that person talked about something like improving the relationship with Jeboa's merchant guild and such."

"Lord Soma, he simply lured you into misunderstanding it like that with his statements and behavior. He himself had not once said that he's the representative of Jeboa's merchant guild."

'Now that she mentions it, she's right. With the preface of his father being a member of the merchant guild's Committee of Ten, I was completely deceived with his way of talking as if he's really representing them.

"Because merchants regard trust as important, they won't use obvious lies. But at times they will induce you to misunderstand by not saying everything."

"Then, for argument's sake, what would have happened if I had concluded an agreement with him while under the impression for that to be true?"

"That man would have returned to Jeboa while bringing the agreement as present with him, and the merchant guild would have likely declared that he was their representative while feigning ignorance."

Souma let an "Uwaaah..." mixed with admiration and astonishment leak at the toughness of Jeboa's merchants.

However, to Shyemul that's inexcusable.

"That guy tried to deceive Soma!?"

Raising her voice while baring her fangs, Shyemul was about to chase after Yoash at any time with

her entire body overflowing with anger as if she's going to cut off his head with her machete.

"Please stop, Lady Shyemul. No matter what the reason might be; if you kill that man, it will develop into the worst-case situation with Jeboa's merchant guild!"

In the first place the merchant guild is an organization founded in order to protect merchants from authority and violence. If they learned of one of their own having been killed by Souma's group, the guild definitely won't stay silent about it. Even for the sake of setting an example for others, they would come to thoroughly crush Souma making use of every possible method.

"But, that guy acted rudely towards Soma!"

Delivering a suitable punishment for rudeness is the zoan's style. Shyemul is enraged, wondering why she can't execute that.

"For the merchant guild the fact of us having killed him with our own hands would be important. Such situation won't pass as trifle issue."

Then Eladia shook her head and continued,

"Besides, if choosing between our arguments and the arguments of Jeboa's merchant guild, society will believe in Jeboa's arguments. No, even if society doubts their true motive, they won't contradict them. In this world it's not the correct arguments that prevail, but the arguments of those shouting the loudest and those possessing power."

If Souma's group had strength enabling them to oppose Jeboa's merchant guild, it would be a different matter, but unfortunately they can't even begin to compare with the merchant guild at the moment.

Being admonished like that, even Shyemul has no other choice but to restrain her own anger. However, even if she can understand it logically, it's obvious at a glance that she's dissatisfied as her emotions apparently can't come to term with this.

"Please be relieved, Lady Shyemul. Lord Soma will most certainly create a society where you will be able to identify what's correct as such."

Once Eladia said that with a bright voice, Shyemul widened her eyes a bit, apparently surprised. Then she smiles all over her face and calls out to Souma, overflowing with expectations.

"That's right! My 『Navel Master』, please do your best!"

"...I will try and do what I can."

Due to the exceedingly big talk about creating a society and such, Souma could only smile wryly. However, Shyemul wrinkles up her nose due to that.

"If you are a man, at least say 『Leave it to me!』. If it's you, you will be definitely able to make it!"

Being embarrassed by the unshakable trust and the huge expectations, Souma speaks up to Eladia, trying to change the topic.

"If Mr. Yoash hadn't been the representative of Jeboa's merchant guild, for what reason did he come here?"

Seemingly pleased by the conversation between Souma and Shyemul, Eladia elegantly covered her mouth with a hand, and answered after giggling,

"I fear he might have come here with the goal to see you, Lord Soma, with his own eyes."

At that Shyemul agreed with "Good work coming here to scout Soma out after having already noticed his awesomeness," while nodding by herself with her arms folded.

However, Souma, who has a low self-esteem to begin with, couldn't believe at all that Yoash expressly came just to see him.

"I feel like it's not just that though..."

At that point Souma suddenly remembers.

"Come to think of it, there's something that bothers me a bit."

When he informed Eladia about the aspect that bothered him in Yoash's speech and conduct, she nodded powerfully.

"You did well to realize it. If we go through what that man said at first, your thoughts are probably not wrong, Lord Soma."

"Then it means that not only did he deceive me, but he also tried to steal a march on his merchant colleagues?"

Once Eladia answered, "That's the conclusion," Souma couldn't help but be utterly amazed at Yoash's determination.

"By the way, why did we pay him in advance all of a sudden, Lord Soma?"

Even during the preparatory meeting, something like that was never mentioned. When Eladia asks while considering that part to be strange, Souma's expression becomes filled with pride.

"I think that man probably understands, but it's a little opening move, I guess?"

Souma took out a coin from a bag filled with gold coins which had been left behind after Yoash said that it would be too much, and threw it to Eladia. Eladia lowered her eyes on the coin in her hands after catching it, and mumbled quietly in surprise,

"I see. So I guess that's what it's about."

The gold coin, which had the profile of an old man carved into it, shone with a momentary flash on Eladia's palm.