

## **Chapter 2 - Story 34: Distinction**

*T/N: The title refers to making a proper judgment, distinction between right or wrong.*

Shyemul loitered around in a place slightly away from the encampment where the tents are lining up in a row. Since yesterday she has continued to constantly stare in the direction of Maha Genobandela while praying for Souma's safe return.

"Divine Daughter, aren't you quite the lovable one?"

The one calling out to Shyemul was the Head Priestess who had just returned to the encampment in secret.

Unaware of that, Shyemul, who was convinced that she had all night long performed a ceremony for Souma's safe return, lightly bows towards the Head Priestess while putting feelings of gratitude into it.

"Don't worry so much, okay? That boy is a divine child. Moreover, of the terrifying Goddess of Death and Destruction."

Shyemul frowns quizzically at the Head Priestess' way of speaking.

Excluding the exception of the blessing, a god won't protect or assist someone just because they are their divine child. There's no way that the Head Priestess, the leader of the clan of rituals, doesn't know that.

"Do you really understand, Divine Daughter? That your 『Navel Master』 is the divine child of the Goddess of Death and Destruction."

'Even if Soma himself might be of noble character, Aura has set her eyes on him. I can't believe that dreadful goddess to choose her divine child out of mere curiosity and play. Some kind of ulterior motive should be hidden behind that choice.

'Have you chosen him as your "Navel Master" after acknowledging that fact?

The Head Priestess implicitly questions Shyemul about that.

After hesitating for a short moment due to that, Shyemul answers,

"Of course, I'm well aware of it."

Shyemul continues speaking to the Head Priestess who has widened her eyes slightly.

"But, the real Soma is someone that hates dispute. He's that much of a gentle, timid person that it makes one wonder whether he would be able to endure if he were to injure someone else."

At that point Shyemul falters a bit.

"That's why Soma is always trying to do the unreasonable. And, we are the ones making him do that."

Shyemul grinds her fangs while looking frustrated.

"He doesn't voice it out, but sometimes he looks at my face. Asking, is it alright like this? Is it fine with that?"

Shyemul smiled sadly at the Head Priestess who is stumped about what that means.

"I think that Soma is very uneasy."

The Head Priestess was surprised. 'Just what is the "Divine Son of Destruction," who carries out the reclamation of the plains, presses onward with various developments, and has even defeated that "Black Beast" according to rumors, feeling uneasy about?' The Head Priestess couldn't get a read on that.

"But, I think that's only natural. That guy way dropped into a world that's completely new to him in all aspects. Even though he didn't know left from right, he had to suddenly fight against humans like himself in order to save us zoan. That's why Soma feels anxious whether the humans' deeds are really all that bad and whether it has been truly correct to save us zoan. And that's not all. Am I mistaken in what I'm trying to do? Will the things taught by me lead to even more terrible events? Won't many people become unhappy because of my actions? He doesn't even know whether it's fine for him to be here. He's hesitating. He's worrying. He's suffering! And yet Soma is trying to proceed onwards for our sake."

Once she finished, Shyemul shut her mouth. After a brief period of silence she said full of determination,

"That's why, even if others deny him, I will keep accepting Soma as he is. Telling him, you're not wrong, you're a good guy, and it's fine for you to be here."

Seemingly embarrassed after saying so much, she scratched her head and continued, "But, if he does something wrong that even an idiot like me can understand, I will put an end to it by whop him one."

The Head Priestess was uncertain whether she should tell Shyemul about the future visions she saw last night.

'However, premonitions are not absolute. To the bitter end you can merely have a look at the future that's most likely to come true at the present point in time thanks to the power of the gods.

As a matter of fact, each of the many times the Head Priestess predicted the zoan's future through the power of the Beast God before Souma fell into this world, the zoan were destroyed by the humans, or their descendants barely survived by hiding deeply in the mountains.

However, recently she can't predict the zoan's future, no matter how often she tries.

'That's probably because the future has been thrown into chaos because the unknown element Soma that didn't exist here so far had been thrown into the fray through the power of the Goddess of Death and Destruction who possesses a power equal or above that of the Beast God. The chaos is so strong that I can't even see the future without the power of The Seven.

'In the same way it might be possible to prevent that future of destruction and atrocity by revealing the contents of the premonition, which I didn't anticipate at that time, to Shyemul.

Thinking that, the Head Priestess was about to open her mouth, but stopped.

'Telling her about the premonition would at the same time make them conscious of the possibility of such future existing. It's also possible that this might force destiny towards that future instead.

'Among the zoan legends there's a story where a hero, who was given the prediction "You will be

destroyed by your lover" by a prophet, coldly pushed aside his lover, resulting in the prediction being fulfilled by him being stabbed from behind after incurring that lover's hatred instead. That's why the Head Priestess changed her words.

"What do you intend to do if that boy would make 『Rankaka's Mistake』?"

Rankaka is the name of a clan chief who formerly lived in the plains.

At the time when Rankaka, who was said to be wise since his early days, became clan chief, he gave his clanmates a certain order in order to enrich his own clan.

That order was to drive out all the wolves living in the territory of his clan without leaving a single one alive. If the wolves are gone, the cows and rabbits will increase abundantly. Rankaka believed that his clanmates would greatly benefit from this.

At first it went as Rankaka had expected. The cows and rabbits multiplied, and his clanmates were full of joy. However, after a short time the grass had been consumed by the overpopulation of rabbit, causing the cows to disappear from the clan's territory instead.

Hence Rankaka's clan had to be rescued by the other clans as they had fallen on that very day into a state of being troubled what to eat.

It's said that Rankaka, who didn't only trouble his own clan but even the other clans of the plains, was punished by tying him up with ropes and leaving him in the plains to be devoured by the wolves while still alive.

Since that incident, the zoan of the plains refer to the act of doing something with good intentions, but bringing about a bad outcome to many people instead as "Rankaka's Mistake."

Shyemul answered with a bright and clear smile to the Head Priestess,

"At that time I will be eaten by the wolves together with Soma while laughing."

The Head Priestess gasped, obviously overwhelmed by that smile, but after a while she released a sigh full of relief.

"Divine Daughter. Without a doubt you're 《Noble Fang》..."

The Head Priestess believed that there was nothing left to say anymore. That's because she sensed that Shyemul's determination wouldn't change, no matter what she might say.

However, there was still one thing she had to mention.

Inside those visions, she was told that a person called divine child wasn't there anymore, although she doesn't know whether it referred to Shyemul or someone else. If that means that Shyemul will be separated from Souma, she might be able to change that future by preventing that.

The Head Priestess deliberately didn't interpret 'not being there' in its other meaning.

"But, resolve yourself for at least this much. Never separate from your 『Navel Master』."

Thereupon Shyemul hit her chest once.

"Isn't that only natural!?"

Shyemul threw out her chest with a confident expression, but then her face suddenly brightened up. Once the Head Priestess followed Shyemul's eyes while wondering what's going on, she saw how Souma was descending the mountain.

"Soma!"

Shyemul became four-footed and started to run while yelling. While watching her retreating figure, the Head Priestess grumbles with a sigh mixed in,

"Good grief, what inveterate Divine Daughter. —Now then, go and call everyone."

The latter half of her words was directed to a shadow attendant hiding in the nearby thickets in order to guard the Head Priestess. The shadow attendant runs back to the encampment while making faint rustling sounds as he pushes his way through the grass.

A little while later, Garam and the others, who were informed about Souma's return by the shadow attendant, assembled. Soon after that Souma stands in front of the Head Priestess after having been guided by Shyemul, who followed him while looking worried and asking "You have no injuries? Your physical condition is fine?"

"I have returned."

The Head Priestess nods calmly at Souma who announces his return with a bright smile.

"Now then, can I have you show me the proof of having climbed Maha Genobandela, boy?"

At that Souma lowered the earthenware pot he carried on the ground and presented it. The Head Priestess checks whether it's really "Fire Water" that's inside the pot.

"There's no mistake. This is 『Fire Water』. I, as Head Priestess, shall acknowledge that this boy has climbed Maha Genobandela and spent a night there."

Manbaha, who was present, became dumbfounded while listening to the solemn voice of the Head Priestess.

Maha Genobandela is a mountain of evil spirits that makes even him, who brags to be a brave warrior, feel timid. Spending a night on that mountain being an unreasonable demand was its good point. Manbaha believed that at most Souma could escape under the cover of night after getting scared or be haunted to death by the evil spirits. 'However, the human brat, who can't even fight, safely succeeded in spending a night on Maha Genobandela.' Even as Souma was in front of him, Manbaha couldn't believe it.

But, no matter how much he doubts it, in addition to him having brought back the "Fire Water" as proof, the Head Priestess, who possesses a strong jurisdiction related to gods and rituals, has declared that she will acknowledge his achievement, and thus he can't act petty here either. Shyemul puffs out her chest while donning a proud expression towards Manbaha who groans as he grits his fangs in vexation.

"What now!? Did you see? The courage and valor of my 『Navel Master』."

Due to Manbaha's face becoming all the more mortified, Shyemul's pride climbs to new heights. Souma called out to the Head Priestess, who was utterly stunned by the childish attitude of Shyemul.

"Is there a rule stating that one must not climb Maha Genobandela?"

"No. There's nothing like that. You can climb it as you want, and die there as you want. It's of no concern to us."

Upon her answer, Souma smiles and says, "That's great." Once Shyemul, who tilted her head to the side thinking that she had heard something very weird, asked for the reason of his question, Souma replied,

"It's the same with this 『Fire Water』, but I discovered various interesting things on the mountain. If possible, I'd like to climb it once more."

In the eyes of the zoan, wanting to climb Maha Genobandela is an act of sheer madness. All of them ended up dumbfounded due to Souma answering this in a quite indifferent manner.

"Shyemul, are you going to climb it next time together with me? It's amazing. Sulfur burns in blue colors, and the night is really beautiful."

Being suddenly spoken to, Shyemul widens her eyes while being startled.

"Eh...no, umm...if my 『Navel Master』 says so, I won't object...I think?"

As expected, even Shyemul couldn't muster anything besides a cramped smile.



"Where are you going, 《Savage Mane》?"

The evening of the day when Souma and the others returned from Maha Genobandela. The one who headed off Manbaha, who tried to leave Rollo while taking just a few of his followers along as if escaping, was Garam. Moreover, behind him wasn't just Zurgu, but even the Head Priestess together with some shadow attendants.

"Even though you promised that you would approve of him if he spent a night on Maha Genobandela, where are you now trying to go before the ceremony for Soma's ascension to Clan King?"

While feeling the followers behind him stirring in discomposure, Manbaha roars at Garam,

"Don't fuck with me! Who's going to respect a little Genobanda-like shit!"

The reason why Manbaha agreed to the trial was because he underrated Souma as being unable to ever finish it. 'In the first place, approving the likes of a frail human to be above myself is nothing I could ever put up with.

Garam bared his fangs and grinned upon Manbaha's answer.

"Hoh. —So you're no warrior then?"

For the zoan, baring one's fangs is a rudeness that will be very likely interpreted as threat. Manbaha

got enraged due to Garam's smile that bluntly showed his hostility.

"You brat! You're saying that this me is no warrior!?"

"Yeah, indeed I do. My sister said it; if you just kill people, you're no more than a simple murderer. A warrior is someone that disciplines themselves through oaths and honor. My sister is a person whose honor has been approved of by the great Beast God. Don't take her words lightly."

Garam points at Manbaha.

"And, even though you first have said that you will approve of him if he spends a night on that mountain, you're now escaping quickly like this. How's that remotely related to having honor as warrior? Answer, Manbaha!"

Garam deliberately addressed Manbaha with his name, and not his title.

"You bastard! Did you come here to insult me!?"

"Yeah!"

Garam responded to Manbaha who's trembling all over his body in anger.

"All things considered, I'm the one who will become Great Clan Chief. Certainly there's no way for someone like me to challenge the likes of a low-ranking asshole like you to a duel, is there? I'm anticipating the challenge from your side, though."

Due to that Manbaha finally snapped.

"You stupid brat! —Very well! This 《Savage Mane》 challenges 《Ferocious Fang》 to a duel!"

"This 《Ferocious Fang》 shall accept the request of 《Savage Mane》 for a duel!"

Both drew their machetes at the same time.

"In that case I shall stand witness for the duel."

The Head Priestess majestically declared after wedging herself between Garam and Manbaha who opposed each other with little room in-between.

"You understand? This duel is a secret among only those of us present here. Even if the loser dies, their death will be kept secret for a while and then officially announced as having died from sickness after things settled down a bit. —Any complaints?"

Garam and Manbaha both simultaneously answer, "None!"

"All right, I will have you owe up for your mistakes, Manbaha."

"Don't prattle bullshit, brat!!"

Alongside that yell, Manbaha brandished his machete and assaulted Garam.

As expected of the man who was once called the strongest warrior of the plains. The way how he freely attacks and wields his machete is just like a storm. The Head Priestess believed that he had already passed his peak as warrior, but her eyes couldn't make out the slightest difference compared to the past.

She approved of this duel because of Garam's insistent demand, but the Head Priestess laments whether that might have been too rash. If it turns into a grave incident for Garam in this place, Souma's succession to Clan King that's soon after this will be called off.

'If push comes to shove, I will have to make Zurgu force his way in-between them.

Thinking that, the Head Priestess was about to give Zurgu detailed instructions, but even before that, Zurgu whispered while clicking his tongue,

"Jeez, what are you hesitating for...?"

Even as the Head Priestess was unable to execute her own plot due to Zurgu's displeased grumbling, Manbaha continued his fierce onslaught.

"What's wrong, Garam!? Are you just all talk!?"

Manbaha laughs scornfully at Garam, who's in an one-sided defensive battle, while swinging his machete. However, without getting perturbed, Garam indifferently answers while dealing with Manbaha's machete.

"...You became weak, Manbaha."

Manbaha had his rage agitated even further due to Garam coldly responding like that despite being the one who's attacked one-sidedly.

As if to have him receive a full power blow, Manbaha holds his machete widely aloft. As Garam's attention shifted to above due to that, Manbaha kicked up some dirt, targeting Garam's face. Due to that unexpected attack, Garam ends up having his face covered with dirt as he had no time to avoid it.

"Gotcha!"

Alongside that shout, Manbaha swung down his machete upon Garam's head.

However, he cuts air with his hands not feeling any feedback.

'Why? Even though 《Ferocious Fang》 is supposed to be in front of me, why has my machete cut empty air!?'

Manbaha felt appalled by the impossible happening while the entire moment felt surprisingly slow. However, at the moment when he caught something floating in midair at the corner of his sight, he comprehended the reason.

What was reflected there was his own right hand dancing through the air while still grasping the machete as it spun around.

The flash of Garam's left, which was swung with such a speed that he couldn't catch it with his eyes, had cut off his right hand.

The instant he understood that, time returned to its normal speed for Manbaha. And at that moment he was assailed by the pain at his right wrist.

"My right hand has!?"

Is what Manbaha tried to shout, but what came out from his mouth was a spate of blood alongside the sound of air escaping.

Manbaha's neck had already been cut to the extent of his trachea having been completely severed by a flash of Garam's right.

And yet Manbaha extends the stub that used to be his right hand as if trying to challenge Garam. However, without that arm reaching its target, Manbaha raised a soundless scream and collapsed to the ground with a thump.

At last even the slightly convulsing body stopped moving. While looking down on Manbaha's corpse that breathed its last, Garam muttered,

"With this a distinction has been made. —But, I wish I could have settled the dispute with you before your power declined like this."

Garam's voice lacked any joy.

In the past he won because of Manbaha's conceit, this time he won because Manbaha had grown old and weak. Although he won the duel, Garam's heart wasn't delighted over the victory.

The Head Priestess called out to the backs of Manbaha's followers who tried to quietly run away in order to not provoke Garam who stands still in silence.

"Wait!"

The Head Priestess faces the followers, whose bodies trembled with a start, and points at Manbaha's corpse.

"He was the man you guys tried to elevate to a high position. Take him with you, go back and mourn for him properly. —However, just as agreed upon, conceal his death for half a year. If I hear that the death of 《Savage Mane》 has been leaked before that, I won't guarantee for your after-life."

Manbaha's followers, who shuddered due to the Head Priestess' threat, wrapped up the corpse in a big woolen fabric that was handed to them by a shadow attendant, and hurriedly departed the scene while shouldering it.

Garam couldn't help but feel sadness over that scene.

Manbaha was a man who had been called the strongest warrior of the plains in the past. Originally his death should be mourned by many people with a grand memorial service. Because he went down the wrong path thanks to no more than a single defeat, his death is being hidden and he must be mourned in secret.

'At least I myself will pray for this great warrior of the past,' Garam silently prayed towards Manbaha's corpses that was carried away by his followers.

Zurgu stands next to Garam, who gave himself over to those sentiments, with his arms folded.

"Humph! With him not being a match for the likes of Garam, he was never worthy of fighting against me!"

Garam's sentimentality is blown away and he becomes annoyed with Zurgu who made that declaration while breathing roughly through his nose.

"That's true. A guy who doesn't seem to be able to win against someone of your level, wouldn't be a worthy opponent for me."

"Haaah!? What are you trying to say here!?"

"You started it, didn't you!?"

Garam and Zurgu face each other very closely, threatening each other with their fangs exposed. In front of the two, who started to quarrel all of a sudden, the Head Priestess places a hand against her chin and sighed deeply while saying, "Good grief."

'It looks like both believe that Manbaha has become weak, but that's absurd.

Manbaha, who repeatedly trained himself in order to get his revenge for the duel, rather seemed stronger than weaker compared to the past in the Head Priestess' eyes.

Being able to win easily against such Manbaha was just proof that Garam had become far stronger.

'Very likely him being close to people that are far stronger than him like that dinosaurian called Jahangil, him having gotten through many life and death struggles, and him having a friend with whom he can compete over power and technique allowed Garam to reach a height as warrior that he's not aware of himself.

"Lady Head Priestess, is it alright to not stop these two?"

The shadow advised with a sidelong glance at the two who are still continuing to quarrel, but the Head Priestess shook her head slightly.

"Just leave them alone. That's a fight between kids. —We will return to Rollo first."

Saying that, the Head Priestess turned on her heels and returned to Rollo while taking her shadow attendants along. While listening to the snarling voices of Garam and Zurgu, she sighed deeply.

"Well then, all that's left now is the Grand Festival Borollo, I guess...?"