

## **Chapter 2 - Story 27: Savage Mane (Beginning)**

"Thank you for having made the journey all the way here."

The exotically dressed Head Priestess, who had painted her forehead and outer eye corners with crimson-colored soil, squints and welcomes everyone. After exchanging greetings with Garam, Zurgu and then Shyemul, the Head Priestess shifted her attention to Souma at last.

"Boy, you're Soma? I've heard rumors about you."

Souma worried what kind of rumors she might have heard, but he bows his head and politely replies, "For me it's also an honor to be allowed to meet you."

"Now then, I'm sorry for being so abrupt, but can I have you show me your seal, boy?"

'As priestess, who serves the Beast God, she's surely curious about Aura, the Goddess of Death and Destruction.' Once Souma unfastens his headband upon her request, the Head Priestess puts Souma's head between her hands after apologizing in advance, brings her face so close that he can feel her breath, and stares at the seal. After a breath-taking silence, the Head Priestess lets a sigh of admiration escape her lips and separates from Souma.

"You allowed me to see something rare. Certainly, there's no mistake that it's that goddess' seal."

"Umm...Aura, what kind of goddess is she?"

'She's the person standing above all priestesses. Maybe she knows something about Aura which others don't?' Thinking that, Souma asked. In response the Head Priestess wrinkles up her nose and screams.

"Ah! Stop right there. To speak that name here. Calling her name spells trouble."

The Head Priestess hugs her own shoulders while her body trembles.

"I'm sorry, but it's not like we're well informed about that goddess either. Either way, you must not extol that goddess. You must not look down on her. You must not concern yourself with her. That's what we've been told since the old days."

"...I see."

He didn't place too many expectations into his question, but even so Souma felt disappointed. He wanted to grasp a clue to learn for what purpose Aura had summoned him into this world and what she wanted him to do.

Seemingly feeling pity with the crestfallen Souma, the Head Priestess says with a gentle voice,

"Unfortunately I can't tell you anything about that goddess, but if there's something else you want to ask, then don't hold back. If it's something I know, I promise to tell you."

Just when he was about to tell her that there's nothing right now, he suddenly remembered

something that bothered him. Given that he had the rare opportunity to ask the Head Priestess anything, he seized his chance and asked,

"Lady Head Priestess, can you use magic?"

Upon that question, not just the Head Priestess, but everyone present looked confused. Wondering whether his question was bad, Souma explains with words and gestures.

"Releasing a fireball or lightning from your hands like this, or unleashing water with a woosh."

If you speak about different world fantasy in modern Japan, magic is a must-have. He never saw that kind of power since coming to this world, but Souma hoped that if it's the Head Priestess, the leader of all priestesses, she might know some kind of magic.

Yet, the Head Priestess burst into laughter in front of the frantically explaining Souma. And not just that. She even begins laughing while rolling around on the floor.

Finally realizing that he had asked a weird question thanks to that, Souma's face dyed red.

"Ah~, you're funny. Unfortunately we can't use the power of magic like the one mentioned by storytellers and their likes."

After laughing for a while the Head Priestess wiped the tears at her eyes away and replied.

"But, I heard that I could only survive in this world thanks to the Elder..."

"Yeah, I heard about that. But, that's actually the Beast God's power. All we can do is to pray to our God. If God notices that prayer, he might wield his power on a whim, as long as there's balance between what's wished for and what's offered. That's how it works."

The Head Priestess points at Souma.

"If people possessing such magic-like power exist, they are likely fellow divine children chosen by the gods."

And then she bends her head back and laughs without showing any inkling of being able to resist the urge to laugh that apparently assailed her once again.

Someone tightly grabbed Souma's shoulder, who shrunk his body due to that while having his whole body tremble in shame. And, once he was turned around energetically, the brightly smiling face of Shyemul was right in front of his eyes.

"Soma, your shame is my shame, too, okay?"

It looks like she's smiling sweetly, but she's baring her fangs. This is obviously a threatening smile.

"Now, now, oh Divine Daughter. Forgive him. I heard about him. This child is a 『Drop Child』 from a different world, right?"

Shyemul, who was soothed by the Head Priestess in such manner, removes her hand from Souma's shoulder very reluctantly. However, her eyes tell him that this matter is still not finished yet, causing him to leak a strained laughter.

"Leaving that aside, you guys, did you have lunch already?"

Upon the Head Priestess' question, Souma and the other three, who were guided here immediately after entering the sacred land Rollo, shake their heads.

"That's good then. Wishing to make you feel welcome, we've prepared a meal. It's great that it wasn't in vain."

Once the Head Priestess clapped her hands together twice, one priestess after the other entered the tent while holding plates with food. After a part of the food was offered on the Beast God's altar, it was placed directly on the sheet.

Once all dishes had been lined up, the Head Priestess offered it to Souma and the others.

"Go on, eat without holding back."

Souma's group, who was sitting in a circle, sighed in astonishment due to the dishes lined up in front of them.

Dumplings made out of nuts and tuber powder. A cluster of meat cut out of a whole roasted cow. Raw liver pickled in rock salt. Once the Head Priestess personally cuts open the abdomen of a whole roasted bird, which was well-done with a light brown color, using a machete, potatoes and root crops spill out from within alongside plenty of meat juice. A huge, tomato-like vegetable was imposingly placed right in the middle of a wooden bowl filled with piping-hot, heavily-spiced soup. There are many dishes resembling those made by Shyemul so far, but Souma also manages to catch sight of dishes he sees for the first time.

"That's freshly caught catfish fried in cow oil."

Fish was rare in the zoan cuisine that's heavily inclining towards cow and bird meat. As Souma stared at the catfish, which had been deep-fried without breading or butter, with its huge mouth still open, the Head Priestess provided an explanation. With there being few watering holes in the plains, fish dishes are definitely rare. Especially this dish made out of catfish seems to be a treat one won't be able to eat unless during celebrations and festivals. Someone like Zurgu crunches down the catfish starting from the head while being all smiles.

In addition there are also sausages among the provided dishes. Souma was delighted that those exist in this world as well.

"It looks like you're quite pleased with this dish."

Being addressed by Shyemul like that, Souma realized that his hand was only extending towards the blackish sausages among the various types available.

"Yeah. This is really delicious."

You couldn't call it appetizing with its pitch black exterior, but once he tried it, it was very tasty. Finely cut intestines and cartilages have apparently been stuffed inside. The sausage's unique texture while chewing and the tingling stimulus of the spices that were used plentifully encourages Souma to keep eating more.

"I see. This is something only made for celebrations and festivals, but if you like it this much, I will make it for you once we return to the city."

The taste and texture seems to hint towards liver. Dishes using liver, which spoils easily, likely won't be made often outside the times of slaughtering cattle in this world that has no refrigerators and such.

Those were Souma's thoughts, but he was slightly wrong.

The true identity of this sausage is that of a blood sausage which wasn't made only out of intestines, but also blood. It's an unfamiliar dish in Japan with its cuisine that usually lacked meat dishes, but if one looks around the world, blood sausage isn't such a rare dish at all, seeing as it's a food that uses all of the livestock without wasting anything.

And it's a dish that's spreading even among the pioneer villages in the Solbiant Plains alongside the expansion of stock-farming and the exchange with the zoan. For now it still hadn't propagated widely, though.

A little later in the future there will be surprising rumors about Shyemul cheerfully carrying fresh cow blood while saying, "I'm going to make Soma's favorite dish," but that's a story for yet another time.

As all of them were enjoying the dishes with relish, a single warrior appeared and quietly whispered something into the Head Priestess' ear.

"Hoh, I see. —Somehow it looks like we received various gifts. You have my gratitude."

'It seems like the souvenirs Yoash allowed us to keep were safely handed over.' Due to that Souma remembered something he forgot.

After wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, Souma offered the Head Priestess something he had Shyemul bring along.

"Please take this."

It's a leather bag with the size of a baby's head. Once the Head Priestess unfastened the string binding the leather bag's opening and took out the contents, she realized it being silver coins.

"It's the payment for the rock salt."

"Well, even if you call it payment. It's not like the salt belongs to anyone to begin with. It's property of all the zoan of the plains. Our Eye Clan only takes care of it so that it's not monopolized by someone. Besides, even if you give me something like this..."

Money doesn't circulate among the zoan. Gold and silver is also too precious for the zoan, who don't possess the techniques to process either. Unable to use them for anything but as ornaments for the Head Priestess and as ritual tools, the use for those metals is limited instead.

"Please equally distribute these together with the gifts to all clans then. If there's something that fancies you among the gifts, I would be happy if I could have you buy it in the city next time, using this money."

In the first place, Souma's objective is to have the zoan and humans mingle with each other through trade. Rather than those things being hogged by a part of the zoan, it's more convenient to have it spread to all of them.

"That's a great idea!"

It was Zurgu who first welcomed Souma's suggestion. 'It was also the same when I first proposed the development of the plains, but even so, Zurgu's flexible way of thinking is amazing. Zurgu, who doesn't notice Souma staring at him full of admiration, licked his chops with a slurping.

"I want to buy that fish as dried food. And also, the liquor made out of fruits!"

'Maybe he's just a glutton?' Souma was seriously troubled.



"Now then, even though there's still time until the Borollo festival, I called you over because there's a little problem."

Choosing the right moment after the dishes were cleaned up, the Head Priestess began to talk. And then, the Head Priestess, who led Souma's group outside the tent, walked until the edge of Rollo, and pointed at a spot of the plains spreading below them.

"Look, over there is a hill. Can you see it?"

Ahead of where the Head Priestess pointed was a small hill that rose all alone in the plains like an island.

As only several zoan tents and sparse trees are visible in the distance, it's not such an unusual sight. But, everyone became speechless after hearing the Head Priestess' following words.

"Folks wanting to wreck the Borollo festival are gathering over there."

It's no exaggeration to say that holding the Borollo is the dearest wish of the zoan living in the plains. By no means did anyone expect in their wildest dreams that there are zoan who are trying to disturb that festival.

"To be more precise, it's a gathering of people disapproving of this boy becoming Clan King. While at it, they are also opposing you, 《Ferocious Fang》, as unsuitable for the position of Great Clan Chief since you have nominated a human as Clan King. They are declaring that they won't cease wrecking the Borollo if it's for the sake of preventing you two's official succession of your titles."

Zurgu spoke while subduing his anger.

"Just who the heck are they...?"

Opposing Souma becoming Clan King is a matter of course, but if it comes to even deny Garam becoming Great Clan Chief, it's very likely the deed of the Claw Clan that was antagonistic towards the Fang Clan so far. If that was to be true, it would mean that there are people contradicting the will of Zurgu, their clan chief, within the Claw Clan.

Due to Zurgu cladding him in a dangerous aura, the Head Priestess hurriedly waves her hands.

"It's not like it's a clan, actually. It's a gathering of zoan from all over. —However, the one in their center is..."

At that point the Head Priestess meaningfully stared at Garam.

"«Savage Mane» Menuin Nulga Manbaha."

Going by his clan surname Menuin, it's at least obvious that he's a zoan of the Mane Clan, but Souma doesn't remember having heard that name before.

However, for Garam and the other two zoan, that name was apparently one they couldn't overlook. Shyemul and Zurgu stare at Garam with surprised expressions. And Garam wrinkled his nose and traced the scar on his face with a finger.

Going by the Head Priestess' behavior, he was a person that seemed to have some kind of fated connection with Garam, but due to the atmosphere, which didn't really seem appropriate to ask questions, Souma had no other option but to watch the outcome silently.

"...What about Bararak?"

After a while Garam finally spoke, confirming the movements of Bararak, the clan chief of the Mane Clan.

"He's saying that he sent a messenger to remonstrate Manbaha and that he'll come here at once as well, but I wonder about that. That guy seems to consider only himself to be clever, resulting in him bringing calamity upon himself with all his various schemes. You can't place any expectations on him."

Although he hasn't criticized them publicly, Bararak also harbors discontent about Garam becoming Great Clan Chief and Souma becoming Clan King. Very likely he happily ignores Manbaha's actions, intending to watch what's going to happen as spectator.

"Then Bararak has secretly joined hands with «Savage Mane» on top of plotting all of it?"

The Head Priestess shakes her head at Garam's question.

"That's not the case. In the first place, «Savage Mane» is someone looking down even on his clan chief."

Among the zoan who value a warrior's bravery, only the Mane Clan decides its clan chief through a conference between influential blood relatives (those families that have very close blood relations even within the clan itself). It's said that this is the reason why Manbaha voiced his dissatisfaction over Bararak, whose ability as warrior is far below his own, being the clan chief with, "If this was a different clan, I would definitely be the clan chief," for a long time.

Having heard that, Zurgu laughed scornfully.

"That Manbaha sure seems to believe that one can be a clan chief with just their physical strength, but he couldn't be any wronger."

Due to the unexpected words of Zurgu, who's proud of his own physical strength, Shyemul

reflexively ends up asking, "Is that something you should be saying?" Immediately realizing her own verbal slip, she blocked her mouth with both hands in a hurry, but the person in question, Zurgu, answered without minding it at all,

"Aye! When I had just become clan chief myself, I ordered my brethren without listening to them, earning their antagonism. At that time I was on the verge of being denounced on top of being really close to being dragged down from my position as clan chief. But then my older sister, who heard the stories, came back and appealed to the family of her husband after having beaten me up until I was unable to stand. Thanks to that I somehow managed to get through this."

"How to say it...that's an amazing story."

Souma seriously says after having heard Zurgu's story.

"Yeah. Thinking back now, it was a good experience."

The one Souma considered to be the most amazing is Zurgu's sister who trashed a person like him, but he decided to keep silent about that.

"If it's about him not being suited as clan chief, I certainly agree with you as well."

The Head Priestess assented.

"But, that man's past fame is nothing to scoff at either. Right now it's less than 200 people, but once the Borollo draws near, a lot more people will gather here. I'm sure among them there will be others who will agree with those guys. If their numbers grow any further, they will go out of control."

The zoan of the plains were oppressed by humans for 30 years. Everyone, without exception, has family, friends or lovers who were killed by humans. Among those zoan there will be many who will feel repulsion towards accepting Souma, a human, as Clan King, even if he might have regained the plains for them. Right now they are being held back by the strong support of the two great warriors, Garam and Zurgu, and the Divine Daughter, Shyemul, but the recent actions of Manbaha might very likely serve as trigger for their pent-up frustration to explode.

"Well, we are troubled about this as well. —Therefore I've got a request."

The Head Priestess raised the corners of her mouth slightly and turned her finger towards Souma.

"I'd like this boy, who will become our new Clan King, to resolve this situation in a whiff."

Souma, who had all of it suddenly dumped on himself, was instinctively about to ask, "Why me?", but swallowed the words down in a hurry.

'This must be a trial. I'm being tested whether I can really show my ability to control the zoan of the plains.

'In that case there's no way that I can refuse.

'However, in order to challenge the trial, I need to confirm the achievement conditions.

"If you speak of resolving the situation, what concretely do you have in mind?"

The Head Priestess nodded in satisfaction upon his question. For the great majority of the zoan, who are unhappy about Souma becoming their Clan King, this matter is a suitable chance to demonstrate his capability. Learning that he's blessed with the discernment to properly understand this fact is convenient for her as Head Priestess who must hold the ceremony to crown him as Clan King.

"Persuading them, or making them yield by beating the lights out of them; anything's fine. Either way, it would be great if you could subdue the bunch over there and make them shut up."

Since the Head Priestess hadn't pointed out any means, Souma interpreted that it would be alright as long as he forces that zoan called Manbaha into submission.

"What kind of person is that Manbaha?"

'No matter whether I persuade him or beat him up, I have to know my opponent either way.' First he asked about Manbaha's traits. In response Zurgu laughs meaningfully.

"He's the past strongest warrior of the plains. —Right, Garam?"

Even Souma knows that Garam is referred to as the strongest warrior of the plains. Since Zurgu especially added 'past' to the title, Garam seems to have some kind of fate with Manbaha after all. Souma turns a questioning look at Garam.

"Got it. I will tell you."

Having noticed Souma's gaze, Garam said after sighing once.

"«Savage Mane» Menuin Nulga Manbaha is the man who was called the strongest warrior of the plains in the past. And——"

He points at the scar on his own face.

"—he's also the man who carved this scar on my face."