

Chapter 2 - Story 31: Maha Genobandela

The next morning, Maha Genobandela, simply looked like a normal mountain from the distance under the sunlight.

Once you look up at it from its foot, you can see a yellowish-brown mountain surface with no vegetation growing on it. Furthermore, since white smoke is rising here and there, it seems to be an active volcano.

However, it was no eerie mountain colored by the blue light of will-o'-wisps like last night.

"Listen. If you continue following the path adorned with Beast God statues, you will come out at a lake filled with 『Fire Water』. There I'd like you to draw some 『Fire Water』, head to the summit, and spend a night at the small shrine located there."

The Head Priestess explained the details of the trial in front of Souma's group.

"—What are you going to do? If you want to give up, now's the time."

Even Shyemul, who would normally shout "Don't belittle Soma!" in anger at the provocative manner of the Head Priestess' speaking, bobs her head up and down slightly. 'It looks like this Maha Genobandela is quite the terrifying mountain for the zoan.

"It's fine. Besides, I'm curious about what kind of mountain it is anyway."

Souma said while shouldering a wooden rack with shoulder straps that had a small earthenware pot placed on it.

What has aroused Souma's interest is the "Fire Water" mentioned by the Head Priestess.

He was told by the Head Priestess to fetch the "Fire Water" from the lake as proof of the trial's completion, but until now he wasn't told in detail what kind of substance it is. No matter how often he asked, the Head Priestess dodged it by saying, "Look forward to actually seeing it," keeping him completely in the dark about its true identity.

'However, going by it being called "Fire Water," it's probably not wrong to consider it to be related to fire in some way.

What Souma came up with first while thinking so is oil.

'If so much oil had gathered that it could be called a lake, it would be a great discovery. The majority of this world's fuel depends on wood, but it might be possible to overturn it with that.

He wanted to ascertain its real identity by any means necessary.

"Hey, Soma. Isn't it fine to not do the impossible and avoid climbing the mountain?"

Shyemul voiced out her disapproval even right before Souma was about to ascend the Maha Genobandela.

"If we consider it some more, there will likely be other good methods as well. That place is really dangerous!"

"Oh my, Divine Daughter. How about believing in your own 『Navel Master』 a bit."

Shyemul was chided by the Head Priestess, causing her to get angry since her trust in Souma was

called in question.

"I always believe in Soma!"

However, she immediately wrinkled up her nose and lowered her voice.

"However, as you are well aware, Lady Head Priestess, I hear the ones staying on Maha Genobandela are ghosts not of this world. Furthermore, those are no mere rumors. Leaving aside if it was a matter of the present world, with ghosts as opponents..."

Garam and Zurgu, who had the same thoughts albeit not voicing them out, groan while folding their arms.

"But, Manbaha said that he would approve of me if I complete this trial."

Manbaha, who has absolutely no interest in acknowledging Souma, declared that he would do so if Souma spends a night on Maha Genobandela. For Souma, who wants to obtain the trust of all zoan by any means, it was worth it to brave that danger. And not only that. In addition to it being a suggestion by the Head Priestess, Manbaha, who is completely under the impression that Souma won't be able to achieve it, likely will never agree even if they bring up any other conditions. Precisely because they understand that, Garam and Zurgu had no other choice but to stay silent.

"Hey! Take this with you."

The Head Priestess passed a leather bag filled with water and two buns to Souma.

"There's food inside the two buns. Eat the yellow bun at noon, and the red one at evening. Originally it's something you eat after offering a prayer to the Beast God, but in your case it doesn't matter to go with the name of a god you believe in."

Souma approved and placed the buns on the wooden rack together with woolen material to be used for spending the night on the mountain.

"Soma, wait a moment!"

Shyemul, who held back Souma as he was about to finally ascend the mountain, immediately runs away, apparently having thought of something.

Coming back soon after that, Shyemul forced a heap of ornaments, which she carried with both hands, on Souma.

"Soma! These are charms I had the priestesses hand over after requesting them earnestly. Take these with you."

Beginning with a fist-sized stone that had various designs carved onto its surface, all of them are charms against evil such as wooden talismans, necklaces and head ornaments. All of them were given to Shyemul after she bowed her head to the priestesses of the Eye Clan accompanying them. Shyemul cheerfully hangs them around Souma's neck, coils them around his wrists, and shoves them into his pockets.

However, as just the necklaces are more than five, attaching all of them would be too bulky, no

matter how you look at it.

"Divine Daughter, don't you think that he won't be able to carry all of that?"

Unable to keep watching, the Head Priestess went as far as rebuking Shyemul.

'As expected, I can't take everything with me, but still, these are items Shyemul collected for me out of worry.' Souma, who only put on the charms he could wear, said with an as energetic voice as possible to Shyemul, who still wrinkled up her nose in anxiety,

"Well then, I'm off."

"Yeah. —Make sure to definitely come back safely! Without fail! Without fail, got it!?"

Souma smiled and waved a hand upon Shyemul's words, and then turned his back on her to begin climbing the Maha Genobandela.

Due to Shyemul showing no signs of moving while still staring in the direction of Souma even after he could not be seen any longer, the Head Priestess gently calls out to her.

"Now, now, Divine Daughter. There ain't no need to worry. That boy is the divine son of that goddess, you know? Even ghosts won't be able to mess with him that easily. Besides, I will also perform the ceremony to pray for that boy's safety from now on, so have a peace of mind."

Shyemul, who took her eyes off the mountain at last, bowed very deeply towards the Head Priestess.

"Lady Head Priestess, please, pray for the Beast God's divine protection for Soma..."



The Maha Genobandela is a deserted and desolate mountain.

Even the number of plants, which could be still seen sparsely when he began the climb, noticeably decreased. Within less than half a toki, the scenery changed into that of rugged rocks.

As far as the eye can see, only very few lichens are growing here and there. Not a single other weed is visible. Of course, if there are no herbivores that eat such plants, carnivores preying upon them are not present either. Coupled with the scenery of white smoke rising up all over the mountain's surface, the Maha Genobandela turned into a place with an eerie atmosphere hanging in the air.

Within such ambience, Souma silently climbed the mountain.

What Souma is walking on is a narrow path which is a mountain trail in name only. With just big stones that would be obstacles moved out of the way, the footing is bad too. Souma concentrated on moving his feet even while being close to falling down countless times due to the stone beneath his feet giving way.

However, his pace is slow.

That's because uneasiness gradually sprouted within Souma's chest as he was climbing the mountain.

The sight of Maha Genobandela as it was dyed by blue flames last night was something that couldn't possibly be out of this world.

Even if you are told in modern Japan that ghosts are going to come out, it will be laughed down as

absurd, but in this world gods actually exist in reality. If there are gods, it wouldn't be strange for something like ghosts to exist either.

Sometimes, probably because of the fiercely blowing wind or the gases blowing up from the underground, sounds of rocks tumbling down can be heard from somewhere. Each time he hears that, Souma's body trembles with a start. Even when he surveys the vicinity, he can't see animals or something similar to the figures of people.

However, that instead triggers the wild idea that someone, who doesn't show himself, is continuously observing him while hidden, causing Souma to be scared all by himself.

And then, when he had climbed the mountain for around two hours, a peculiar bad smell assailed Souma's nose.

"This is the smell of sulfur..."

For Souma, who often went to various hot springs due to his father who likes traveling as he lives in Japan with its many mountains, it's a smell carrying a nostalgic feeling.

Once he surveyed his surroundings, he found yellowish-white objects at the places where the white smoke was rising. 'That's sulfur, isn't it?'

Due to the appearance of the mountain with the rising smoke, Souma had already expected it as a possibility.

'Even in Japan there are accidents where mountain climbers lose their lives due to sulfuretted hydrogen gas that occasionally spew out of volcanos. Is this possibly the reason why many zoan lost their lives until now?'

Once he looks back at the path he traveled so far while pondering that, he can feel like the path avoided depressions where it's easy for the air to stagnate. 'Very likely it became like that as result of creating a path that made sure to avoid the places where the predecessors, who climbed this place, died.'

Due to the possibility that many zoan died for the reason of poisonous gases and not because of ghosts, Souma felt relieved. Alongside that feeling of relief, he shudders due to existing danger which is a lot more distinct than ghosts whose existence is uncertain at best.

For the time being Souma retrieves a cloth from within his baggage, soaks it with water from his water leather bag, and then covers his mouth with it. 'I don't know how effective it will be, but it will likely give me a temporary peace of mind.'

As he climbs the mountain further, the smell of sulfur gradually becomes more prominent. The vast mountain surface, which is observable into the far distance, has begun to be covered by clusters of yellow sulfur with dense, white smoke rising from them.

Accompanying that, the stimulation of nose and eyes becomes intense. Since some time ago he's no longer able to stop his eyes tearing up and his nose dripping. 'For a zoan, who has a lot sharper senses than me, this should be quite harsh. It's no wonder that they are avoiding this place,' he assessed.

'Maybe the zoan consider this sulfur smell as smell of excreta, which might be the reason why they are calling this place Genobanda's Mountain.'

Although the sulfur clusters have advanced until right next of the mountain trail, Souma keeps marching onwards.

Just when Souma held his breath and was about to run through in a jog, something suddenly caught his attention on the side.

The poisonous gas was scary, but the thing, which he could see appearing and disappearing, makes him extremely curious. He timidly trails back right next to a cluster of sulfur.

And once he held his breath and brought his face close to the sulfur, Souma became surprised.

Being close to shouting out unintentionally, he quickly covers his mouth. Afterwards he once again

examines it closely, and after making sure that he has made no mistake, he steps back in a hurry. Souma, who retreated to a spot where the wind was blowing, exhaled the air as if spitting it out. Then he greedily devours fresh air by breathing in deeply. And, after feeling comfortable again, he looked back at what he saw just now.

"Blue fire?"

Because the sunlight is strong during the day, it isn't obvious unless one looks very closely, but blue fire is certainly coming out of the sulfur.

"Does a blue flame possibly appear if sulfur burns?"

Souma recalls the flame color responses he was taught about during lessons at school. He was taught that the color of a flame will change if you burn metal, depending on its kind, and thus he thought burning sulfur might trigger a blue flame.

"Don't tell me! This is the true identity of the will-o'-wisps?"

That conjecture was right on mark.

The true identity of the will-o'-wisps of Maha Genobandela are the blue fires of burning sulfur. The Maha Genobandela was a leading sulfur production area on this world. The sulfuretted hydrogen and sulfur dioxides, which were included in the volcanic gases gushing out through tears in rocks, create sulfur on the surface. With that sulfur catching fire due to high temperatures, blue fire is produced.

While being surprised by the unexpected truth about the will-o'-wisps, Souma continued climbing the mountain.

The steepness of the mountain trail got even more intense. At times Souma runs past spots where white smoke spouts out while holding his breath. At other times he climbs a rock while using both hands. On the way he takes his lunch on a big rock as he was told by the Head Priestess. Souma, who continued his ascent after another half toki, finally came out at the lake filled with "Fire Water."

"...! Uwaaah!"

Souma reflexively raised his voice in admiration.

'It's very likely a caldera lake which was created after rain water gathered in a crater that settled down after an eruption or a basin created due to volcanic activity.' The lake, which was created halfway up the mountain, glittered in a beautiful emerald green as it basked in the sunlight.

Unfortunately it wasn't the oil he had expected, but his impressions after having seen the beauty of the lake more than compensated him for his disappointment.

Once he approaches up to the lake's shore, Souma puts down the earthenware pot he had carried, and draws the lake water with an earthenware ladle that's similar to a bowl with a short handle attached.

Back then he was sincerely warned by the Head Priestess that he must not spill the water nor touch it.

However, it's human nature to become curious if one is told something like that.

As far as he can see, the lake water shines in a beautiful emerald green, but he's curious why it's being called "Fire Water."

'Maybe it has an outrageously high temperature?'

Once he surveys the lake while thinking so, he can certainly confirm white steam rising from it. Accordingly he timidly tried to hold his opened hand above the lake surface.

However, he can't feel it being as hot as he thought.

He dips his finger in the lake for just an instant.

However, it's not hot.

Next he shyly tried dipping his right hand in the lake's water for an instant. 'Certainly, it's faintly warm. And I somehow feel my skin prickling. But that's all.

'I wonder, why is this "Fire Water?"

He wasn't fully satisfied with his finding, but he tried to scoop the water into the pot anyway.

At that moment,

"Hot! Eh? It hurts!? Oooooouuch!"

Suddenly an intense pain assails his right hand which he had soaked in the lake's water. At first he feels a heat as if he had touched a flame. Next an intense pain traveled across the entire surface of his hand as if it was pierced by needles all over.

'If this is caused by having put my hand into the lake's water, I have to wash it away.' He soaks a cloth with the water he brought along and frantically wipes his hand with it.

After a short while there's still some tingling remaining, but once he properly looks at his hand since the pain had subsided, its skin had become red and scalded. Even though he only put his hand into the lake, it shows symptoms as if having been shoved into boiling water.

'Just what the hell is the water of this lake!?

A hand that looks as if it had been burned, even though it touched water. Also, volcanic gases that spout out in great amounts. And, sulfur that dyes the mountain surface yellow.

Those guided Souma to a single deduction.

"No way! This water is sulfuric acid!?"

Just as Souma has guessed, the "Fire Water" as it's called by the zoan is actually sulfuric acid.

The caldera lake on the Maha Genobandela was one of the very few sulfuric acid lakes on the Seldeas Continent. There are volcanic fumaroles blowing out large amounts of gases at the bottom of this lake. The sulfur dioxide contained in those gases and the water that gathered in the lake reacted with each other, leading to sulfuric acid.

The lake's water is a strong acid with a pH-value below 0.1. It was so strong that it could completely dissolve an aluminium can without leaving a trace of it within a few hours.

The reason why the lake had a beautiful green color was owed to iron sulfates, which had their iron contents melted by the sulfuric acid, dissolving in the lake's water.

"All of this is sulfuric acid...!?"

A mountain that burns in a blue color due to sulfur.

And, a huge sulfuric acid lake that can be found there.

Souma couldn't help but being struck with admiration due to this all being produced by the nature of the Seldeas Continent.

"As expected of a fantasy world!"

There not being any fantasy-like elements like magic or adventurers since he came to this world was a secret disappointment for Souma. However, due to the natural miracle of the Maha

Genobandela, which he would never be able to see in modern Japan, he felt an excitement that made him tremble as he realized anew that this world is a different world.

However, although Souma isn't aware of it, places, where similar natural phenomenons such as the Kawah Ijen Volcano located in Indonesia can be observed, exist on Earth, too. But, for Souma, who doesn't know about that, this Maha Genobandela was truly the expression of a fantasy world.

Once he considered it like that, Souma, who reacted with fear due to the ominous signs of ghosts until now, is exhilarated by this natural miracle.

He properly closed the lid of the pot so that the scooped water wouldn't spill over, affixed the pot to the wooden rack after twining a cloth on top, shouldered the rack, and started to walk again, albeit with a light stride this time.

Souma, who continued climbing the mountain while making sure to follow the statues of the Beast God, arrived at the peak of one of the outer rims of the volcano that surround the lake.

Something like a small shrine had been built by piling up stones at the mountain's top, allowing successive generations of Head Priestesses to spend a night. 'It's a small shrine that's fully occupied with one person staying in there, but I guess it's better than camping outdoors on a windswept mountain.

The sun was already hanging over the western mountains and had started to become crimson. Once he turned around, looking at the mountain path he had ascended, he could see the bluish-white light burning in the shadows created by the mountain blocking the evening sun.

What he only perceived as frightening will-o'-wisps last night, now just seemed to be mystical and fantastical nature for Souma.

Forgetting to even breath for a short moment, Souma gazed at the sight of the mountain with its burning sulfur without getting tired of it.

However, he cannot afford to do that forever. As the sun has sunken completely, he has to prepare his stay at the shrine before it becomes pitch dark.

Souma spread out the woolen material he brought with him, and sat down on top of it. Afterwards he ate the dumpling-like dish that was stuffed inside the red bun as he was told by the Head Priestess.

Before long the night wind picked up strength.

It was a chilly wind, but because of his own blessing, Souma can't light a fire. However, once he crawled under the woolen fabric inside the shrine after finishing eating, the cold became bearable. And as he laid down, he was immediately assailed by sleepiness, apparently being exhausted from the daytime's mountain climbing.

'If possible, I wanted to watch the spectacle of the sulfur for a good while longer, but I can't win against my sleepiness.' Souma grandly yawns once, pulls the woolen fabric over his head and decides to go sleep.

Seemingly having been so tired without being aware of it himself, he started to release a regular sleeper's breath inside the shrine without having time to count to ten.

Souma fell asleep like that, and a short time later several figures appeared around the shrine. Those figures soundlessly creep towards the shrine and silently peek at the sleeping Souma for a while.

And then one of the figures picked up a stone and threw it down next to the shrine. The stone crashes onto the ground, and tumbles down the slope while making a lot of noise. However, that didn't disturb Souma's sleeping in the least.

Because of that one of the figures approaches the shrine after it exchanged looks with the others, suddenly inserts its hand into the shrine and lifts the woolen fabric that covered Souma.

Once it did, the face of Souma as he slept like a log became visible from beneath.

"It's alright. He's asleep very deeply."

The figure, which confirmed that Souma was showing no signs of waking up, said to the other figures watching the situation from behind. A single zoan woman appeared from behind those figures.

"That really did its job well, didn't it?"

It was the Head Priestess.

The figures around the shrine are zoan warriors under the direct control of the Head Priestess called shadow attendants. Just as their name indicates, they support the Head Priestess from the shadows, and even within the Eye Clan there are only few warriors that know of their existence.

"It's good that our medicine worked for a drop child from a different boundary. —Put that away just in case."

Once the Head Priestess jerks her chin while saying so, one of the shadow attendants picks up the red cloth, which had covered the dumpling, from a corner of the shrine where Souma had folded it, and replaces it with a closely resembling cloth instead.

"But, he's a surprisingly bold guy, isn't he? He didn't appear to be frightened of those will-o'-wisps at all."

One of the shadow attendants said, apparently praising Souma's behavior up until this point.

"Even if he's thin and weak-looking, he's the divine son of that goddess, you know?"

The Head Priestess agrees with that. 'Even brave zoan warriors are scared because of the scenery here.' Recalling Souma, who seemed to be happy rather than scared, the Head Priestess answered half in admiration and half in astonishment.

However, then the Head Priestess' look becomes serious at once, and she orders her shadow attendants,

"You guys, stand guard in the vicinity while staying away from this place. Don't come no matter what happens until I call you."

Once the shadow attendants quietly leave the shrine, the Head Priestess drags Souma, who's sleeping deeply thanks to the medicine, out of the shrine. And then she lays down Souma atop a woolen cover which she had spread out on the nearby mountain surface in advance.

"Now then, guess it's time to start, eh?"

The Head Priestess quietly drew her machete. Different from the machete of other zoan, hers is a ritual machete that had finely carved decoration added to it.

"Boy, please don't think badly of me, okay? Even though things may appear this way, I'm someone who has been entrusted with the fate of all zoan of the plains."

The Head Priestess quickly draws the machete, which she had pressed against its neck, sideways. Bright red, fresh blood splashed on Souma's cheek.