

## **Chapter 2 - Story 30: Mud**

"Why is there mud in this place!?"

It's natural for Manbaha to be surprised. As for the reason: the ground in the vicinity has turned into mud, causing Manbaha to be buried up to the shins.

That place was a mud trap prepared by the dwarves overnight according to Souma's request.

Although you might say it has been fabricated this way, it's no big deal either. After lightly digging up the ground, they just added water and mud they had drawn from the pond. If you camouflage the place by suitably covering it with weeds growing in the vicinity after pulling them out alongside the roots, the difference won't be obvious from a distance. Much less to talk about the eyes, which were clouded with thoroughly instigated anger, being blended by the sun light and its reflection by the pond.

Once Manbaha looks back after hearing screams and angry roars behind him, he finds his comrades being caught one after the other in the mud just like himself.

Some who fell over after having their feet or hands tripped up by the sudden mud. Some that fell into the mud by tripping over the ones who got stuck in the mud after running ahead, despite trying to stop in a hurry and yet failing. Some that ended up being likewise pushed inside the mud by those following after them, despite having stopped in time. Some that dropped right in the middle of the mud, despite jumping into the air at once like Manbaha. Some that moved about in confusion not knowing what to do due to the state of the ones who ran in front of them, despite not having been caught by the mud.

While gazing at them, Souma addressed Shyemul.

"The zoan are exceedingly specialized to run fast. And not just their bodies. Even their culture and lives have specialized towards them running on all four."

For example, the zoan's machete. A zoan's machete is a warrior's weapon, but at the same time it's a tool that's used for everything in a zoan's life. It's only natural to use it for killing prey, but the machete is even used for dismantling that prey. And same applies to pruning the thicket, cooking, and splitting firewood. The zoan literally use their machete for everything.

They restricted the tools they carry with them for the sake of running fast, and that's likely the reason why a tool like that was born in the first place.

"For the sake of running quickly, the zoan don't carry swords or long-handled weapons which will become hindrances. They don't wear heavy armor either. Nor do they carry shields. Same applies even for bows and arrows."

Bows are tools created to hunt prey from a distance.

Why does one have to hunt prey from a distance? That's because many of the animals are quick on their feet. If they run away, it won't be possible to approach them, leave alone chase them. A tool to hunt prey from a distance like bows is necessary for that reason.

However, the zoan run faster than the animals which are their prey. Therefore the method of directly jumping the prey and killing it with the machete is more reliable for them than shooting the prey with an arrow from a distance.

And that's the very reason why the zoan scorn those using weapons such as bows as cowardly and gutless.

"But, what will happen if you seal their biggest weapon, their legs? All that's left will just be soldiers that wear nothing but meager armaments."

Shyemul listened to Souma's words somewhat dumbfounded.

Even though it's not like the mud is overly deep, Manbaha and his men had their biggest weapon, their speed, completely sealed, just as Souma said. And not just that. They try to quickly get out of the mud, but probably because they lost their calm due to the sudden events and the enemy right in front of their eyes, they push down their comrades or fall down by themselves, struggling unsightly inside the mud. The ones there are not the zoan who were hailed as supreme rulers of the plains. Then Souma gives Dvalin's dwarves, who stood behind him, a signal by raising a hand.

"Now then, let's have them surrender."

Seeing the signal, they push out the leather bags with long strings attached in their hands in front. And then they spin the leather bags while holding the strings. Using the centrifugal force, they throw several bags at the zoan squirming in the mud.

One of the bags directly hits the head of a single zoan, who is laying atop another. However, contrary to his expectations, there's no pain or impact. Instead the male zoan is entirely covered by the liquid that had been inside the bag.

"W-What the heck is this...!?"

Wondering about that only lasted a short moment. The man immediately realized the liquid's true identity.

"This smell! O-Oil!?"

The other zoan also notice the liquid's smell that covered their bodies and raise their voices in the same way.

In front of that scenery, Shyemul furrows her eyebrows suspiciously.

It was the plan to demand their surrender after stopping the feet of Manbaha's group with mud and toss oil at them, but even so, Souma doesn't say anything, no matter how much time passes. The range of the mud created within one night isn't as wide as they might believe. Right now they are in chaos, but if he doesn't make them surrender quickly, Manbaha and his men will break free.

Shyemul, who looked at Souma while wondering what's wrong, widens her eyes in surprise.

Souma, who held a burning torch, trembled. Seemingly intending to demand their surrender, his mouth is partly open, but no sound escapes his lips. It feels like his face is somewhat pale.

Shyemul, who believed that something's wrong, at once snatches the torch from Souma and yells towards Manbaha's group,

"Don't move!!!"

Being struck by Shyemul's roar, they stop moving.

"I am Shyemul, daughter of Galguss, member of the Fang Clan which is one of the twelve zoan clans! I am the divine daughter of the Beast God and have received the nickname «Noble Fang»!"

Shyemul thrust the torch at Manbaha's group as if it were a machete.

"«Savage Mane» and those following him! Throw away your machetes at once! If you declare that you are unwilling to do so, I won't have any other choice! The one over here, my 『Navel Master』 Kisaki Soma, defeated the humans who assaulted our village to save us, the Fang Clan! Even you lowlifes should have heard of that!"

The story of the 「Battle of Hognareah Hill」, where Souma destroyed Holmea's army with a fire attack, is a well-known truth among the zoan of the plains.

Those who were completely covered with oil screamed after just hearing Shyemul's threat.

"If there's anyone who resists, I will have them experience his might with their very own body! Also, if you do not wish to watch your own comrades burn in front of your eyes, the others are to throw away the machetes as well!"

While his comrades were exchanging looks, only Manbaha himself raised hell.

"You bastards, don't falter! Kill those guys! It's a bluff anyway! Torture them to death!"

However, they are people who came following Manbaha's fame. If Manbaha were to be burned to death, there wouldn't be anyone that could unify them. Even those stuck in the mud couldn't fight despite being told to do so, once they considered that their comrades would burn to death for the sake of them turning their blades at the enemy.

First the zoan, who were covered with oil, dropped their machetes. With that as a start, the others let go of their machetes in succession, too.

"Very well! —Dvalin, I don't think that they will be so shameless to resist once they acknowledged their defeat. I will leave them to you."

Shyemul, who entrusted the aftermath to Dvalin, extinguished the torch by thrusting it into the mud, and called out to Souma.

"Hey, Soma. Are you alright?"

Shyemul talks to him with a flustered expression, however, Souma only stares at her in puzzlement.

"Mmh? Eh? —I'm fine. What's wrong?"

Shyemul frowns at Souma's state.

"Right. Thanks, Shyemul. My voice didn't come out. Probably because I was nervous. It was a big help that you demanded their surrender in my stead."

Shyemul fixedly looks at Souma's face, who gives his thanks as if this all has nothing to do with him, for a short while.

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

'It doesn't seem as if he's hiding something. It looks like he's saying that for real. Shyemul judged.

"...No. It's nothing. Just my imagination."

'Very likely he still hasn't recovered from the emotional scars caused when he burned his enemies to death in that fire attack.

'Even though he should have known best that it was just a threat with no intention to actually burn them at all, that mental trauma has affected him so strongly and deeply that he became unable to speak at the moment when he was about to threaten them with a death by fire. Moreover, he isn't even aware of that himself.

'It will be all fine if that doesn't become a problem later down the road.

Shyemul cannot help but to pray for that to not happen.



"This is a surprise. For you to truly have taken care of «Savage Mane»'s gang so quickly."

The Head Priestess cackles in front of Manbaha's group who were led to the sacred ground Rollo while being bound.

Manbaha and those that approved of him sat in front of the Head Priest with their heads hanging down dejectedly.

Not only did they lose and had their machetes confiscated, they were still covered in mud all over. Their big bragging about not approving of Souma and Garam while even going as far as hindering the Grand Festival Borollo is nowhere to be found anymore.

Even among them, Manbaha was in a particularly terrible state.

Because only Manbaha didn't surrender in the least, Souma's group unwillingly dragged him outside the mud after sealing his movements by throwing ropes at him from the sides. For that reason Manbaha was in a state where it would be difficult to find any spots on him that were not stained with mud. His prided fur is also a mere shadow of its former self now.

"But, I didn't want you to tamper with the pond over there too much. It's an important watering place, you know? Besides, the catfish that can be caught there are a crucial treat for the festival."

Not really intending to blame Souma to begin with once he had apologized for that, the Head Priestess didn't pursue the matter any further.

"So, how do you guys feel? You were beaten black and blue by a human whom you utterly ridiculed."

Upon the Head Priestess' words, the zoan, who approved of Manbaha, uniformly curled up their bodies in shame.

"I don't accept this!"

And yet Manbaha acted brave and reproached Souma.

"You don't know when to give up, «Savage Mane»."

Being remonstrated by Garam makes Manbaha rage instead.

"Don't fuck with me! I don't approve of such a cowardly battle!"

And then Manbaha turned his eyes in Souma's direction and roared loudly,

"Human brat! Fight me! A duel! If you win against me, I will approve of you bastard!"

Souma ends up troubled due to Manbaha shouting at him.

"Even if you tell me to duel you, I can't fight..."

Manbaha believed that to be the excuse of a coward.

"You coward! Does a man run away from a duel!?"

Souma smiles bitterly at Manbaha who ridicules him like that.

"That's not it. Because of my blessing, I can't hurt anyone nor destroy anything."

Manbaha insulted that as being an unsightly excuse, saying that there's no way for a blessing given by a god to their child to be something so close to a curse.

However, once Souma actually demonstrated it to him, he had no choice but to believe it. After all, the machete, which Souma swung down at Manbaha with all his strength, didn't cause the slightest pain, let alone any wound. Something like that is absolutely impossible unless it's caused by an abnormal power like a blessing.

Shyemul said to Manbaha, who stared in wonder due to the power of Souma's blessing, in order to admonish him,

"«Savage Mane», are you going to call it a victory if you drag someone who can't fight into a duel? That in itself is actually considered to go against a warrior's honor, isn't it?"

It's the words of Shyemul, the divine child whose honor is protected by the Beast God's blessing. As expected, even Manbaha couldn't insist on having a duel against Souma.

"T-Then select a proxy! Send out the strongest warrior you know of!"

Instead Manbaha desperately suggested to that it's fine to have a proxy fight in the duel.

"The strongest warrior, you say...?"

After folding his arms and pondering for a while, Souma requested something of the zoan archer Fagul Gulshata Shahata.

Thereupon, Shahata, who always does what Souma requests of him, pulls a reluctant face.

However, after being asked once more, Shahata went off somewhere with heavy steps.

Suspecting something from Shahata's retreating figure, Garam grimaced and called out to Manbaha.

"«Savage Mane»..."

Manbaha raises his voice at Garam who called out to him with a solemn expression.

"It's a great opportunity, Garam! I will have you dispel my previous enmity here! This time I won't be negligent! I will make you realize who's the true strongest warrior of the plains!"

Due to Manbaha laughing while bragging like that, the look in Garam's eyes appear to be full of pity.

"You're wrong, «Savage Mane»."

Garam addressed Manbaha, who seemed to be under the impression that he would stand in as proxy for the duel, with a calm tone.

"It's no shame to be told that you can't run as fast as a bird flies. Just because you can't break a rock by striking it with your bare hands, it's not like your power is lacking. «Savage Mane», don't misread the time when to bet your honor as warrior."

"What in Genobanda's name are you talking about...?"

A strange sound reached Manbaha's ears as he's knitting his brows while trying to grasp the real meaning behind Garam's words.

It's a noisy sound, similar to pieces of metal hitting each other with a jangling. Accompanying that, a sound as if the ground is steadily struck by something heavy reverberates regularly.

Suddenly a wall appeared in front of Manbaha's group, who wondered what might be causing all those sounds with quizzical looks.

No, that's no wall.

What made them believe that it's a sturdy wall is the bulky chest covered with greenish gray scales. A huge body that towers more than two melt into the air. And, on top a reptile head whose expression is unreadable.

It opens its mouth with fangs, which give one the impression of being sharp knife blades, lining up, and introduces itself.

"I'm a descendant of the great dragon, Jahangil Hesam Jalji."

The zoan, who were present, were all taken aback.

They knew about the existence of dinosaurs from stories, but seeing one live was a first for all of them.

"Sorry for calling you all of a sudden, Jahangil."

Far from minding it, Jahangil said joyfully to Souma, who apologized, as if it was rather a great idea to call him,

"As expected of you, Soma! How nice to nominate this me as proxy for your duel!"

And Jahangil, whose blood was boiling upon the prospect of fighting a duel, spread his arms widely and roared,

"My blood is seething! It's boiling over!"

Jahangil starts to swing the chain with the attached iron ball in his hand, causing a buzzing. The chain, which was swung especially widely as if performing a giant swing alongside his strange voice, loudly twined itself around a bush that grew nearby.

In the next instant, as soon as the muscles of Jahangil's arm that holds the iron chain bulged, the bush is pulled out of the ground alongside its roots. The bush, which was pulled in by flying through the air while scattering earth, was broken right in half by Jahangil's downward-swung right fist.

Jahangil, who wasn't satisfied with only that much, grabbed a nearby stone, which was as big as a person's head, with his free left hand while brandishing the iron ball with his right hand again, and tossed it into the sky like a pebble.

A roaring war cry welled up from within his mouth.

The iron ball, which he threw alongside that roar, directly hits the airborne stone. The stone is pulverized as if having exploded.

All the zoan, who had small stone fragments rain down on them, widen their eyes and freeze with all their fur standing on end. Even the Head Priestess became petrified while staring in surprise. The only exceptions are Garam, Zurgu, Shyemul, and Souma who have become used to seeing Jahangil going on a rampage.

"Now then, who is it!? Who's my duel opponent!?"

Looking for his opponent, he first grabs the head of a nearby zoan with an eagle grip, lifts him up with his right arm and bring his face close to his.

"Are you bastard my opponent?"

"N-N-No! It's not me! Not me!"

The warrior denies with a frantic expression.

Jahangil, who lost any interest in him once he knew that he's not his opponent, tossed the warrior away as if getting rid of something worthless.

"Mine opponent, who is it!?"

In response to that yell, the zoan simultaneously look in Manbaha's direction.

Jahangil, who finally knew his opponent, lifts the corners of his mouth so obviously to a smile that even other races can understand it from his normally incomprehensible face, and walks over to Manbaha with loud footsteps.

Garam called out to Manbaha whose eyes were widened in shock while he had become a statue with his fur on end.

"«Savage Mane», let me tell you in advance. Even «Mad Claw» and I refuse being that guy's opponent."

Next to him Zurgu nodded with a humble expression.

"...I appreciate it."

As one would expect, even Manbaha gave in upon Jahangil approaching with the iron ball in hand.

"It's my loss..."

The iron ball fell out of Jahangil's hand, landing with a thud.



Jahangil, who had the duel come to an end before the fight started even though he had braced himself for it and came over, became quite sulky. When Souma praised Jahangil, who was stomping his feet while insisting on fighting someone, with "Wow! To win against the opponent without even fighting! Nothing less of you, Jahangil!", he responded by roughly breathing out through his nose, apparently having his mood improved at last.

As if a storm had passed, everyone present exhaled in relief.

"B-But, it's not like I acknowledged that human brat's authority yet!"

Manbaha shouted once more after Jahangil was out of sight. However, with him having trembled in front of Jahangil just now, that's just laughable.

Souma seriously considered whether to call back Jahangil.

"What the heck are you telling us to do then?"

Garam grills him in a somewhat fed-up manner, but since Manbaha doesn't feel inclined in accepting neither Garam nor Souma in the first place, there's no way that he has an idea what they have to do for him to acknowledge their claims. All he does is obstinately denying it.

Just when Souma and the others were greatly troubled about this, the Head Priestess cut into the conversation.

"Isn't it fine without fighting in particular? In short, this child just has to show his valor of leading the warriors, right?"

Manbaha simply can't approve of either emotionally, but he hesitates frankly voicing out that truth. For the time being he nods, assenting to the Head Priestess' statement.

"Then I have a good idea."

All of them focused on the Head Priestess at once.

She was asked just what kind of method she has come up with, but the Head Priestess gave them the slip by smiling impishly.

"Well, let's leave that entertainment for later. To do it, we have to travel for a bit. Let's happily depart together tomorrow."

After saying that, the Head Priestess gave no further answers, no matter what the others asked. And then, on the next day, Souma headed east of Rollo while being guided by the Head Priestess and others of the Eye Clan. The ones accompanying him are Shyemul, Garam, Zurgu, and in addition Manbaha, who came along as witness of the trial. Jahangil was eager to come with them as well, but upon Manbaha's insistent demand, Jahangil stayed back at Rollo together with Dvalin and

the others.

They were worried that Manbaha will cause another quarrel if he's allowed to accompany them, but at least on the surface, he was obedient. Being defeated by Souma's plan and having acknowledged his defeat in the duel he started himself, apparently made even Manbaha act somewhat prudently.

Also, being fully threatened with "If you throw yet another tantrum, I won't guarantee the destination of your soul after your death" by the Head Priestess at the time of their departure played a big role. No matter how much confidence he might have in his strength, being implicitly told, "Is it fine for your soul to be dropped into Genobanda's swamp of excreta after your death?" by the Head Priestess who rules over the zoan's rituals, was likely nothing he could have endured.

For that reason the journey was relatively calm, albeit they didn't know the destination.

However, that was only limited to the beginning.

As one day and then two followed, the state of Shyemul and the others started to become odd.

They didn't voice it out, but they were apparently feeling some kind of big uneasiness. Even when Souma, who had noticed that, asked about it, they didn't respond with any more than a vague reply of "No, by no means." To Souma it only looked like they deliberately wanted to deny that possibility.

And then, on the evening of the third day after leaving Rollo, Shyemul, who had finally reached the limit of her patience, questioned the Head Priestess as they were eating dinner all together.

"Lady Head Priestess! Give it a rest and tell us what you're trying to have Soma do!"

"Oh my, that's weird. Haven't all of you realized a long time ago already?"

Shyemul is at a loss of words due to that reply.

'As I thought, she seems to have noticed something,' Souma was convinced.

"I'm sorry. To me it's not clear what's going on at all. Can I have you tell me, if possible?"

"My, I guess so. Haven't you been told by the Divine Daughter? How cold-hearted."

Once the Head Priestess says so as if teasing Souma, Shyemul mumbles the objection, "I didn't tell him since I wasn't sure myself," under her breath. 'With an upbeat and free hearted person like her being so evasive, I'm sure that she realized after all.

"Boy, come over here for a bit."

Being beckoned over by the Head Priestess who stood up right away, Souma followed her to the eastern edge of their camp.

"Look, it's over there. It already visible for you as well, right?"

The Head Priestess pointed east while saying so.

What's to be found there is the mountain range surrounding the Solbiant Plains. The sight of steep mountains with their black surface lining up from the south to the north is similar to one ongoing, huge and black wall.

Suddenly a strange scene is reflected in the eyes of Souma, who tilted his head in confusion, wondering what might be wrong with those mountains.

It was a bluish-white light.

The light floated within the black mountains' shadow.

Once Souma strains his eyes, it appears as if that light is swaying faintly. It looks just like a flame. No, a blue flame is actually burning. Naturally Souma holds his breath due to the bluish-white light he saw for the first time in this world lacking any decorative illumination.

Like a child that disclosed her cherished secret, the Head Priestess tells Souma,

"I will have you climb that Maha Genobandela and spend a night there all by yourself."

At that moment an invisible shock traveled across the zoan.

"No way! Are you telling him to spend a night at such a place!?"

Garam, who never showed fear in front of the big enemy army, presses the Head Priestess for an answer with a pale face. Plain fear dyed his voice.

"It's not impossible. I also spend a night there in order to become the Head Priestess."

"However, putting aside you, a priestess who accumulated training over many years and received the Beast God's protection, I hear that place is not be visited by the living."

Souma was taken aback due to even Zurgu, who doesn't know fear, protesting with his fur being on end.

"I have also been told about it by the Elder many times. That place is no rumor or myth. Isn't it said that countless warriors knowing no fear actually went there to test their courage just to never return again!?"

"Yeah, that's true. As far as I know, the number of warriors and priestesses, who didn't come back from there, exceeds the number of fingers on both hands."

Shyemul flares up, but the Head Priestess says something dreadful without any care.

"Interesting!" Manbaha yelled. "—If he has enough courage to spend a night over there by himself, I will yield as well!"

The difficulty is easily guessable as even Manbaha, who is obstinately denying Souma's promotion to Clan King, says that he will approve of Souma, if he does it. As expected, Souma also got worried and asked Shyemul,

"Hey, Shyemul. What's with the mountain everyone's talking about?"

Shyemul hesitates to speak about it, but making her resolve after a short while, she reluctantly explains,

"According to legends, an abominable, huge sinner was banished there. It's a mountain where ghosts, who loiter the area after being drawn in by his corrupted soul, gather. A mountain of death where the blue will-o'-wisps burn. Even mentioning its name is terrifying. We call that mountain——"

Shyemul said with a trembling voice to Souma who gulps down his saliva,

"——Genobanda's Mountain."