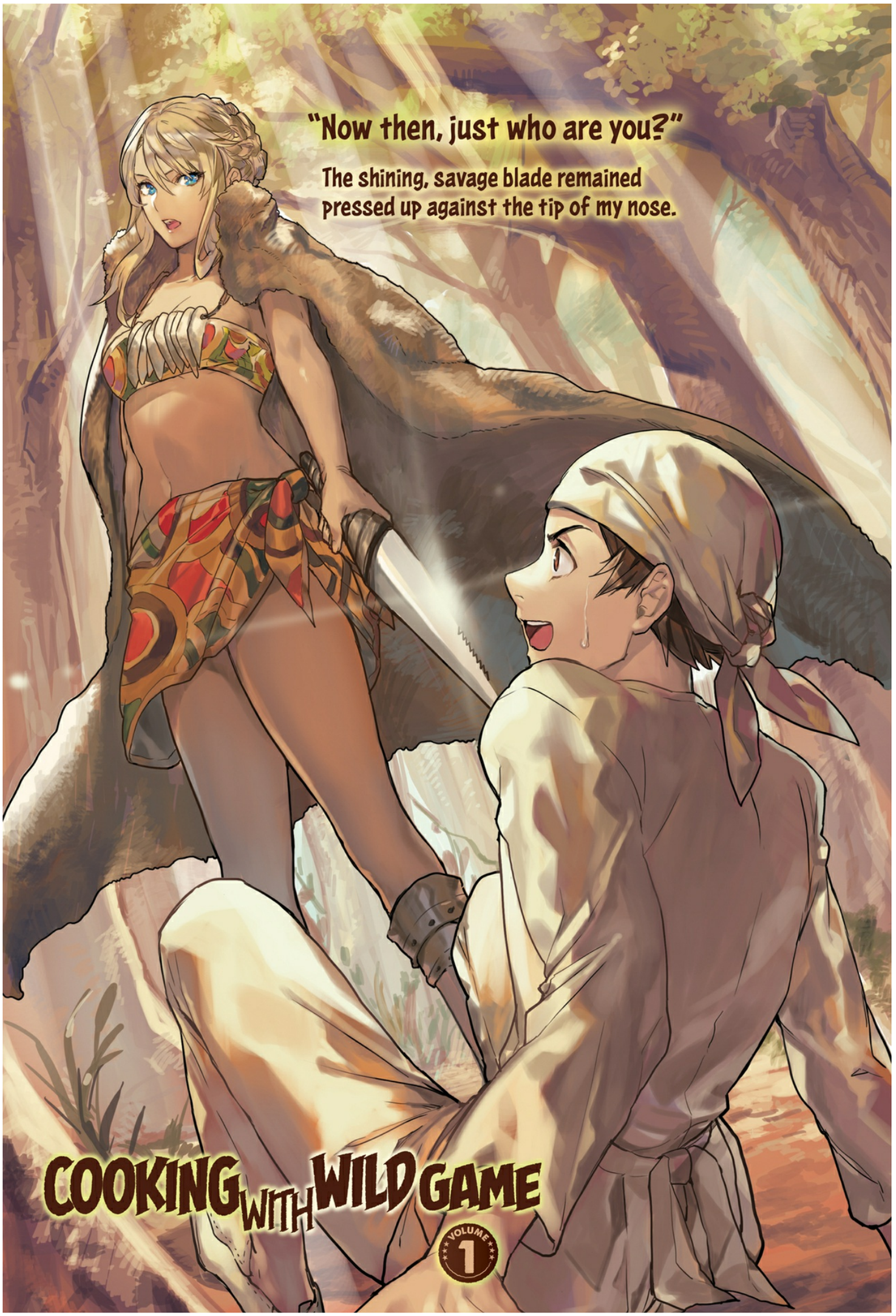
COOKING WITH WILD GAME

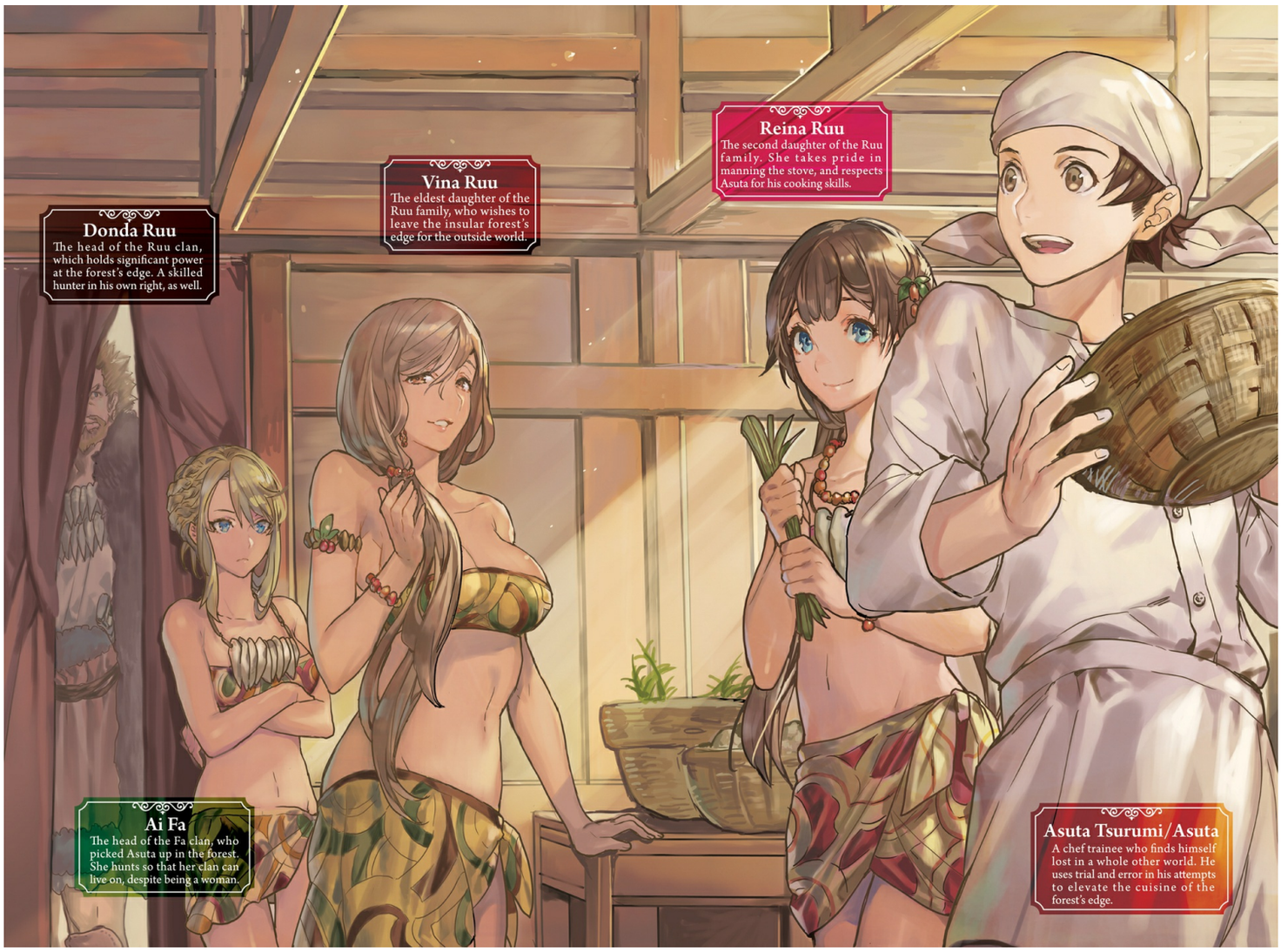
Author. EDA Illust. Kochimo

VOLUME 1




"Now then, just who are you?"
The shining, savage blade remained pressed up against the tip of my nose.
COOKING WITH WILD GAME
VOLUME 1




Donda Ruu
The head of the Ruu clan, which holds significant power at the forest's edge. A skilled hunter in his own right, as well.
Vina Ruu
The eldest daughter of the Ruu family, who wishes to leave the insular forest's edge for the outside world.
Reina Ruu
The second daughter of the Ruu family. She takes pride in manning the stove, and respects Asuta for his cooking skills.
Ai Fa
The head of the Fa clan, who picked Asuta up in the forest. She hunts so that her clan can live on, despite being a woman.
Asuta Tsurumi/Asuta
A chef trainee who finds himself lost in a whole other world. He uses trial and error in his attempts to elevate the cuisine of the forest's edge.

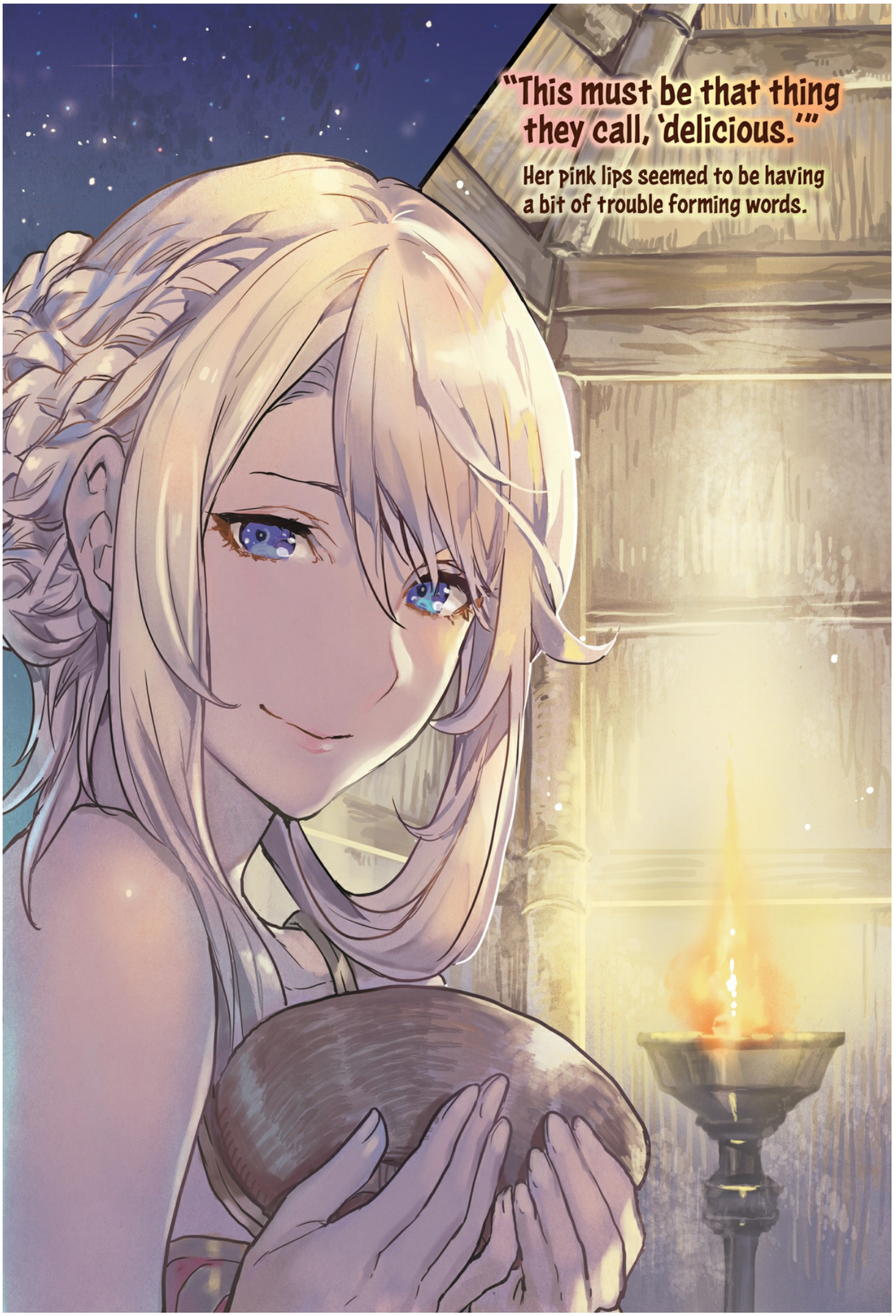

"This must be that thing they call, 'delicious.'"
Her pink lips seemed to be having a bit of trouble forming words.

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Prologue

As I came to, I found myself sprawled out on the ground in an unfamiliar forest.

“Huh...?”

I sat up and took in my surroundings, still in a daze.

Yup, that’s a forest. I was right in the middle of some forest I’d never seen before in my life.

Well, I was born and raised in a shopping district, so I guess there was no such thing as a forest I *had* seen, though. Plus, I couldn’t imagine this sort of jungle existing anywhere in Japan, anyway.

I could see a huge, oddly twisted tree. There were large palm leaves and flowers that sure looked poisonous. An utterly alien bird cry rang out from somewhere nearby. And the foliage above my head was so thick that I couldn’t even see the sky.

Just where the heck am I?

Then, I looked down at my body, which was half-buried in the verdant underbrush. I was in my chef’s uniform, complete with white apron and shoes. The black “Tsurumi Restaurant” logo was emblazoned on my chest. Finally, there was a white towel wrapped around my head, completing my usual ensemble.

What was I doing sleeping in a place like this, dressed up in this outfit?

At any rate, I sat there cross-legged and tried to think back on what had happened before I lost consciousness.

Just when I went to move, though, my hand brushed against something. It was the feeling of hard, smooth, processed wood. I pulled it out from beneath the underbrush, and found it was a single all-purpose kitchen knife in a white magnolia sheath. The ebony grip showed plenty of use, and the blade was 20 centimeters long.

I knew exactly what this was without even needing to remove it from its sheath. This was the knife that my old man valued more than life itself, which came from the famed old Sakaki cutlery shop in Kyoto.

The second I saw it, I remembered everything.

◇

My name is Asuta Tsurumi. My family name uses the “tsu” from the Tsugaru Strait, and the kanji for “stop” and “look.” The Asuta, meanwhile, is written like “getting fat tomorrow.” I’m 17 years old, in my second year of public high school. I’m 170 centimeters tall, and weigh 58 kilos, so no, I’m not especially fat. And I wasn’t actually born in Tsugaru, but rather Chiba in the Kanto region.

My family runs the Tsurumi Restaurant, an eatery that does pretty darn well for itself. Or, well, at least it did, until those guys started prowling around a month back.

Apparently, the building next door was getting remodeled into some sort of amusement complex or something, so the new owner came over asking us to sell our land. Officially, he wanted to build a parking lot for his new place. It seemed the real reason, though, was that they were going to have a food court in the park, and having a popular eatery next door might have drawn away their customers.

Naturally there was no reason for us to accept such a one-sided demand, so pops politely refused. It seemed we were up against a worse scoundrel than we thought, though. That building’s new owner was apparently the sort of man to have seized ownership of the place through shady means.

And so, around when the remodeling of that building started, we came under fire from some underhanded harassment. We had someone spray paint “poison” on our shop’s shutters, and people calling us but not saying a word, and we even got a dead cat thrown in front of the place... Really, it was all tried-and-true old-school harassment. The only thing they did that felt up-to-date was spread unfounded rumors online about our shop giving people food poisoning.

Of course, our regulars paid this no heed, coming out every bit as often as ever. That said, though, we saw a dramatic drop in new customers and college

kids on their way back from school and the like, which had a definite effect on our sales numbers. It really made me feel the power and reach of the internet to a frustrating degree.

My pops, however, just laughed it off, saying, “I just feel bad for anyone who believes that nonsense and misses out on a chance to eat my cooking!”

It wasn’t much longer before he couldn’t just laugh about it, though.

To me, it felt like just a few hours prior.

Pops left the evening’s preparations to me and went to go stock up on supplies, only to be hit by a small truck along the way and get rushed to the hospital. I hurried to go see him as soon as I got that notice, not even stopping to change out of my uniform.

When I saw pops in the hospital bed, he shot me back a hearty smile.

Even though he had a grin on his face, he had compound fractures in both legs. Bandages were wrapped all around his arms and his head, with red spots here and there all over. He *had* been hit head-on by a truck going at a speed of about 80 kilometers per hour, after all. The attending physician had a look of amazement on his face and said that it was a miracle that he was still alive.

After hitting pops, the truck just kept on going and sped off. There had been a number of witnesses, but the license plates had been removed and the driver was wearing a ski mask and sunglasses to hide his appearance.

It was clearly a deliberate, expertly handled attack. But even so, pops just kept on smiling.

Well, you’d need a dump truck or something to finish off this old man of mine.

“So, how long till I’m discharged?”

The attending physician looked exceedingly troubled, faced with his widely smiling, bedridden, seriously wounded patient.

“No, you see, before we can discuss anything like that, first we’ll need to examine your brain waves, and then we’ll need to perform surgery on your legs...”

“Right. So, how long till I’m out?”

“At this point, I can’t really say... After all, you have compound fractures in both legs, and we don’t know how many months of rehabilitation you’ll need...”

“I see. Well, I’ll leave all that up to you, Doc, but I’ve got a shop to run. I don’t care if it needs to be in a wheelchair or whatever, but please discharge me as soon as you can. If I have to leave things to this oaf, my shop’ll be ruined.”

Naturally, “this oaf” referred to me.

Well, it’s true that my old man would keep on wielding that knife of his until he died, even if he had to use crutches or a wheelchair. I couldn’t help but smile, too, thinking about it.

It was then that I got a call from my childhood friend, Reina.

Her panicked screams came through. “*Asuta! Your restaurant is on fire!*”

The smile was wiped from my old man’s face for the first time when I conveyed that to him.

“Asuta, my knife! That’s the one thing I can’t lose!”

I flew out of the hospital, heading back home in even more of a rush than I’d been in on the way there.

My dad valued that Sakaki knife more than life itself. He would always yell about how a true chef could satisfy a customer no matter where they were, regardless of the ingredients and tools on hand. “But this is the one thing I just can’t let out of my grasp,” he’d add, clutching that precious knife from the famed cutlery shop in Kyoto.

That was the one thing he couldn’t stand to lose. No matter how much he was harassed, even after getting hit by a truck and breaking both legs, and even having his shop burned down, my pops would stand firm. But if he lost that knife, that would be the final straw that breaks him.

And so I ran, as fast as I could.

By the time I arrived at the shop, there were already dozens of onlookers staring at the spectacle, and the fire engine had gotten to work. But the restaurant was still cloaked in flames, and black smoke was billowing up into

the summer sky. There was probably no preventing it all burning down to the ground at this point, no matter how much water they poured on. It was just burning too fiercely, like something out of a nightmare.

“Asuta-chan...”

Reina had been standing there dumbfounded, but when she noticed I was there she clung to me with tears in her eyes.

I grabbed her slender shoulders, gave a single nod... and then dove into the roaring flames.

Chapter 1: The Worst Dinner Imaginable

1

And so, that brings us back to the present.

I shook free from Reina and the firefighters and dove into the crimson blaze, so what exactly was I doing laying here like an idiot in some forest I'd never even seen before?

I had pushed my way through the roaring sea of flames and managed to make it all the way to the kitchen. Then I hastily grabbed my old man's knife, but in that instant, the building collapsed with a tremendous cacophony of noise. I should've been crushed flat then, scorched by the flames and smoke as I held the knife tightly.

And yet, I couldn't find a single burn or even so much as a scorch mark on my body. And on top of that I was holding my old man's knife, which should've burned up along with me.

"I... guess this really is the afterlife, huh?"

I gave my cheek a pinch to check, and sure enough, it hurt.

Guess that makes sense. Whether this is the afterlife or whatever, it was at least clear that this was no dream or hallucination.

The smell of grass in the air was so strong it felt almost stifling. There was a humid, lukewarm breeze blowing. I could feel the sweat rolling down my cheek.

The knife's white magnolia sheath felt smooth to the touch.

There's no way this was some dream or hallucination...

"So then I really did die...?!" I yelled out to no one in particular, then collapsed back to the ground.

Well, guess it's no surprise that I died. I mean, I went and dove into that sea of flames, so I suppose that's the natural result.

Still, a fact remained that I couldn't just turn a blind eye towards: The whole

reason I had gone and done something so idiotic in the first place was because I didn't want to see that hopeless expression on my old man's face. But there was no point if I didn't just lose the knife, but my life on top of it!

10 years ago he lost his wife to illness. Now he lost his shop, and his son, and even his precious Sakaki knife... So just what did he have left to live for?

I clutched the knife in its sheath tight with both hands, squeezed my eyes shut, and ground my teeth. If I didn't do all that, I would have collapsed into an ugly, sobbing heap.

I'm sure Reina must be crying about now, too...

We'd grown up together like we were siblings, but now I'd never see her or the only family I had left, my old man, ever again. Just like my dad, I'd lost anything and everything.

What was even the point of my life...?

Just as that painful question flashed to mind, I heard a rustling from the nearby brush. This was followed by the unmistakable bellow of a beast. I slowly looked in that direction, still laying on my side. On the other side of the brush, in the dim darkness, two burning red glints shone back at me.

What's that...? Is it some sort of demon or devil?

This place looked like a southern paradise, but maybe it was actually hell rather than heaven...

The animosity in those eyes was strong enough that I couldn't help but think so.

Come on, give me a break... I didn't do anything that *bad back when I was alive, did I?*

I got up nice and slow, so as not to provoke whatever it was that was staring at me.

And then... it finally showed itself.

Whoa...

It was a boar. Or well, something that looked a lot like one. The thing was a

four-legged beast that looked just like a boar, and must have been about 200lbs. Its hard, wire-like fur was a brown so dark it almost looked black, and its hair stood up running from its head down its back like a mohawk. Its legs were short, but its thighs were quite thick. It had a squashed snout, with three sets of sharp tusks jutting out. The small eyes staring at me were fixed on the sides of its face. Its large body was short, stout, and round looking.

No matter how I looked at it, it looked just like a boar. And yet, it couldn't be one... That was because there were two splendid white horns growing from its forehead, as if to form a pair with its tusks.

"Whoa...!"

When I saw it kicking off the ground with its hind legs out of the corner of my eye, I took off running as fast as I could. The boars I knew could apparently go upwards of 40 kilometers per hour, but what about this guy? And the boars I knew were omnivorous but didn't tend to go after live prey, but would that hold true here?

While pondering such questions in the back of my mind, I ran desperately as fast as I could. I ran a whole lot back when I was alive, and now I've got to do it in the afterlife, too?

Maybe I didn't have anything to fear now that I was already dead, but I'm sure getting stabbed by those horns and tusks would hurt a whole lot more than pinching my cheeks did.



And so, I ran as fast as I could. I may have had enough leeway to turn around, but instead I leapt over underbrush, shoved past branches, and darted between trees. I ran, and ran, and kept on running... And then, another disaster befell me.

“Waaah!”

Suddenly, the ground fell out from under me.

It was a pitfall.

The world was spinning, and I felt a dull shock running through my head and back. I had reached the bottom of the pit before I even knew what was going on.

“Owwwwww... Damn it, what the heck is going on here?!”

Now sprawled out on the bottom of the pit, I looked up overhead. I could see a circular cutout of the forest scenery. From eyeballing it, I’d guess the hole was around 3 meters deep. If this was manmade, it must have taken quite a bit of effort to put together.

“Damn it! Give me a break, already...”

Fortunately, it didn’t seem likely at this point that the boar-looking thing would fall in after me, so I stood up and tucked the knife into my coat. But then, a sudden hot pain shot through my right ankle. Looks like I must have sprained it when I fell.

I was thrown into the depths of this forest without even knowing what was going on, and was chased by some unknown creature, and then to top it all off I fell into a pit. And as a bonus, I even went and sprained my ankle!

Ugh, this is just the absolute worst. It’s so bad all I can do is laugh.

“No wait, this is no laughing matter!”

I couldn’t just laugh at the matter, so I got mad instead.

“Damn it! I don’t know if it’s a god or a devil doing this, but what’d I do to deserve this?! Did I really screw up that badly in life?! My death may not have been anything to brag about, but I can’t imagine I earned such a malicious

punishment. Even if you've got some sort of problem with me, you could at least pick a bit nicer of a hell to throw me into!"

"You sure are a noisy one..."

That sudden voice was as much of a shock as getting hit in the head with a metal bat from behind. Suddenly, a dark silhouette appeared in my circular view of the sky overhead.

"What are you doing causing such a ruckus in a place like that...?" It was a young woman's voice, but there was a masculine tone to it. It was a bit husky and blunt, but still had a pleasant sound to it. The sunlight filtering through the trees only provided backlighting, so I couldn't quite tell what she looked like.

I decided to try to strike up a conversation, feeling truly relieved to find that there were people in this world.

"As you can see, I seem to have gotten caught in a pitfall. I don't know who made it or why, but it sure is an awful prank on their part."

After a short bit of silence, an unfriendly voice shot back, "I'm the one who set that trap..."

"Eh?"

"That trap was meant for catching giba, but a human won't fill my belly... Do you have any idea how hard I worked to prepare that?"

"Huh? No, well you see... I'm sorry...? Wait, am I the one who should be apologizing here?"

There was no response.

"Right. But yeah, it was my bad, ruining all that hard work. I'm sorry. I'm apologizing already, so won't you please help me out of here?"

"It shouldn't be so deep that you can't climb out on your own..."

The silhouette looked like it was about to leave, so I desperately called out, "No, wait! The thing is, I twisted my ankle when I fell! It's nothing too bad, but it's enough to keep me from climbing out of here! Sorry, but could you please lend me a hand?!"

“...That’s your issue. Just go ahead and take a dirt nap.”

The silhouette disappeared from view.

“Hey, hold on! That’s way too heartless! Come on, save me!”

There was no response.

Is she really going to leave me to die?

“Heeeey! I’m begging you! If you leave me here I’m gonna starve to death! If you have a heart, then come back and save me!”

“You truly are a noisy one...” the voice replied, still out of view.

It was then that a strange object suddenly dropped down and dangled in front of me. It was made of the vines that I had seen here and there about the forest. The thing was made out of five or so of them bundled together, and when I went to pull on it, it felt plenty sturdy.

“Hurry up and climb already.”

Oh, so she intended to save me from the very start, huh? What a mean-spirited woman. Is this what people call a tsundere?

At any rate, I let her mercy wash over me. The bizarre circumstances I found myself in just made me feel all the more grateful. I placed a foot on the wall while thinking how once I was out of here, I’d give her my wholehearted thanks.

My twisted ankle throbbed, but it wasn’t bad enough that I couldn’t bear it. At any rate, I desperately pulled myself up, the black soil crumbling beneath my feet as I went.

Still... I’m only getting more and more confused as to what’s going on here.

If this was hell, then it was awful strange for a savior to come rescue me from that predicament. Plus, my senses felt like they were working just like they did before I passed away, so the fact that I was dead just hadn’t quite sunk in.

Well, I’ve just got to do what I can, I guess, I thought as I wrung out the last of my strength to reach the surface.

And with that, I’d safely escaped the pitfall.

It had grown a good bit darker, so I figured night must be fast approaching.

“Owwwww... Ah, thank you. You really saved me!”

I flopped down on the ground, then bowed to my savior. She stood there staring at me imposingly, then without a word, she thrust what she was holding right in my face. It was the shining silver tip of a savage-looking blade.

2

“Now then, just who are you?”

The shining, savage blade remained pressed up against the tip of my nose. It sure did look sharp. The length looked to be about 80 centimeters, while it was approximately 10 centimeters wide. The whole thing was rather thick like a machete, but even so, the edge of the blade was certainly plenty sharp. Something like that could hack through the flesh and bones of any prey.

Hey, wait, this isn’t the time to be getting all impressed by something like that!

“W-What the...? What’s with the violent greeting?! I already apologized for the pitfall!”

“Cease your chattering. Just hurry up and answer the question.”

The girl seemed to have calmed down... but that actually just felt all the more frightening.

I looked back and forth between the face of the girl and the tip of the blade, then gave a sigh.

“Before that, just where exactly am I? It doesn’t quite have the feel of the afterlife, somehow, but...”

“This is the forest at the foot of Mount Morga.”

“Mount Morga?”

“In the territory of the Western Kingdom of Selva, ruled over by Duke Genos... Just where the hell did you come from?”

I seriously had no idea what was going on. But still, considering the circumstances, I saw no option but to answer truthfully.

“I was born in a country called Japan. The Chiba Prefecture, to be specific. Do you know of it?”

“Japan... Chiba...?”

Yeah, she hadn’t heard of it. Of course she hadn’t.

In all likelihood, this was a world completely removed from the country known as Japan in every sense imaginable. I mean, in the world where I was born, there weren’t any boars with horns, nor were there any girls who walked around with such huge blades.

And besides, this girl looked different than anyone I had ever seen before. Her skin was dark, like a sort of creamy chocolate color. And yet, her hair was a dull blond. And on top of that, her eyes were a deep blue. Her golden-brown hair seemed to be quite long, but she had it done up in an unusual manner using a leather strap. Her blue eyes shone with a strong, sharp shine about them, even in this dim light.

As far as her facial features went, well, she was definitely good-looking. Her slightly arched eyes were reminiscent of a wildcat, and she had a thin, perfectly formed nose and petite lips the color of cherry blossoms. She had nice, soft cheek lines, giving her face just a bit of a childish look, but she must have been around the same age as me.

Yeah, she was a pretty high-level beauty. Actually, maybe it would be better to call her an unparalleled one, at that. At least on a personal level, I couldn’t help but find that combination of dark skin and pink lips incredibly sexy.

Still, what was with that outfit...? She had a thick, blackish-brown fur cloak draped over her shoulders. Underneath that, she had some cloth of a stunning hue wrapped around her chest and waist... and nothing else on. There were complex, beautiful patterns on the fabric, and it didn’t look shabby in the least. But still, that getup was just a bit too stimulating.

As for the rest of her outfit, she wore a necklace made of numerous white horns or tusks and a bracelet made of nuts strung together, and she had a small knife in a leather sheath dangling from her waist. And so, her smooth, dark skin was quite generously exposed. Ah, and she had what looked like leather belts wrapped around to up past her ankles, which must have been some sort of

footwear.

Faced with such a stunning, excessively exposed beauty, though, the only thought that ran through my mind was, *Wow...*

Her facial features may have been adorable, but the expression on her face was ferocious. Her eyes burned with the intensity of a real wildcat, and her lovely lips were firmly pursed. She was rather tall for a girl, and had a slender frame. However, there wasn't even a hint of weakness about her. Her bare arms, legs, shoulders, and stomach were all taut like a leather whip, without even a bit of excess fat. On top of that, she also had white scars scattered here and there, telling of how rough a life she lived.

She was a girl who seemed to be full of some sort of primal energy and strength, the sort that modern man had lost in relying so greatly on science.

Still...

Just *what* is this smell? I'd been wondering that ever since I stood face to face with this strange girl. It was an incredibly complex scent. It was sweet, like overly-ripe fruit. A gentle fragrance like flowers about to bloom. Refreshing, like dried herbs. Just a bit powerful, like strong spices. And that overwhelmingly delicious aroma of animal flesh and fat...

All those scents were melding together in a complex manner to positively tantalize my nostrils.

Not to brag, but as someone who had trained to be a chef since childhood, my sense of smell is definitely above average.

At any rate, it was a scent that strongly aroused my hunger... And acting in concert with that thought, my belly let out a *growl.*

The girl's blade wavered, as if showing a bit of hesitation.

"Just what are you intending?"

"Hey, it's got nothing to do with my intentions... I'm just hungry."

My stomach added a *gurrrgle.*

Yeah, I wasn't exactly looking cool here...

The girl's well-shaped eyebrows rose in a rather dangerous-looking manner.

"Hey, stop messing around! Are you trying to make fun of me?"

"I'm seriously not messing around. I mean, I can't exactly control my physiology, can I? My stomach just naturally reacted to that delicious smell all over you."

"What are you talking about? I don't have any food on me, and I didn't catch anything today, thanks to you."

"Right, like I said, I'm sorry for wrecking your pitfall, but still..."

The end of my sentence was accompanied by a *grrgrooowl!*

My stomach really was being way too noisy.

Ah, that's bad. The look on the girl's face was growing more and more dangerous, and her shoulders had even started shaking.

Was I seriously about to die for a second time for such a stupid reason?

"At any rate, I didn't have even the slightest intention of messing with your turf. I mean, it's a real issue for me too, being thrown out into a place like this with no idea as to what's going on. But if it's a problem, I'll leave as soon as I—"

Groooowowowowl!

...I'm done for.

No matter how sincere of an apology I may offer, my stomach will just butt in and ruin it.

It was then that the girl suddenly looked to the side. While she kept the blade in her right hand trained on me, her left hand went to cover her mouth. The trembling of her shoulders grew more and more violent.

"What's wrong...?"

Groooooowl?

The blade fell to the ground, tip-first.

The girl's face was beet red.

"Hey? Are you feeling sick or something?"

Groowl? Groooooowl grooowl?

It was then that a “Pfft” snuck out in a sort of strange tone.

The girl’s eyes were filled with tears as she looked at me.

“It’s alright... Don’t talk...”

Her voice seemed weak, somehow, making me feel all the more worried.

“Come on, even if you ask me that...”

Growl. Groooooooooooooooooooowl.

The girl had been using her blade as a cane, but now she suddenly fell down on her rear.

And then, she let loose a, “Bwahahahahaha!”

Ah, she’s super cute when laughing, too. Oh, but wait, she was just trying to hold back her laughter?

After that fit of laughter, the girl stood up while wiping the tears from her eyes, then pointed the blade at me once again. Then, she simply said, “...You’re dead.”

“Why?!”

I hurriedly tried to retreat, still seated on the ground. However, waiting behind me was the pitfall I had just climbed out of.

The metal tip steadily drew near my nose.

“This is the most shame I’ve ever faced in my whole life... I swear I’ll kill you.”

Even in the darkness of night, I could clearly tell that her face was beet red.

She’s embarrassed? So she really *is* a tsundere? No wait, that’s not right!

At any rate, I can’t let myself get killed over something like this!

When my hand finally reached the edge of the pit, I raised my hands up in a plea to hold on.

“If this rude stomach of mine has hurt your pride, then I apologize! It’s my hunger that’s at fault! And now that I think of it, I haven’t eaten anything since lunch today!”

She stood there silently.

“I seriously am in a bind! I don’t know what sort of place this is, or why I’m here, or anything! If I get killed by you now, without knowing a thing, then just why did I...”

Why did I risk my life by diving into those flames?

When that thought crossed my mind, my words suddenly got caught in my throat.

I couldn’t think of anything else to do, so I stared intently into the girl’s eyes. The girl’s deep blue eyes somehow had a look about them like they were looking at some sort of mysterious, unknown creature.

“I have absolutely no idea what you’re talking about.”

The tip of the blade lowered just a bit.

“Don’t you come from the city of stone?”

“City of stone? Like I told you before, I’m from a country called Japan.”

“...I’ve never heard of a country by that name. I suppose for now, it’s at least safe to assume you haven’t lived under Genos’s rule,” the girl said, finally lowering her blade. However, the suspicion and distrust in her eyes remained. And yet, I could sense a complex mingling of emotions beyond that dangerous glint in her eyes.

“Could I hear a bit more of what you have to say...?” the girl asked in quiet tone. “Come to my dwelling. If you don’t wish to do so, though, I can simply leave you here instead.”

“You’d go and invite a complete stranger into your home...?”

“It’ll be nighttime soon. There’s not any more time to be hanging around here asking you questions... Let me just tell you that if you stay out here in the forest at night without so much as preparing a fire, you *will* die.”

She picked up the leather sheath at her feet and returned her blade to it. I placed my hands on the ground and stood up as I watched that elegant maneuver.

“Got it. I’ll follow your lead, then. Ah, by the way, we still haven’t introduced ourselves yet. I’m Asuta Tsurumi.”

“Asootasoo... Roomy?”

“No, Asuta Tsurumi.”

“Asoot Aroomy...”

Well you sure are a cute one, aren’t you?

The way that her facial expression was totally serious only made her all the more adorable.

“Right. Well, if that’s too tricky, then just call me Asuta. What’s your name?”

“Ai Fa,” she let slip in a low voice, then spun around so her back was to me.

She may have had a slender and tall build, but sure enough, she wasn’t actually taller than I was. She must have been 167 centimeters or so tall at most.

So how was it that someone so slim, of such an average height, could swing around such a stupidly big blade with one arm? Maybe the people here were built completely differently in terms of muscle strength and bone density...

Ah, as I was nonchalantly pondering such matters, I got shot a sideways glare.

“What are you doing? You injured your foot, didn’t you? Grab onto my shoulder.”

“Huh? You don’t mind?”

“We’re short on time. Hurry up and grab on.”

I put my right arm around Ai Fa’s right shoulder, feeling a little awkward about it all the while.

Suddenly, her elbow came flying right into my solar plexus.

“Who said you could put your arm around me? I just told you to grab my shoulder.”

“Gah... Right, so that’s it, huh?”

I rubbed my solar plexus while grabbing Ai Fa’s left shoulder with my right

hand.

I wasn't all that injured in the first place anyway, so this was more than enough support to walk on. And besides, she had on a thick fur cloak, so my hand couldn't feel anything but the stiffness of the fur.

"Is that a blade that you have hidden there near your chest...?"

"Huh?"

I froze in place.

When I tried to wrap my arm around her, my chest had touched her back. But still, she managed to figure that out through that thick cloak? That was *far* scarier than the blow I had taken to the solar plexus.

"I-I'm surprised you figured it out from just that instant... Of course I don't mean you any harm, though, so don't worry about it."

"Why should I need to worry? If you wish to take a swing at me, then please, be my guest," Ai Fa said, shooting an incredibly chilling sideways glance back at me. "When you do, my blade will simply slit your throat even faster. If you think I'm lying, then go ahead and test it out whenever you wish... Asuta."

3

And so, I ended up leaving that twilight forest alongside Ai Fa. It seemed it really was almost nighttime, as it was getting pretty dark out.

"We wasted a lot of time thanks to you. We should pick up the pace a bit until we're out of giba territory."

I asked, "Giba?" while unsteadily walking along, holding onto Ai Fa's left shoulder to help take the weight off my injured right foot. "You made that pitfall to catch one, right? Is that what you call those boar looking animals?"

"Boar...?"

"Right. It was black, and round, and they had horns growing around here..."

"That's a giba. You saw one?"

"I did. Actually, it's more that I was chased around by one. And that's when I

ended up falling in your pitfall.”

“What a fool. Everyone knows that if you’re attacked by a giba, you should climb atop a tall tree.”

“Yeah, well like I said, I’m not familiar with what goes for ‘common sense’ around here.” As I said that, my eyes drifted to Ai Fa’s left shoulder.

“Hey, is this fur cloak made out of a giba pelt, then?”

“Of course. I’m one of the people of the forest’s edge. We make a living by hunting giba, eating their meat, and selling their tusks, horns, and pelts.”

She shot me a displeased look as she carefully pushed her way through the thicket.

“And the people from the city of stone mock us people of the forest’s edge, calling us ‘giba eaters.’”

“Hmm? But why? Boar meat is delicious.”

This is nothing to brag about, but during winter break of my second year in middle school, I participated in a farming camp held by a local hunting club, so I had experience handling boar and deer meat. The boar stew I had back then was truly delicious.

“But we’re discussing giba, not this ‘boar.’ Giba meat is tough and has a strong odor. And so, those of us who eat it also stink.”

“You don’t stink. In fact, you’re positively coated in the most delicious scent.”

The displeasure in Ai Fa’s deep blue eyes grew all the greater. Hmm... It sure is difficult to handle girls this age.

Oh, and for the sake of Ai Fa’s honor, she wasn’t just giving off the scent of animal flesh and fat. The smell of sweet fruit and refreshing herbs was actually stronger about her, and those scents were blending splendidly with the tantalizing fragrance of meat and seriously stimulating my hunger.

“No, I’m serious! I’ve got a pretty good nose on me. Those giba are definitely delicious! I’m sure of it!”

“...When it comes to food, there is no good or bad taste.”

Hey, that hurts! Are you trying to pick a fight with me, as a chef in training?

Still, though, it wouldn't do any good to go flinging about my personal values from my own world, considering the situation. I focused on keeping myself from saying anything I shouldn't as we walked onwards in silence.

15 minutes later, we exited the forest and my field of view opened wide.

The sun had already set about 80% of the way. And what that orange fading light shone down upon was a rustic village in a valley.

Ah... so there really are *people living here in this world.*

For whatever reason, I got a lump in my throat.

It was hard to tell due to the dim lighting, but there were small wooden buildings dotted about the rugged rock faces that almost made it look as if a mountain had been cleaved in two. And from those countless red lights drifted up the smoke from dinner being prepared.

See, isn't that a nice smell...?

The scent of animal protein and what was likely some sort of herbs or spices was wafting through the air. It took all my effort to hold back my stomach from growling, so I wouldn't anger Ai Fa again.

"It's nice and calm out here, outside of the forest. About how many people live here?"

"I don't know... Well, at most it should be around 500, I'd imagine."

"500? That's pretty big. It doesn't look like that many houses from what I can see, though."

"...The people of the forest's edge have settlements from north to south, spread between Mount Morga and Genos's lands. It would take nearly half a day to walk from where they start to where they end."

Hmm. So it was a really long, spread out territory, huh? It made sense that the population density was low due to everything being stretched out, but still, I don't know if it's really fitting to call it a "settlement."

I had wanted to try to dig more information out of her, but it was then that an

intruder suddenly butted into our conversation.

“Hey, Ai Fa. What’s the deal with the seedy-looking kid?” called out a deep, masculine voice from alongside us. I was just plain surprised, but Ai Fa gave a small “Tch” with her tongue.

“It’s none of your business, Diga Suun.”

“Of course it’s my business! The Suun family rules the people of the forest’s edge.”

The large figure arrogantly strode up to us. He was a young man with a very similar look to Ai Fa about him. And he was tall, probably about 180 centimeters or so. His frame and muscles were solid, and he looked to be around 80 kilograms. His blackish-brown hair was cut short, his skin was dark, and his eyes were blue. Aside from his hair color, he looked very similar to Ai Fa.

He wore a fur cloak and cloth vest over his massive body, and at his waist was a thick longsword and small knife. Even more fangs and horns dangled from his neck than Ai Fa’s.

The man stood to block our way, not even trying to hide the way he was looking me over.

“Hmm... You’re a strange looking one, aren’t you? Where do you hail from?”

Despite his deep voice, he had a dull, unpleasant way of speaking. And despite his eyes being the same color as Ai Fa’s, they looked far muddier.

He was the second person I’d met after being thrown into this world, but I couldn’t say I had an overly positive impression of him. And yet, customer service had been a part of my life for as long as I could remember. If someone like this was enough to get on my nerves, I never would have made it as a merchant’s son. With that in mind, I prepared to be as courteous as possible, but...

“I said it has nothing to do with you,” Ai Fa butted in before I could say anything. “I’m not at all indebted to the Suun family, and getting involved with folks like you is nothing but a pain. It’s annoying just having to speak with you, so hurry up and get that stupidly huge body of yours out of my way, Diga Suun.”

“Why, you...!”

The man looked flustered, but Ai Fa kept going.

“If you have a problem with me, then I’ll take you on whenever you wish. But otherwise, don’t show yourself before me. You’re a real eyesore, Diga Suun.”

And with that, Ai Fa started walking off. Since I was leaning on her shoulder, I had no choice but to follow along. As we passed by the young man trembling with anger, I gave an unassuming nod.

“You damn obstinate stray of a woman! You better take care that nobody mistakes you for a giba and bashes your head in from behind!” the young man yelled out, clearly having lost his cool. It seriously ruined the idyllic scenery.

“Um, I realize it may not be the place of an outsider like me to give an opinion, but... wouldn’t it be smart to treat your neighbors a little nicer?”

“...That man, Diga Suun, he tried to make a mockery of me by sneaking into my bedroom the night that my father passed. And so, I beat him till he couldn’t stand, then I threw him in the river.”

That shut me right up.

“Ever since then, nobody living here will have anything to do with me, because I brought shame to the next head of the family. You’re telling me to treat *him* nicer?”

“I take back what I just said. And I shouldn’t have bowed to him, either. Hell, I want to slug him one, too!”

When I stopped and took my hand off Ai Fa’s shoulder, she went and grabbed my wrist really hard. Her strong, slender fingers dug firmly into the skin of my wrist.

“What are you saying? There’s no merit in hitting a man like that.”

“No, but still, it’s totally unreasonable for them to make you feel all isolated like that.”

“I can’t say I ever particularly felt that way. Dealing with people who aren’t family is just plain troublesome, so it’s honestly been refreshing, actually.”

She was shooting me an angry glare, far fiercer and colder than that of the man from before.

“But if you were to harm a member of the Suun family, I will be found entirely responsible for having been the one to invite you here. And if that were to happen, then this time I may well be exiled from the village... Do you intend to tell me to live out in the wild?”

“Ah... I see. Sorry. I wasn’t thinking about the position you were in. I guess I was just being a little quick-tempered due to hunger.”

And then, as if to chime in in agreement, my stomach offered a *grooowl.*

Ai Fa’s shoulders started to quake again, her grasp still firmly on my wrist.

“...Are you doing that on purpose? Should I take that as you wanting to be thrown into the river, too?”

“I-I’m not skilled enough to make my stomach growl on command! And wait, if you want to laugh, then just laugh!”

“Quiet, you!”

Ai Fa thrust away my arm, and started walking away in long strides. I hurriedly reached out and grabbed onto her left shoulder.

And as I admired her beet red ears and neck and whatnot, the aimless thought that kept running through my mind was *the people of this world really are warm to the touch, just like back home.*

4

Ai Fa’s home was less than a ten minutes’ walk away. Just like the others, it was an isolated wooden building constructed on a flat cleared-out area with only a bit of shrubbery left to it.

Even just from our journey here, I quickly noticed how spaced out the houses were. The area around Ai Fa’s home in particular was so desolate that it felt almost eerie.

Still, considering Ai Fa’s outfit and the name “people of the forest’s edge,” I’d

expected a much more primitive dwelling. But looking at it up close, it seemed to be rather splendidly made.

“Huh. You sure do live in a pretty nice place, don’t you?”

It didn’t quite have the quaint appeal of a log cabin, but still... The evenly-cut boards and logs were all well assembled, and besides, it was just plain impressively large. Heck, it may not even lose out to the Tsurumi Restaurant in terms of plot size.

It had gotten pretty dark out, so I couldn’t quite make out the details, though... At any rate, it had a rather unique structure with the roof slanting slightly from right to left, and it looked to be made entirely using woodworking, without any nails or screws. There was a moat about half a meter deep dug out around the house, with a log crossing over it at the entranceway. I figured it must have been for keeping animals away, or maybe directing rainwater.

“What are you doing...? Hurry up and head inside.”

“Ah, right, sorry.”

The door at the entrance slid to the side, reminding me of the type we had back in Japan.

Following after the home’s owner, I nervously entered into the dwelling.

“Pardon me...”

It was even darker inside. But still, I could tell that it really was spacious. The floor, meanwhile, had dark, reddish-brown pelts laid out over it.

As soon as I saw Ai Fa taking off her leather sandals at the earthen-floored entrance, I hurriedly started doing the same. I worried about what to do with my socks, but I ultimately decided there would be no harm in just taking them off. The feel of the stiff fur actually tickled my bare feet a bit.

Then, I heard a heavy clang from behind me.

Ai Fa had placed a large bar across the door in the entryway.

Now even if I scream or shout, nobody will come save me...

Well anyway, I gave the room another look over while praying that such

actions wouldn't be necessary to start with. It looked to be around 20 square meters. There were large windows cut into the walls to the left and right, and though they didn't use any glass or anything of the sorts, they had vertical wooden bars set in them spaced about 8 inches apart.

Looking at the far wall, I spied three doors.

The ceiling, meanwhile, was fairly tall, but the beams were exposed and showed that the roof indeed slanted down to the left, just like I had seen from outside. I figured it was built that way to endure the wind and rain, but I wasn't really sure.

To be honest, though... my attention was more on what my nose was picking up rather than what my eyes were seeing.

It seemed that three of the ingredients in the complex aroma surrounding the girl were strongly filling the space. In particular, they were the smells of meat, herbs, and spices.

"Does your foot still hurt?"

"Huh? Ah, no, it's nothing that serious. It feels sort of warm, but it's not really swelling or anything. It should probably be better by tomorrow, even if I don't do anything to treat it."

"I see..." Ai Fa had walked to the center of the room, and now looked like she was thinking something over. "I want to hear what you have to say as soon as possible, but I'm hungry as well. So for now, I'll start preparing the food."

"Go right ahead... Um, I don't have anything to offer in exchange, but will I be allowed to partake, too?"

"Do you really think we could hold a conversation while your stomach is making such a commotion...?"

Come on, you don't have to grit your teeth and get so angry...

Still, I was certainly grateful for the chance to eat a proper meal free of charge. I mean, if I had to sit in a room filled with this delicious scent as she ate alone, I may have ended up passing out.

So, the time came to prepare dinner. Of course I had only just set foot into

this house for the first time, but I could see a setup near the window on the right hand side that looked to be for that purpose. It was the only place that didn't have fur carpeting, instead having small stones laid out in a square that was about 2 meters on every side. There were also yellow rocks arranged neatly into a trapezoidal shape. That waist-high pedestal had a hole open wide in the front of it, and enshrined atop it was... a large, shiny, black metal pot.

It was just a bit primitive in nature, but this was clearly a cooking stove. Off to the side was what appeared to be a thin pile of kindling. Did that mean this huge hall also doubled as a kitchen? Maybe they had a custom of everyone helping cook and then eating together...

And yet... the only one I could see right now in this huge room was Ai Fa.

"Now that I think of it, where's the rest of your family?"

"...I already told you that my father passed away, didn't I? And my mother died even further back," Ai Fa bluntly stated while ladling water from the jug next to the stove into the pot.

I had no idea about the logic or common sense of this world, so all I could say was, "I see..."

Meanwhile, Ai Fa had lit the stove. Just what sort of ignition technique had she used? I wish I had seen...

At any rate, the room gradually brightened up.

"What are you standing there like an idiot for...? You're being an eyesore, so hurry up and sit down already."

"Ah, right, um... Where should I sit? I'm sorry, but I really don't know anything about the culture or customs of this land."

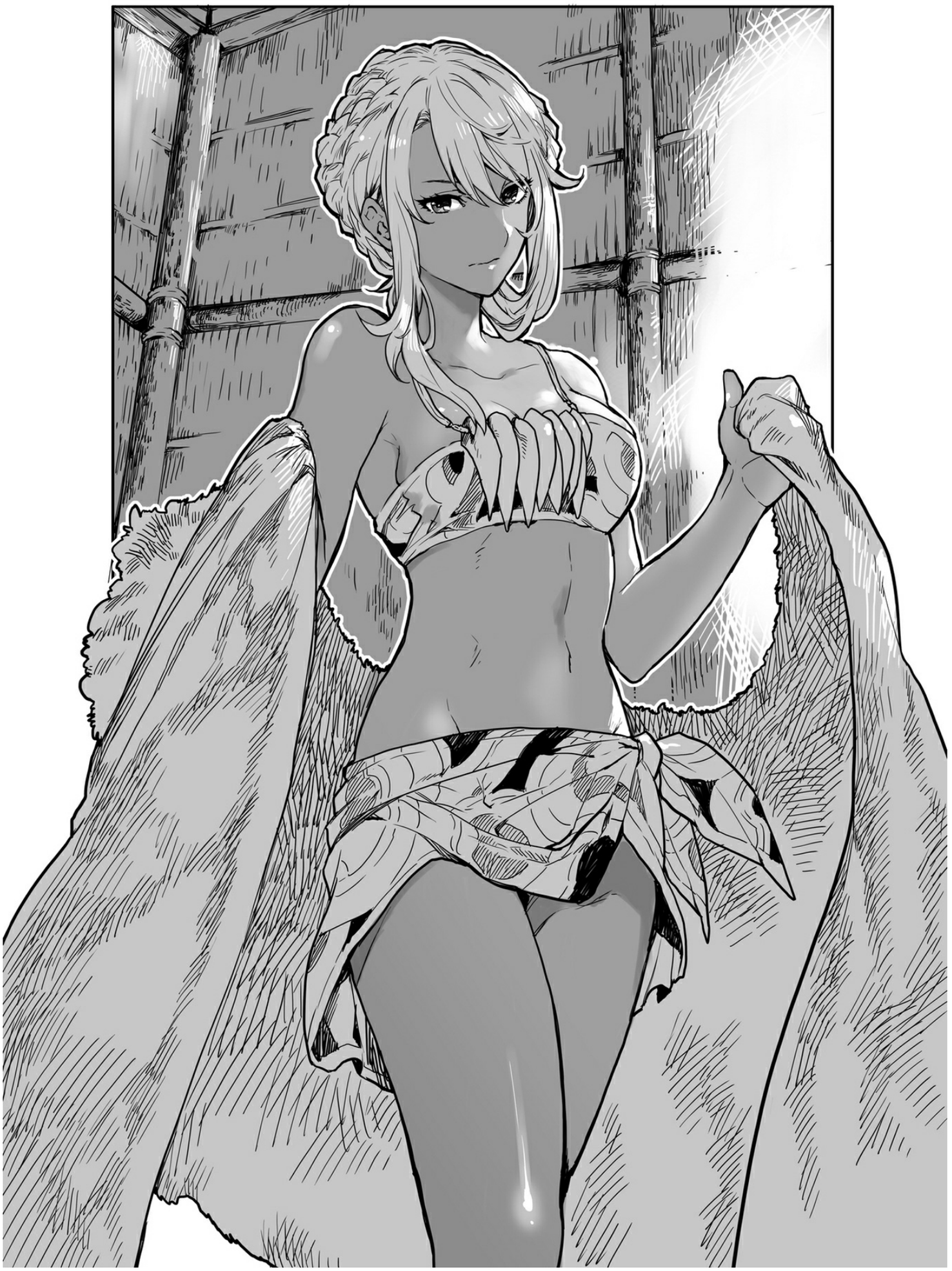
Ai Fa got up from the stove and shot a puzzled look my way.

"Who the hell needs culture to tell you how to sit down? You truly are a strange man..."

When I noticed the light from small flames coming from each of her hands, that diverted my attention a bit. She was holding onto the handles of little candlesticks on saucers. They were the third bit of metalwork I'd seen since

coming to this world, after Ai Fa's blade and pot. On top of that, they were definitely made with tallow, as they were filling the room even more with a scent that incited my appetite.

Ai Fa went about the room setting the candles in front of the windows, then she gently removed the fur cloak she had draped over her shoulders. The room brightened up significantly, bringing Ai Fa's slender limbs into clear focus... and then my heart suddenly skipped a beat without me even thinking about it. I mean, she didn't have anything on anywhere but her waist and chest, and then that necklace. She was every bit as exposed as if she would be if she was wearing a swimsuit or just her underwear. And I mean, no matter how unsociable she may be, she was still a woman, and quite a beauty at that. She had a carefully tempered body despite her slenderness, giving the impression of a flexible leather whip, which combined exquisitely with the elegant, womanly contours of her body, and how should I put it...? She was just plain beautiful and charming. That fact only hit me all the harder now that she had removed that unrefined cloak.



“Hey...”

“Yes! What is it?!”

“Don’t go yelling like that... Hand over that thing you have hidden near your chest.”

Ai Fa shot me a glare as she hung her fur cloak on the wall and propped up her large blade beneath it.

“It’s not as if some pale little man like you could do me harm even *with* a blade. But still, it’s the custom of the people of the forest’s edge that when you visit someone else’s home, you entrust your weapon to the master of the house.”

I was at a loss for words.

Ai Fa approached me, her eyes narrowing in an ever so slightly dangerous-looking manner. And she still had a knife dangling from her slim waist...

“Do you need me to say it again? If you intend to abide by the customs of the people of the forest’s edge, then hand over that blade.”

“Hold on a second, please! That’s gotta be meant to display your trust in each other... right?”

Ai Fa silently held out her left hand.

After three seconds of hesitation, I made up my mind.

“Alright. But this is incredibly valuable to me. And it’s more delicate than the sort of blades made for hunting, so could you please handle it as carefully as possible?”

“...Are you mocking me? None of the people of the forest’s edge would ever handle a blade improperly.”

“No, that’s not what I meant. It’s just that if the edge gets chipped or anything, it’ll be really difficult to repair. As long as you understand all that, then it’s fine.”

I pulled out the knife that I had previously stashed away near my chest and offered it to Ai Fa, handle first. This time it was Ai Fa’s turn to stop in her tracks,

as she stared at the ebony handle.

“...Is this blade a memento from your family?”

“Yeah, well, something like that...”

I was actually the one who went and died, but it was still true that we would never see each other again.

Ai Fa took the knife from me and held it close to her chest, then walked further into the room.

“None of the people of the forest’s edge would ever treat family improperly...” she whispered quietly, then opened the door farthest to the right and disappeared inside.

When she reappeared, Ai Fa was carrying a mountain of ingredients in place of my knife. As I watched with great interest, she approached the stove. Looking closely, the pot was actually pretty sizable, with a diameter of around 60 centimeters and a depth of 30. It was deep with a rounded bottom, looking just like someone had lopped off the top of a sphere. And the water that filled that sphere up halfway was already boiling.

“What do you want? It’ll still take some time before it’s ready, so just have a seat already.”

“It’s just that my family works in the food industry, so I can’t help but be interested in this world’s cuisine.”

Though Ai Fa shot me a seriously doubtful look, but rather than complaining any further she simply deposited the ingredients she was holding by her feet.

“Hmm... This sure is looking pretty luxurious.”

There were two different sorts of vegetables there that I had never seen before in my life. One of them was a seriously vibrant green color, but it otherwise looked just like a large onion. Just what exactly was the other one, though...? If I was forced to say what the lumpy little fist-sized sphere resembled, I’d have to say it was sort of like a potato. And yet, it was a sort of cream color, plus it utterly lacked the eyes you would expect from one of those. Maybe it didn’t grow underground...?

Overpowering all of that, though, was the lump of meat sitting there.

In all likelihood, it was from that pseudo-boar, the giba.

The leg looked like it had been used a bit already, but there was still plenty of meat around the thigh. The meat alone must have weighed at least 5 kilos... The pelt had been smoothly peeled back, revealing the red flesh underneath, which had been dusted with what looked almost like some sort of black wood shavings. Considering the powerful black pepper smell wafting through the air, it must have been some sort of spice used to preserve food.

The hunk of meat alone was placed atop a large, smooth leaf that reminded me of the ones on an Indian rubber tree. The vegetables, meanwhile, were placed right on the floor.

Looked like this dish was going to have some serious volume to it...

“Luxurious...? You really *don’t* know anything about how we people of the forest’s edge live, do you?” Ai Fa said without a hint of amusement on her face, as she started things off by grabbing the meat. She held it out over the steaming pot with an underhand grip, holding it just below the hoof. I worried that she may be getting ready to chuck it in as is, but she instead drew the knife that was at her hip and started slicing off pieces of giba meat. The way that she was shaving away at the surface of the meat reminded me of someone running a kabob stand. The thinly sliced cuts of meat fell down into the boiling water, then almost seemed to dance about inside the pot. Apparently she was prioritizing the spiced parts of the meat, as more and more of the red underneath was getting exposed.

No matter how I looked at it, that was clearly a hunting knife, but it actually seemed to be pretty darn sharp. It was around 20 centimeters long and about 8 millimeters thick. The back of the blade was jagged like a saw, giving the whole thing the feel of a survival knife. Just like that savage blade from before, it had leather wrapped around it to prevent slipping, but it lacked any sort of guard.

And now, that hunting knife was slicing off chunks of meat. What a wonderfully... rustic way of cooking. But I mean, I was the heir to an eatery myself. I didn’t have any interest in the hoity-toity cooking of the culinary world’s pompous elites, and I didn’t mind how something was prepared, just as

long as it was sanitary.

When it comes to cooking, the only thing that matters is whether or not a dish is tasty. Heck, the only reason I care about presentation is because it makes a dish *feel* tastier. And keeping sanitation in mind is important because there's just no point if your dish harms somebody, no matter how delicious it may be.

In other words, what I'm trying to say is... Watching Ai Fa heartily shaving off the meat with a practiced hand was seriously rousing my hunger.

"What are you looking so happy about...?"

"Huh? Oh, it's just that it looks like it'll be really tasty."

"...When it comes to food, there is no good or bad taste."

After uttering those harsh words once again, Ai Fa lowered the lid on the pot. Well, I say "lid," but it was more just a square board. And then she placed a large, flat stone on top of it, probably as a weight.

Ai Fa returned the leftover red giba meat to the pantry, checked the temperature, and gave a satisfied nod. Then, she turned and looked at me.

"It will take some time for the meat to cook... Do you mind telling me your story while we wait?"

5

"Right, well it's not a very easy story to digest. But I guess we should get this pain out of the way, huh?" I replied. Ai Fa gave a "hmph" and sat down beside the stove, one leg upright with the other crossed behind it. It was a truly manly pose; rather unfitting for such a scantily clad woman.

"You mind if I make myself a little more comfortable, too...?" I asked. After getting a small nod, I loosened the strings of my apron.

The temperature around here was probably about the same as it was in early summer back in Japan. And with the stove lit, that meant it was starting to feel pretty hot in this room. Still, now that I'd taken off my apron and exposed the t-shirt underneath, the night air blowing in through the windows was feeling real refreshing.

“What a strange outfit you have on... I’ve never seen anyone dress like that, even in town.”

“Yeah, well, I guess that makes sense. And I mean, this is my first time seeing anyone dressed like you, too.”

I took a seat too atop the stiff fur rug, directly across from Ai Fa.

“So, what do you want to ask me? To be honest, I don’t really get what happened myself, though, so I don’t know how good of an explanation I’ll be able to offer.”

“Where did you come from?”

That was the second time she’d asked me that question. I suppose we wouldn’t get anywhere if I just answered that I was from the Chiba prefecture in Japan again...

In the dim light, I stared straight into Ai Fa’s wildcat-like eyes and said, “Ai Fa... You saved my life, and invited me into your home. I had nowhere to go, but you took me in and treated me kindly, which I’m just so, so grateful for. That’s the absolute truth.”

Ai Fa tilted her head as if to say “and?”

“So I want to tell you everything. And then you can make your decision afterwards.”

And so, I ended up telling her the whole of what had happened to me, even though I didn’t understand it myself.

I told her that I lived for 17 years in a relatively peaceful country. That one day tragedy struck, and I ended up leaping into a fire. That I thought I had died, only to wake up in that forest before as if none of that had ever happened. And that this place was a lot like the world I had come from, but seemed fundamentally different somehow.

“I suppose there’s still the possibility that I just got flung to some unknown part of my own world. But that wouldn’t solve the biggest issue of how I’m alive and kicking when I was supposed to be dead. Too much stuff just doesn’t match up...” I admitted, voicing the doubts that had been swirling around inside. “For

example, take the words we're talking right now. You've never even heard of Japan, right?"

"I don't know it."

"Right, that point alone is utterly incomprehensible to me. I mean, back in my world it'd be unthinkable for someone who didn't know of Japan to speak Japanese so fluently. So how exactly is it that we're able to converse so smoothly like this?"

Ai Fa just sat there in silence.

"So, it's not just you people of the forest's edge living in this world, right? There's also that 'city of stone' and 'Western Kingdom,' yeah? About how big are they?"

"I have no business with the city of stone. I've only ever gone as far as the town on the outside of the stone walls in order to sell giba horns and tusks. Anything else I could tell you would be more hearsay," Ai Fa quietly responded after a bit of contemplating. "I've heard... that Duke Genos rules over thousands within the stone walls, and the citizens ruled by the Western Kingdom of Selva outnumber the very stars..."

"Hmm... Yeah, that's pretty big... Do you know what sort of god the people in the city of stone worship, and stuff like that?"

Ai Fa shot me back a dubious look in response. "Obviously the people of the nation of Selva worship the western god, Selva. There are four great kingdoms on the Amusehorn continent, each with their own principal deity. Without the divine protection of the gods, the people of Amusehorn could not exist. After all, a man without a god is little more than a beast... You're not trying to tell me you don't even know *that* much, are you?"

"Unfortunately, that's the case. I've never heard of any continents, kingdoms, or gods that went by those names in my life," I said with an awkward smile as I scratched my towel-wrapped head. "There was still a slim chance that maybe I was dense enough to never have heard of a tribe of 500 hunters or that there were boars out there with horns, but... there's just no way. Looks like I've got my answer there."

Well, I figured that possibility was a real longshot from the start and had pretty much given up on it, so it wasn't exactly much of a shock at this point. Still, it did mean acknowledging that there wasn't even a smidgen of a chance left that I'd ever see Reina or my old man ever again.

I looked straight into Ai Fa's beautiful blue eyes and stated, "Let me voice my present conclusion... Be it through a godly whim or whatever, I was sent here from another world. And maybe it's the work of some unseen force that we can communicate, too."

"..."

"Whether it's the distant past, the far off future, a parallel world that evolved differently, or just one in some different dimension... At any rate, this isn't the world where I was born and raised."

"..."

"I'm a visitor from a different world," I awkwardly forced out as my shoulders drooped. "Either that, or I'm just a giant idiot who hit his head or something and started thinking all that was the case. Those are the only two ideas I've got..."

"So you admit that you're crazy...?"

"Not in the least. To me, those 17 years I've lived are everything I've got. If all that is just a lie, then where does that leave me?" I forced out while holding back a sigh. That was all I could say on the matter. "Just to be sure, there aren't any other people like me out there, are there? Like if all people who died in my world were reborn here..."

"As if such a stupid thing could be true."

"Yeah... I mean, if that were how things worked, this world would be absolutely overflowing with the dead."

I copied Ai Fa by lifting up one knee, then rested my chin on it.

"Anyway, that's all I've got to say. I leave it up to you to decide what to do with me."

"...Understood."

Ai Fa shot me one last glance and then gradually stood up.

“...Well then, it’s about time.”

“Hmm?”

“The meat should be just about ready.”

With that, Ai Fa took off the stone weight and the lid to the pot, causing white steam to billow forth.

“Man, that smells tasty!”

I stood up myself and excitedly peered over Ai Fa’s shoulder into the pot. The water and bits of meat were positively dancing about in its rounded bottom. And the steam was impressive, but so was the way that it was foaming up. It was like someone had thrown soap in there or something...

“...Hey, food is important too, naturally, but are we seriously done talking?”

That question earned me a glare from up close and personal.

“You’re a visitor from another world. Either that, or a crazy person who thinks so. I understand all that.”

“So you believe my crazy story?”

“...At the very least, I can tell that you aren’t trying to deceive me.”

Ai Fa suddenly averted her gaze, reached down and picked up the onion-esque vegetable by her feet, then started to chop it up while still holding it in her hand. And though the inside was every bit as vivid green as the outside, it really was otherwise just like an onion.

First Ai Fa peeled off the thin, dry outer layer and chucked it into the pot. She then followed that up by simply slicing the vegetable in two and throwing the chunks in as well.

“You’re not some massive liar. In other words, you’re probably just crazy.”

Splash, sploosh.

She threw in around five or six of the pseudo-onions in total.

While gazing at that sight, like some sort of boiling pot out of hell, I muttered,

“Thank you...”

“What are you thanking me for? Are you somehow happy to have me call you a madman?”

“Yeah. Or at least, it’s better than being called a big fat liar. I mean, it means you believe what I said, more or less.”

“I really don’t understand you...” Ai Fa said, sounding a little ticked.

Next up, she grabbed one of those cream-colored pseudo-potatoes. She didn’t even peel the skin off this time, instead just giving it a single slice through the center and then plunking it on into the pot.

The pot itself was pretty darn deep, but the foam was bubbling up to the rim.

As she stirred the concoction with what looked like a thick wooden pestle, Ai Fa shot me another hostile glare.

“So, what do you intend to do next?”

“Hmm? What do you mean?”

“I mean, how do you plan on living your life from here on out? Are you going to look for a way back to your old world?”

“I don’t know... I mean, even if there *is* a way back to my old world, it may just throw me right back into the middle of that inferno. And if that was the case, I’d just be going back to get immediately burnt to a crisp.”

If there was a chance I could get my old man’s knife back to him, maybe it’d be worth risking my life. But if I ended up as a pile of ashes, so would the knife.

“Well anyway, I still haven’t got it all figured out just yet. And hey, it may not have anything to do with what I want, and I may just suddenly get dragged back to my old world. At any rate, I’ve got no clue what caused this crazy phenomenon in the first place, so pretty much nothing else that could happen would surprise me at this point.”

“I see...”

“If you’re regretting having picked up such a pain in the butt, then just go ahead and say it. I’ll leave here right away if I have to. The climate around here

seems pretty well suited for camping outdoors, fortunately...”

“If you spend the night outside, the giba will trample you to death and the mundt will ravage your corpse. By morning, only your bones would remain,” Ai Fa bluntly stated in response. “And on top of that, Diga Suun saw you and me together. You’re clueless about even things like the fours great gods, and if you go and unwittingly break some sort of serious taboo, the responsibility will fall squarely on me.”

“Huh? But that’s not...”

“For the time being, make sure not to leave my sight,” Ai Fa warned me in a rather displeased-sounding voice as she stirred the boiling pot, looking just like a witch out of a fairy tale. “At the bare minimum, I’ll pound the basics of this world and the laws of the forest’s edge into that head of yours. After that, you can go ahead and die in a ditch for all I care.”

“Got it. Seriously, thank you Ai Fa...”

“Hey! Why are you bowing your head like that?! Do you like being told to die in a ditch or something?!”

“I mean, it’s better than being told to get the hell out,” I replied, taking care to make sure I didn’t sound overly serious. On top of that, I also took a step back from Ai Fa. I somehow got the feeling that I’d end up unable to stop myself from hugging her if I kept looking at her from so close. I was just that concerned about my future. I was despairing just that greatly from having lost it all. And Ai Fa had been the one to tell me to stay with her, and say that I was no liar.

Even though I was stuck shouldering this ridiculous fate, I was seriously eternally grateful that the first person I met in this world was this kind, stubborn woman.

“It’s done cooking...” Ai Fa muttered, still sounding a bit angry as she turned her back to me.

This time she went through the middle door, and when she came back, she had two sets of deep bowls and something that looked akin to Chinese soup spoons, plus an elliptical ladle. Naturally, all of these were wooden.

Ai Fa used the ladle to scoop up the contents of the pot, which was now pure

white inside thanks to all the steam and foam, then poured it into one of the bowls and handed it to me without saying a word.

“Thanks.”

I may have been full of emotion, but my stomach was still running on empty. And so, I happily accepted it, then took a seat down on the fur.

As Ai Fa prepared her own portion, I excitedly observed the contents of my bowl. It was a thick, white soup that looked just like clam chowder, but it had the distinctive smell of boar stew. And here and there across the white surface, I spied brown chunks of meat and green vegetables. The bits of the pseudo-onion looked to be just about the right size, but the pseudo-potato was nowhere to be seen. Had it seriously gone and disintegrated in such a short period of time? Now that I think of it, the broth was actually the same sort of cream color those pseudo-potatoes had been...

Well, they may look alike, but they aren’t actually *onions and potatoes. Just what exactly do they taste like, though...?*

I was a little concerned by the fact that she hadn’t skimmed off any of the scum despite how much had bubbled up, but well, when in Rome... And I mean, while so-called “scum” can be an off-flavor that ruins a dish, it also can be a real bundle of flavor too. It wouldn’t be right to say it was the sort of thing you should always be sure to get rid of.

And besides, this place must have its own cooking methods. It would be awful presumptuous for someone from another world like me to butt in.

While I was thinking through all of that, Ai Fa also took a seat.

“Why aren’t you eating? Did you decide that you really aren’t willing to eat giba after all?”

“Not at all. It’s just the custom in my world that everybody should eat together. And this looks absolutely delicious, seriously!”

After shrugging her shoulders and looking like she didn’t care in the least, Ai Fa muttered something under her breath, then started eating. With that, I said “thanks for the meal!” and took my wooden spoon in hand.

I scooped up the brown chunks of meat and white soup together, kicking off my first dinner in this new world.

I brought the spoon to my mouth, giving thanks to the abundance of this world and Ai Fa for cooking the meal. And then, I screamed out, “Gross!”

Chapter 2: A Wild Morning

1

That night, I had a dream back to when I was in farming camp and ate that boar stew. Man, was it ever tasty... The light-brown miso stock was chock full of enoki and shiitake mushrooms, cabbage and carrots, and even burdock and taro. Plus there wasn't any of the stink to it that I had heard so much about. Though it was wonderfully thick, the meat was actually softer than pork, and it wasn't overly fatty in the least, so I could eat as much as I pleased.

It had been December, right smack in the middle of winter. Because of that, I was able to thoroughly experience my chilled body warming up to its core.

Before the meal, I got a chance to prepare the boar, which I had previously only gotten to do with chickens and ducks and the like. That meant I was feeling both nervous and excited the whole time.

I was really grateful to have the experience, but it also seriously drove in just what it meant to eat the flesh of an animal.

Unfortunately, the meat needed to be cured for a few days, so the boar I ate was actually one that had been prepared in advance by the hunting club rather than the one I had handled. Still, it was delicious enough to die for.

It was a three-day camp, so my old man and Reina came to visit on the second night. When Reina saw the boar I had prepared she looked like she was about to faint, but she ended up eating just about as much of the stew as I did. It was really hard to judge whether she was a hearty girl or a weak one.

"Well, you wouldn't ever get to prepare a boar back home!" my pops said with a chuckle.

"Aw, I wanted to eat the meat that you'd prepared, Asuta-chan," Reina added with a giggle of her own.

I probably laughed, too.

I wasn't quite sure at first whether or not I had it in me to take three days off

working at home for the farming camp. But in the end, it turned out to be a really enjoyable, worthwhile experience.

“Hey, wake up.”

When I bragged that the next day I’d be preparing a deer, Reina’s big, round eyes grew even wider in surprise.

“You can eat deer? Don’t you feel kind of bad for them, though?”

“Why? That doesn’t seem especially fair, considering all the boar you just gobbled down.”

“Huh? But boars just look like pigs, right?” she responded, puffing up her cheeks.

I mean, that’s exactly what I was calling unfair...

“Hey, have you ever really taken a good look at a pig or a boar? If you asked me, I’d have to say that they’re cuter than deer.”

“Cut it out! I won’t be able to eat pork either!”

I wanted to tell her that there were people overseas who ate meats that would be even harder for a Japanese person to accept, but I felt bad for her, so I stopped.

“Hey, how long do you plan on sleeping for? Get up already!”

So noisy.

But man, that boar stew sure was tasty... The miso flavor was really strong, so I would’ve liked to try cooking it in a way that focused on bringing out the taste of the meat. I mean, wouldn’t making stock out of the boar’s bone marrow just be the best?

“I told you to stay here, but I’ve got no intention of letting you be a freeloader! Hey!”

Ah, my shoulders are getting shaken all violently.

Putting that aside, though, I seem to have a real fondness for quirky meats. I mean, I’ve only had it a few times, but I love the taste of lamb. And I’m just a big fan of the smell of fat and meat in general. I must’ve been a real carnivore in

my previous life.

Heck, my favorite type of ramen is soy sauce tonkotsu. Of course I'd have to pass on ramen that was just swimming in fat, though. Heck, I had a plan to add tonkotsu ramen to the regular menu after I took over the shop.

"Hey... Cut it out already. Or do you *want* me to hurt you?"

Right, that's the smell. Who was it that said giba stunk, again? Hmm? Wait, what's a giba?

At any rate, that was a seriously delicious smell.

I'd just chowed down on all that boar, but I was already starving again.

Besides, last night's stew made me want to spew. Heh, that rhymed.

Well, whatever. I'm feeling hungry, so it's time to chow down!

I felt the wonderful sensation of delicate meat on my teeth and tongue... and then in the next instant, white fireworks exploded in the back of my eyelids.

◇

"...Huh?"

It took a moment for me to grasp just what had happened.

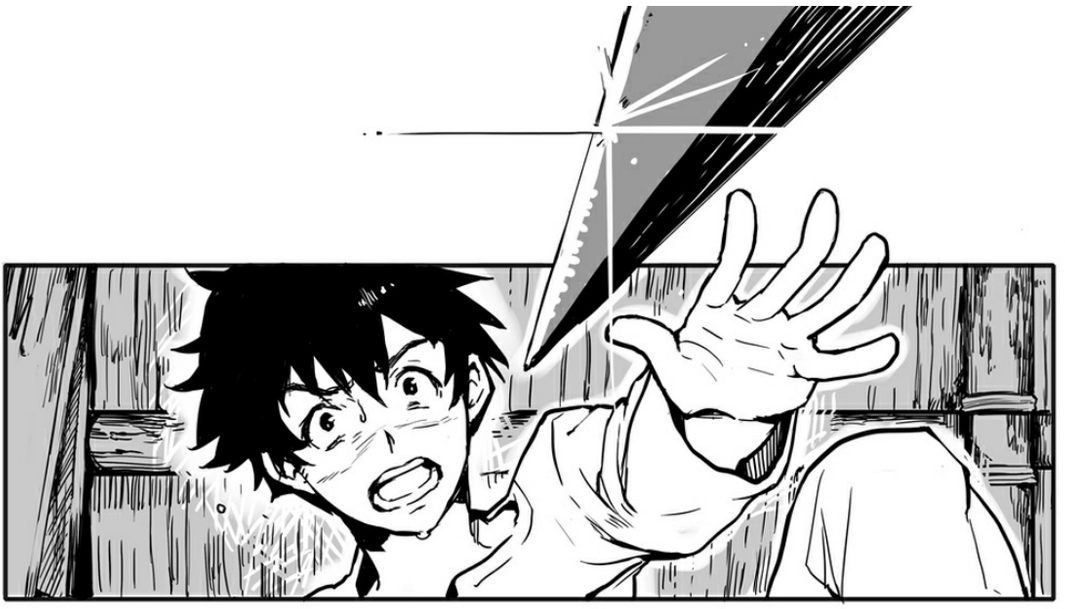
The scent of meat and spices filled my nose, and the morning light streamed in through the windows. I felt the stiff fur beneath me, and looking around I saw the wooden walls and the ceiling with its exposed beams.

Ah, that's right. I'd spent my first night here in this alternate world. This was Ai Fa's house, not my room back home. And currently, the girl herself was standing imposingly before me. My savior was holding her left palm to the side of her neck, her pretty face was beet red, and she was pointing a drawn knife in my direction.

"H-Hold on! I'd taste awful, probably!"

I was instantly awake, and rolled all the way to the rear wall.

The metallic knife shone brightly, reflecting the light of the morning sun. And the hand Ai Fa was holding it with was trembling, as if she was holding back her fury.





“I’ll kill you...”

“Wait, why?! Why are you acting so violent right now...?” I yelled out, feeling a throbbing pain from the top of my head. Hmm? Now that I think of it, I feel like somebody hit me in my dream...

“Wait, did you just whack me one? Seriously, what kind of person goes and hits someone who’s sleeping in the head?!”

“Try asking yourself...”

Ai Fa’s face had gone a vivid red from her anger.

It was the same way yesterday, too, but she sure did lose her temper easily for someone who’s normally so cool and composed... But on the other hand, she didn’t seem to be the type to get angry over nothing. Did I go and do something crude...?

“Sorry. Did I do something to you? I don’t have any memory from when I was sleeping, but if I did something untoward to you, I apologize.”

“You...”

“Hmm?”

“You... You tried to eat me!” Ai Fa yelled out louder than I’d ever heard her before, then gripped the knife in both hands.

Up until now her left hand had hidden her neck, but now it was exposed, and... there were clear, definite bite marks left on it.

“Oh...” I muttered, finally getting it. “I remember now. I was eating something in my dream. It must’ve been the delicious scent wafting off of you that got me confused, right?”

“I’ll kill you...”

“Gah, hold on a second! I’m totally at fault! Seriously, I’m sorry! I apologize from the bottom of my heart! Just please, at least find it in you to spare my...”

“Shut it!”

And so, my second day in this other world got off to a truly turbulent start.

The one silver lining in this whole unfortunate incident was that, though it should go without saying, this didn't awaken any cannibalistic tendencies in me.

2

"As soon as we eat, we're heading out," Ai Fa stated, looking roughly 40% more displeased than usual. Well, it was my fault that she was angry in the first place, though, so there was nothing I could do about it. Still, she'd already whacked me on the head at least five or six times with the grip of her knife, so you'd think she would hurry up and snap out of it already...

By the way, the breakfast Ai Fa provided was giba jerky, which proved to be quite tricky in its own way. Despite the fact that it was sliced super thinly like they do with dried squid snacks, it was unbelievably tough to chew. Honestly, it was more like meat-flavored rubber than anything. On top of that, it had a real animalistic stink to it, so it must not have been properly bloodlet.

Ai Fa was on the opposite side of the room giving off a "don't come near me" aura, so I just stood stock still next to the stove all by myself, chewing my giba jerky. As I peered into the freshly cleaned metal pot, I thought back on last night's dinner. That dinner... was seriously the worst. To me at least, it was practically torture.

I mean, that was just way too much...

That may well have been the first time in my life that I ever blurted out, "Gross!" about food someone had given me. Normally, the event would've sent me into a spiral of self-loathing. The only reason I was spared that fate was because Ai Fa herself ended up feigning ignorance.

"...When it comes to food, there is no good or bad taste."

It was the third time in one day that she uttered those fighting words.

Maybe all of the people of the forest's edge really did just think of eating as a means of gaining nutrition and nothing else.

But still... Even still... That food was just way too awful.

The first problem was the giba meat. To put it bluntly, it was hard. It also had

an unusually strong animal stench to it. No matter how bad a cut it may be, no pork or beef would ever stink this bad. And it was heated enough that it wasn't too hard to chew, but the surface was all mushy, while still sinewy on the inside, making it sort of like eating melted rubber... In other words, the texture was just the absolute worst, too.

The pseudo-onion, on the other hand, had a nice, crisp texture... but that was all there was to it. My number one impression was honestly just, "Onions really just don't belong in a stew." Of course there *were* stews like a motsunabe or a kimchi hot pot where they did fit just fine. But at least in my household, we just plain didn't use them in stews.

The real issue, though, was that pseudo-potato. Just what *was* that thing? There wasn't anything solid of it left in the end. All that remained was a sort of cream-colored floury substance, which felt like she had just thrown it in to completely ruin the balance of the dish. The closest thing I can think of is water that had wheat flour dissolved in it.

Go on, just imagine it. Oozy soup made from diluted flour. Crisp, crunchy onions. Smelly, slimy meat. And the only thing used for seasoning is black pepper. Now does that sound appetizing to you?

Sad to say, I wasn't able to grasp even a fragment of deliciousness from it.

The roughest part of it all for me, though, was that the smell alone was so amazingly good. It was just the absolute best. I had zero doubt that the delicious flavors of the meat and fats had seeped plenty enough into the cloudy liquid. And when paired with the smell of the black pepper-esque spice, it made for a scent so powerful that smelling it alone was as satisfying as eating a bowl of white rice.

And yet, it tasted awful.

The second I brought the meat and soup into my mouth, that wonderful scent was blown to smithereens by the animal stench.

And so, it ended up feeling like absolute torture.

My hunger had been so thoroughly stimulated, and yet my mouth was rejecting the substance entering it. To be honest, if it weren't for my gratitude

towards Ai Fa and the ingredients she had used, I likely wouldn't have even eaten half of my portion.

And yet, I ended up eating three bowls of the stuff. By the end, it was a real battle with my gag reflex.

Thanks to that, even though my stomach was full, my brain kept on mumbling, "So, when's dinner?" all the way until I fell asleep. And it was probably why I had that dream last night, too...

"What's with that stupid look on your face? Come on, it's time to get going."

I looked up in response to the thorny voice, and saw that Ai Fa's fur cloak was already draped over her shoulders, with her large blade and knife dangling from her hip. She was 100% ready to head out.

"Ah, hold on a second! What about my kitchen knife?"

"Kitchen...?"

"My blade. I entrusted it to you yesterday, remember?"

Ai Fa silently gestured with her chin towards the doors in the rear of the room.

From what I could recall it was the one that was furthest to the right, so that was the direction I headed.

Ai Fa and I both ended up sleeping out here in the reception hall, so those three inner rooms were still a mystery to me.

I carefully, slowly opened the door... And in that instant, a tremendous smell exploded forth.

Gah... This is seriously something.

Just like I'd expected, it was a pantry. There were various bags around that were made of some sort of linen-esque material, with what looked like onions and potatoes peeking out of them. And there were also a variety of plants dangling from the walls. There were pitch black ones that looked like shrivelled up seaweed and ones with strangely long, thin vibrant green leaves all packed into the crowded room.

And in the back of the room was an area about 2 meters square blocked off by square boards, which was packed tight up to around the height of my knees with black powder. That was the source of the smell.

It was the black pepper-esque spice that had coated the giba meat.

Rather than the scent being something I could judge as being good or bad, it was just plain overwhelming. Those particles had thoroughly blended into the air of this windowless room, so it felt like I could easily wreck the mucous membranes of my eyes, nose, and throat if I wasn't careful.

I see. So this is how they preserve the giba meat...

Despite that aforementioned danger, my natural curiosity won out and I continued to investigate with slightly watery eyes. There must have been giba meat sealed away in this mountain of spice, right? So rather than pickling meat in salt, they did it in pepper. Well, without any sort of refrigeration device, you absolutely needed to do something like this. The climate around here was like it was at the start of summer back in Japan, so raw meat would surely spoil in no time at all.

Hmm... Is this dried stuff what it's made out of?

I was looking at those shriveled leaves hanging from the walls. It looked like a weirdly black-ish seaweed, but when I went to touch it, the fibers started to crumble.

I see. So when you dry out these leaves, they turn into a spice that's akin to black pepper. I'm sure if Europeans from the Age of Exploration saw this, they'd get so excited they'd have a convulsion.

As I jumped to that abrupt conclusion in my head, a voice called out from behind, "What are you doing?"

Ai Fa's silhouette was standing in the door to the pantry, backlit by the morning sun. She was leaning against the wall with her arms crossed and her head tilted just a bit, with the greatest look of doubt in her eyes that I'd seen yet.

"Your blade is right here. Now hurry up and get out of there. You'll end up wrecking your sense of smell if you stay in there too long."

“Ah, sorry. There was just all sorts of stuff in here that caught my attention.”

When I followed Ai Fa’s suggestion and stepped outside, I found the morning sunlight to be blindingly bright. I couldn’t have been in there for more than a minute, but I already felt like I had been pickled in pepper, too.

“Gah, my nose seriously stings! That spice sure is no joke!”

“...Are you some sort of idiot? What’s so enjoyable about staring at food that you aren’t even going to eat?”

“It *is* enjoyable. I told you yesterday, right? I’m the son of a chef.”

“Chefs don’t exist outside of the walls of the city of stone. If that’s how you wish to make a living, then you should learn the ways of this world as soon as possible, and then depart immediately from the forest’s edge,” she said with a pout, shoving my knife at my chest.

“Nah, it’d probably be impossible to try to become a chef in a world where I don’t even know my left from my right... By the way, why’d you choose to store my knife in such an overpowering room?”

It wasn’t like I was thinking the spices would cause the blade to rust or anything. Though I was a little worried about the smell sticking to it...

“...That’s the only room without a window. Of course, it’s rare for anyone to be as shameless as Diga Suun and break through a window’s bars in order to sneak into someone’s home, but still, it’s the most secure location in the house.”

“Ah, so that’s it. I see you really were treating it well... Thanks.”

Ai Fa’s brows furrowed a bit, telling me that she probably wasn’t the sort who was all that used to getting thanked.

“We’ve already wasted plenty of time. We have to gather up pico leaves and firewood by the time the sun reaches its peak. And if you don’t want to be called a freeloader, then you better be of at least a little use.”

“Aye aye, sir! But... do you mind if I make a request before that, Ai Fa?”

Naturally, Ai Fa looked incredibly annoyed. She was seriously ruining that natural beauty she exuded...

“So, you intend to impose on me ever further? You’re a surprisingly shameless man, Asuta.”

“No, I was actually thinking it’d be good if I could take even a tiny fraction of the burden off your shoulders, so... From tonight on, could I handle the dinner?”

Ai Fa had been frowning, but when she heard my question, she made a face like a pigeon that had been hit with a peashooter. Honestly, it was kind of cute...

“What sort of question is that? It’s not exactly much of a burden to prepare dinner. Even a ten year old child could handle it.”

“Right, then I suppose it wouldn’t really be helping you out, huh...? So is it no good, then? I kind of wanted to test out if the cooking techniques from back home would work with this world’s ingredients.”

Ai Fa’s eyebrows slumped down in a bewildered manner, and she looked me up and down. The expression on her face made it look like she’d run into a dog walking on two legs or something. Maybe our standards differed, but *I* thought I was pretty cute...

“I don’t get it... Is that how so-called ‘chefs’ think?”

“Well, I’m ultimately still just in training. But I’m sure full-fledged chefs would feel the same way, too.”

“...Do as you please. I honestly don’t care in the least how dinner preparations are carried out.”

After saying that, Ai Fa walked off towards the door. As I hurried after her slender figure, I couldn’t help but breathe a sigh of relief. It was kind of like I had just told her, “your cooking tastes awful, so let me handle it,” so I’d been half ready for her to start swinging her knife at me. But apparently Ai Fa really didn’t concern herself in the slightest with culinary matters. It made for an odd feeling, like I was both happy and sad about it at the same time.

Still, it really is true that I’m fired up to take on the challenge.

Last night I felt dissatisfied and just plain gloomy, and I wanted to wipe all

that away by my own hand. The way I saw it, giba meat was an ingredient that could make for an incredibly delicious dish. And at least in my mind, it was pure blasphemy to eat such a tasty smelling ingredient in such an awful form. I may not have figured out how to tackle those pseudo-onions and potatoes just yet, but I could say with certainty at least that none of the giba meat's potential had been utilized.

I only had cursory knowledge on how a boar stew should be prepared. Just how well would those techniques be able to draw out the true potential of the giba meat? That thought alone was enough to get me all excited and make my stomach growl.

And... I thought to myself, sneaking a peak at Ai Fa as she wrapped that leather belt-esque footwear around her feet. *I want to have her eat my cooking, too.*

As a mere chef-in-training, there wasn't a whole lot I could make. And since Ai Fa didn't have any interest at all in the subject of food, there's a chance she just plain wouldn't care. But still, there isn't anybody alive who would pout because they had a delicious meal.

I guess I'll say I've earned a passing mark if I can make this perpetually displeased girl look even just a little happy. Yeah, I'd cook up the giba meat and bring my savior a bit of joy.

It's definitely ridiculously extreme to think of it this way, but right there, I'd found a purpose for my life. Just like that, I felt like the dark clouds that had been accumulating inside me cleared up just a little.

"By the way, is your foot alright?" Ai Fa suddenly asked, having finished putting on her footwear.

"Yeah. Seems like it'll be fine for walking, at least... Thanks for worrying about me."

"I did no such thing. It's just that if we head into the forest and you suddenly say something like 'I can't walk anymore,' then I'm leaving you right then and there." Then, with an serious pout, she added, "...So if anything feels wrong, don't push yourself and tell me right away."

Man, I really was saved by someone it was worth paying back my debt to.

“Got it,” I replied, then I stepped out into the bright morning light of this other world.

3

“Pico leaves grow alongside bodies of water in the forest. The best place for gathering them would be the area around the Lanto river, but the upper part of the river is the domain of the Suun clan and their related families, so we’ll be heading downstream.”

“Got it, captain!”

The plan was to retrace the path from last night and head into the forest.

Even though we had that whole big commotion that delayed us heading out, there wasn’t so much as a peep to be heard from the other houses in the settlement. Occasionally, I could spy a flickering silhouette, but not a soul came out as we passed on by.

“Hmph. Nobody would actually choose to head out into the forest first thing in the morning. This time of day is meant for various chores such as tanning furs and chopping firewood.”

“But you’re doing just that, aren’t you, captain?”

“Thanks to an added freeloader, I’ve been left uneasy about my firewood stockpile. I’d never normally head off into the forest this early.”

“So it’s this lowly private’s fault, then?! Your subordinate is truly, deeply ashamed!”

“If you don’t fix the way you’re talking right here and now, I’ll chop off that tongue of yours.”

“Got it. Sorry.”

Ai Fa still seemed to be in a bit of a bad mood, so I decided to behave myself for the time being.

What spread out before my eyes now was the sight of my very first morning

in this alternate world. I couldn't tell last night since it was so dark out, but the scenery around here really was something.

Mount Morga stood imposingly, piercing up through the misty sky. The peak spread out so wide in front of me that I couldn't help but be impressed by the size of the thing.

Our destination right now, though, was deep in the forest.

Looking around this area that had been cleared out for the settlement, I saw that it was all covered in a verdant green. The air was crisp and clear, without a hint of the smell of exhaust. There were even birds fluttering about through the sky.

The beauty of nature was spread out all around me, as far as the eye could see.

The temperature didn't seem to have risen too much just yet, as I was still feeling pretty comfortable in my long-sleeved chef uniform.

As my gaze returned to the nearby scenery, I spied morning dew shining on the bushes and shrubs all around. If this had been some sort of camping trip, I'm sure even I would've felt plenty satisfied.

"Hey. Now that I think of it, just what exactly is a pico leaf, anyway?" I asked as we approached the edge of the forest.

"It's that thing that made you so happy you could cry," Ai Fa replied, looking annoyed.

"Huh? You mean that spice? That's a pretty cute name for it."

"...Pico leaves lose their effectiveness in less than a month, so it's important to build up a stockpile before then. After all, without pico leaves, meat won't last two days before going bad. So if you don't want to eat rotten meat, then work hard."

"Got it... Hey, do you just gather those vegetables from last night from out in the wild, too?"

"I trade these in town in order to obtain aria and poitan," Ai Fa responded as she pushed her way into the forest thicket, her necklace jangling as she went.

“With the tusks and horns from one giba, I can get about ten days worth of aria and poitan. I suppose that will be five days with two of us... In other words, if I don’t hunt one every five days, we won’t have anything to eat but giba meat. We do have a little bit of leeway to do this now, though.”

“Hmm? But you’ve got such a splendid mountain right there. You should be able to get ahold of as much food as you need from there, right?”

“It is forbidden to pillage the abundant blessings of Mount Morga.”

“Huh?”

“If we disturb the mountain, then the starved giba will end up ransacking the fields of the Genos domain. We people of the forest’s edge are only permitted to gather herbs like pico and lilo, or the highly poisonous grigee fruit. In other words, the plants that the giba don’t eat.”

“Wait, who handed out that ‘permission’? Nobody should own the forests and mountains, right?”

“Mount Morga and the forest are both the territory of the Western Kingdom of Selva. 80 years ago, we people of the forest’s edge fled from the ravages of war, moving our settlement from the Southern Kingdom of Jagar to here. Since then, we have abided by the agreement to leave the mountain alone and only hunt giba, and the kingdom has granted us permission to live on this land in exchange.”

“What the heck? This mountain’s so big that there’s no way just taking a bit from it would cause the giba to starve.”

“That’s not true. Giba are only able to live at the base of the mountain. Giant madarama snakes and varb wolves that prey on giba live farther up the mountain, as well as fiendish savages. This forest’s edge at the base of the mountain is the only place my people and the giba can live.”

“Hmm...”

I could understand what she was saying, but it wasn’t enough to satisfy me.

The giba were driven to the base of the mountain as part of the struggle to survive. That was perfectly natural, but why should that mean that the people

of the forest's edge are only allowed to hunt them, all for the sake of strangers' fields...? They were seriously getting the short end of the stick here.

The fact that I heard yesterday about them being mocked as "giba eaters" was also weighing heavily on me.

"We people of the forest's edge are ultimately just people of foreign blood who fled from the Southern Kingdom, after all... We tossed aside the Southern God Jagar and dedicated our swords and souls to the Western God Selva. And yet to the people of the city of stone, we're still outsiders rather than brethren," Ai Fa muttered emotionlessly, having read what I was thinking.

"Outsiders... But you've been living here for 80 years, right? I can't imagine you'd be punished for advocating for your rights a bit stronger..."

"Just as I don't seek the protection of the Suun family, our people don't seek the protection of the kingdom. And besides, hunting giba suits us more than plowing fields."

"I see... Well, I suppose I'm far more of an 'outsider' than anyone, so it may not exactly be my place to talk..." The way I was speaking must have gotten on Ai Fa's nerves, as she was shooting me a real glare. "Wait, I'm not trying to talk down on your way of living. It's just that I'm not exactly fond of how the people from that city of stone do things."

"Hmph. The city of stone would suit a pale man like you far better than the forest's edge."

As I shot a glare back at Ai Fa for her mean-spirited words, a thought suddenly hit me.

"Hold on a second. You said that you need a giba's horns and tusks to feed one person for 10 days, right? So that means for a family of 10, they'll need to hunt a giba each and every day... Hey wait, if the total population of the people of the forest's edge is around 500, then that means your people hunt 50 giba a day in total?!"

Ai Fa tilted her head as if to say, "and?"

Hey, that's not something to be brushing off so lightly!

“That means the people of the forest’s edge have been hunting 50 giba a day for 80 years now, right? So why haven’t the giba been wiped out by overhunting?”

“As if the giba could be wiped out. I hear that they’ve actually been multiplying over these past few years, and the damages to fields have only increased. The giba aren’t so few that we could hunt them all, and besides, the forest is unbelievably vast.”

“Oof... That’s a pretty crazy story...”

In that case, that Western Kingdom or whatever leaving such a huge task up to the people of the forest’s edge alone felt awful sloppy. And I couldn’t help but feel something unscrupulous behind the whole system where they could only hunt giba and couldn’t get ahold of other food.

They weren’t given permission to gather from the forest or farm, and could only hunt giba... So that was how things were. Add to that the way that they were ridiculed as ‘giba eaters,’ and it was just plain ridiculous.

“I’m telling you, though, that it’s forbidden for *anyone* to pillage the mountain’s blessings. And if you commit a taboo, then you have the scalp peeled from your head. If nothing else, make sure you pound that fact into your brain.”

“...Got it.”

Ai Fa suddenly stopped in place, then grabbed me by the collar.

“Hey, what’s with that attitude you’ve had for a bit now? If you have some sort of issue, then come out and say it clearly.”

“I’m telling you, I’m not mad at you all! I just don’t like the way that the kingdom and city folks and all them do things!”

Ai Fa’s eyes had been boiling with anger like last night’s giba stew, only for that heat to suddenly dissipate.

“Why is that? You’re not even one of us, so why would such a thing anger you?”

“I mean, it’s just the kind of thing that can’t help but tick you off when you

think about it objectively, right? And it's only natural for my empathy to fall with the people of the forest's edge, since you're the one who rescued me, Ai Fa."

"You truly are a strange man..."

With that Ai Fa let go of my collar and started pushing onward once more.

"And besides, what you're saying is wrong, too. It's not as if we're being forced to abide by the agreement at swordpoint. I don't care for the folks from the city, but the fact that we maintain their peace is a point of pride for us. And if we were to leave this place, some other people would surely be forced to abandon their current jobs to fight the giba... As those who have pledged their blades to the Western God Selva, we are tasked with the role of bringing about part of the prosperity of the nation by hunting giba."

"Right... Well, I can't exactly say I completely get that, though, since I wasn't born around the forest's edge."

"We take pride in our lives here. In addition to being our means of obtaining sustenance, these horns and tusks are also the symbol of our pride. So remember: It would be a shameless act to pillage the mountain and thus harm the kingdom as a result, as it would be like trampling all over that pride."

"Got it. I don't give a damn about what's convenient for the kingdom, but if you say it's to protect the pride of the people of the forest's edge, then I understand and I'll promise to be good."

I half-forced myself to do so, but I was able to leave it at that for now.

As Ai Fa swiftly pushed her way forward through the foliage, she suddenly turned around and shot me a look.

"You truly are an unusual man, Asuta..."

Oddly enough, the displeasure from this morning seemed to have completely disappeared from Ai Fa's gaze.

After around 10 more minutes of walking, the sun was no longer visible overhead, and we had reached our first destination: the Lanto river's edge, where pico leaves grew.

The river's width was around 5 meters. It was flowing about as slowly as you'd expect from hearing that it was downstream, and it actually looked like it was fairly deep, too. And the sunlight filtering through the trees reflected off the crystal clear water, making for a truly magnificent sight.

But rather than any proper grass and foliage, the area around the river was nothing but rugged rock faces.

When I turned around to ask Ai Fa if we were heading even further in, I found her starting to remove the fur cloak from her shoulders for some reason.

"I'm going to cleanse myself before we search for pico leaves."

"Huh? 'Cleanse'?"

"What? It's rather uncomfortable to be walking around covered in giba oils and sweating."

Her mood may have seemed like it had completely turned around, but Ai Fa's default was still to be incredibly blunt. And as she explained that in her extremely curt tone, she handed me the cloak she had just taken off. Man, this thing sure has some heft to it... Looking closely at the inside, I noticed that there were a ton of small pockets sewn into it, full of things like berries and nuts I'd never seen before, iron needles, and bundles of leather straps. It must have weighed around 2 or 3 kilos in all.

"Take this, too," Ai Fa said, taking off her fang and tusk necklace and passing it my way.

Your lowly servant has his hands full with your leather cloak though, princess...

"Bow your head," she added, kicking me in the leg.

As I thought, *You know, I would've done it even without the kick...* and bent forward, I saw Ai Fa approaching me with her necklace spread wide. Oh man, she was close. Excluding a certain early morning incident that I couldn't remember, this was probably as close as she'd ever gotten to me... And as I thought such questionable thoughts, my gaze drifted to the nape of her neck without even thinking about it. There were still distinct bluish-purple teeth marks on the left side of her slender neck.

You seriously couldn't at least exercise a little restraint, past me?

The fragrance coming off this princess of mine seriously was to die for, though. And her face was so close... Her skin's gorgeous, and her pink lips sure are sexy... Maybe this is some new sort of torture?

Ai Fa, meanwhile, had no idea of the idiotic thoughts floating around my head, and simply put the necklace around my neck and then swiftly pulled back.

"Alright... The giba should still mostly be asleep, but there are some oddballs amongst them that start prowling around early in the morning. If you sense a giba nearby, then call out to me immediately."

"Got it. I just need to keep an eye on the forest, right?"

I thought I had hidden what I'd been thinking pretty well, but Ai Fa was glaring at my face with some seriously cold eyes.

"...Just to be safe, let me inform you that it's a taboo to look upon the naked body of an unmarried woman."

"Huh. So it'd be okay if it's a married woman, then?"

"The only one permitted to view her in the nude would be her husband."

Ah, I wish I hadn't gone and said that. I got the feeling that the look in Ai Fa's eyes had just gotten twice as chilly.

"Keep an eye out."

"Got it."

I searched for the biggest rock I could find, then put my back to it and started keeping an eye on the forest.

Still, she had entrusted me with the necklace she'd just described as the pride and fortune of the people of the forest's edge, and I was trusted not to be a voyeur, so I couldn't help but consider all this a pretty significant honor.

But man, I seriously had no idea what was going on in that girl's head...

At first I thought she was more cautious than most people, but then she went and trusted me like it was nothing. And I was really impressed by how caring she was, but then she went and acted all cold.

I felt like she was a kind, caring person at her core, but I couldn't deny that she was stubborn and prone to some serious mood swings.

But still, she's also someone I know I can trust.

It was as those thoughts were running through my head that it happened: Ai Fa's shrieking voice broke the calm silence of the riverbed.

4

"Hey! What happened, Ai Fa?!" I cried out, getting up into a kneeling position.

There was still a chance that she had just slipped or something, and if I messed up this time, she would kill me for real. I couldn't afford to make a mistake.

But I wasn't getting an answer back.

All I could hear was the sound of the water violently splashing and the echo that followed, which was more than a little disconcerting.

"Hey! I'm looking over that way! If it's nothing, then just let me know in the next three seconds!" I yelled out, worrying all the while that she may not even understand what a second is.

Sure enough, though, I didn't get a response back.

Despite feeling so impatient that I thought my heart was going to burst, I still stopped and counted to three.

"One... two... three!"

I shot to my feet, turned around, and looked at the river. And... there wasn't anybody there.

However, I spied familiar wrappings and blades on a rock a little further away, and then a rather impressive splash shot up from the surface of the water.

I threw aside the fur cloak, climbed over the rock I had been resting my back against, and took off running in that direction. It was then that Ai Fa's face suddenly appeared from beneath the water. And not just that: she was clearly in pain.

“Ai Fa!”

She desperately gasped for air, but the river water mercilessly flowed into her open mouth instead.

It was only so deep that it would come up to her waist if she stood, but she didn’t seem to be able to get up any further out of the water.

“What are you doing?! Hurry up and grab on!” I yelled, holding out my right hand from atop the rock.

As I desperately struggled like a madman, Ai Fa’s eyes just stared back at me listlessly.

“Don’t come... any closer...” Ai Fa eked out, her voice sounding a bit hoarse. Her body slowly began drifting downstream.

“Don’t give me that crap! Just grab on already!”

I had no other options left, now that it had come to this. And so I plunged my right leg into the water while bracing myself so that I wouldn’t get swept away, then reached out to grab hold of Ai Fa. The second that my hand grasped Ai Fa’s silky-smooth shoulder, though, I felt something snake its way around my right arm.

“Whoa!”

In no time at all, a sharp pain shot through my arm, and I heard the sound of my bones creaking. Whatever it was that was wrapped around my right arm, it was constricting with some seriously insane strength. It was a strange creature about as thick as my arm, coated in bluish-black scales... In other words, I had been grabbed by the tail of a huge snake.

The moment I realized that, Ai Fa let out a pained “ugh!”

With an eye-catching splash, both of Ai Fa’s arms shot up above the water. Thanks to that, I could see that her fingers were wrapped around the neck of the massive snake. Its crooked, sickle-shaped neck looked to be about the size of a rugby ball, and it was baring its fangs at Ai Fa.

Beneath the surface of the water, Ai Fa was battling the huge serpent.

“Bastard...!”

I tried even harder to brace my legs, enduring the pain in my right arm all the while. The foot I hurt yesterday was throbbing in pain, but I didn't pay that fact any heed.

It was so insanely strong that it felt like it could crush bone, but I couldn't help but feel grateful that it wasn't letting go. I'd just keep on at it and pull it straight out of the water!

The flow of the river was nothing, and Ai Fa didn't weigh all that much, so I could do it! No, I'd do it even if it killed me!

"Grr...!" I yelled out, wringing out every ounce of strength in my body to finally pull both Ai Fa and the giant snake towards the riverside. I planted my right foot on the shore, then put my left hand around the snake's throat just like Ai Fa was doing. After that, it was pure weightlifting.

Well, not that I had any weightlifting experience, though...

"Graaaah!"

Once again, I squeezed out every bit of strength I had. And with that, I finally succeeded in dragging Ai Fa up atop a rock.

"Ugh..." Ai Fa let slip in a weak voice.

The gigantic serpent had wrapped itself several times over around Ai Fa's naked body. It was coiled around her chest, waist, and right leg, and the excess stretched up over her shoulder and then tangled around my right arm. At its fattest point, its body was probably as thick as my thigh. In terms of both thickness and length, this thing was far beyond the norm.



Looking at it closely, the giant snake's blackish-blue scales were torn and broken here and there, and it appeared to have a rather serious old wound to its eyes. If it weren't for that, maybe all the bones in Ai Fa's body would've been long since crushed down to a powder.

"Alright! Don't let go of that hand, Ai Fa!"

With that, I grabbed hold of a nearby rock and started pounding away at the huge snake's head. Its slick, shiny, scale-covered body spasmed in response. It's just a superstition that says snakes can't feel pain, and I sure could see that now.

As Ai Fa held its head in the air, I brought my rock down upon it again and again. Around the fifth blow red blood came spurting out, and Ai Fa let out a shriek at the same time.

I could feel my right arm creaking, too.

"Damn it! Don't coil tighter! Let go already!"

Though it was being held in place, its head was still up in the air, which seemed to be softening the impact of the blows.

What about the stomach, then?!

I took aim toward the part on the ground, and swung down as hard as I could. I could clearly feel the disturbing sensation of flesh being pulverized, even through the rock.

Finally, the massive serpent's grip on us slowly loosened.

Without a moment's delay I scooped Ai Fa up and kicked the fleeing snake back into the river. With a heavy splash, the monstrous beast sunk below the surface. After making sure it was swept away downstream, I turned to the girl in my arms and yelled out, "Hey! Just hold on! Are you okay? Please don't die on me, Ai Fa!"

After laying her down on the surface of the rock, I started firmly shaking her exposed shoulders. In response, she let out a weak groan, then vomited up a mass of water.

Usually her long golden locks were worn up, but now they were clinging to

her face and chest. In this weakened state, she looked like a completely different person.

When Ai Fa dug her nails into the back of my hand, her eyes still firmly shut, I called out, “Are you in pain? Do you still need to get more water out?”

I moved the powerless Ai Fa onto her side and gave her a firm hit on the back, and sure enough she spat up even more water.

“Ugh... Asu... ta...?”

“Are you alright? I knocked that damn snake back into the water, so we shouldn’t need to worry now.”

Her blue eyes were still unfocused, and she looked at me in a daze. Ah, what a pitiful expression...

But still, she was at least alive.

I picked Ai Fa up, and hugged her slender body tight with both arms.

Thinking back on it now, I’d reprimand myself for doing that to Ai Fa just after she had gotten away from that snake’s grasp, but I hadn’t quite been myself at the moment, either.

“Thank goodness... Don’t make me worry like that...”

I’d become dripping wet too in an instant, but I didn’t give a damn about that.

However... Ai Fa’s arms pushed back at my chest with with a strength I didn’t think she had left in her.

“Let go... Take your arms off of me!”

“Huh?”

I was caught off guard so badly that my grasp naturally loosened, just as she had asked. She gave me a strong push at the same moment, sending me falling straight onto my rear.

“W-What is it?!”

Ai Fa’s eyes practically looked like they were ablaze.

In an instant, she grabbed her sheathed blade, which had fallen by her feet.

“W-What’s going on? I have no idea what’s happening right now!”

As I was left dumbfounded by this sudden transformation, Ai Fa drew her savage blade from its leather sheath.

Her face had been like that of a sick child just seconds ago, but now it was filled with an unmistakable bloodlust.

Had I broken some sort of unforgivable taboo or something in regards to Ai Fa? Was it because I had seen her naked, even considering the unexpected circumstances involved? Or because I’d went and hugged her without thinking?

Well... If those are such serious crimes around here, then I guess there’s no helping it.

Too much stuff had happened out of the blue, so maybe I wasn’t thinking straight myself. But the only thought floating through my stupid head was that it was way better to be killed by Ai Fa than to have to watch her die.

Ai Fa readied her sword, completely naked and down on one knee. I wondered why she was pointing the back of the blade at me rather than its cutting edge, but I’m sure that thing was hefty enough to bludgeon someone to death with even so.

I stared straight into Ai Fa’s eyes. However, her eyes weren’t looking back at me. Those blue flaming pupils weren’t pointed in my direction, but towards the space behind me.

A noise like the heavy rumble of an exhaust pipe resounded from behind me, far closer than I would have thought. There was something... right behind me.

“Grah!” Ai Fa yelled out, and I could hear the overflowing fighting spirit in her voice.

The savage blade drew a silver arc through the empty air beside me. And then, I felt myself being squashed by something.

“Ugh...”

Something unbelievably heavy had come down on my head with some serious force. It felt pretty damn stiff, but it also had an overpowering animal stench to it.

“Phew...” Ai Fa sighed, then plopped down on the ground. I could see her blue eyes staring back at me with their usual force between her disheveled golden hair. “Don’t let your guard down just because you’ve escaped from a single threat. You won’t possibly be able to survive at the forest’s edge like that.”

She sure was pompous, considering she was buck naked.

But, well, I’d finally grasped just what had happened, too.

The heavy object cloaking my head and back was a twitching giba whose skull Ai Fa had smashed in with her blade.

Chapter 3: A Chef Trainee in Another World

1

“Perhaps you’re the embodiment of calamity itself, or something of that sort...”

By the time Ai Fa muttered that, she had done up her hair, slipped on her usual clothing, and gallantly tossed her fur cloak over her shoulders.

“Perhaps it is too great of an honor for someone so lowly as myself to ask for, but could you explain what you mean?”

“Normally, a giant madarama snake would never appear at the base of the mountain, but one got washed downstream, and then we were attacked by a giba wandering about the forest before the sun had even reached its peak. Nothing good seems to happen when you’re around.”

Hmph, I see...

Now that she mentioned it, I had also seen her unwed body in the nude. I wanted to bring that up, but considering my life had only just been saved, I thought better of it.

And apparently, that was the right decision to make. After all, when I instead just silently nodded back, Ai Fa made a face like she regretted what she’d just said.

“...Still, even though the situation had been entirely unexpected, it was my fault for letting my guard down and not noticing the madarama. And you ended up saving me in the aftermath, so for that at least, you have my gratitude.”

After that she cast her gaze down a bit, then looked at me with slightly upturned eyes and pointlessly fidgeted with her necklace, before finally muttering, “Thank you...” so quietly that it was barely within the audible range for a human being.

She almost seemed like a small child, somehow.

As my heart pounded fast for no reason at all, I forced out a stupid sounding, “Ah, no, it was nothing... And I mean, I didn’t even realize a giba had gotten that close to me. I mean, you saved my life, so... Thank you.”

Besides, I got the feeling that most everything had been forgiven thanks to Ai Fa’s mood having recovered.

If Ai Fa had been crushed to death by that massive snake... Just the thought of it made me want to keel over and die.

“Now then, regardless of the circumstances leading up to it, we’ve got a giba here. Shouldn’t we finish him off while he’s still nice and fresh?”

The giba whose head Ai Fa had busted in was still twitching at my feet.

It was a pretty small one compared to the giba I had encountered yesterday, but from eyeballing it I’d still say it was around 150 centimeters and 70 kilos. And its horns and tusks were still plenty impressive. It certainly was something, being able to take down such a sturdy looking animal with a single blow...

“Right. Well then, first comes chopping off the legs,” Ai Fa said, grabbing hold of her blade.

“Hold on a second!” I yelled out. “Bloodletting should come before dissection, right? Why are you going to chop it to bits right at the start?”

“Bloodletting...? What’s that?”

“What?! You’ve never even done it before? It’s only natural that the meat would have such a heavy stench in that case!” I cried out. Ai Fa, meanwhile, just looked back at me with a truly puzzled look on her face.

Still, I do love that blank look... But this was a pretty serious issue for the people of forest’s edge.

“Now listen, when meat stinks, it comes from the blood. If you perform bloodletting on it, even giba meat shouldn’t have much of a stench to it, right?”

“...I don’t really understand what you’re saying. Blood flows as it pleases, does it not?”

“I’m telling you, you can’t just leave it at that... Wait, now’s not the time to be casually talking about this! It’ll be too late once the giba’s heart stops. Okay, I’ll

explain it all later, but for right now just lend me a small knife.”

Ai Fa handed me a knife with a look of doubt on her face, and then I leaned over the giba’s back.

Now then, I may have talked a big game, but I’d actually only ever seen a member of the hunting club perform a bloodletting. Plus there was no guarantee that a giba and a boar had the same inner workings, so it was pretty much down to luck whether or not this would succeed.

A boar’s heart and veins should be in roughly the same place as a human’s.

I bent over the giba’s large frame, remembering back on the hunter’s words.

I placed the tip up against where the giba’s thick neck met its body, then jabbed it in with a single stabbing motion.

And then... hardly any blood came gushing out.

Did I mess up?

Well, I guess things are never quite that easy.

And so having no other choice, I slid the knife down towards its chest.

The carotid artery, or the aorta... Cutting either would do.

I steadily moved the tip of the blade down bit by bit, struggling with the stiff fur all the while, until finally, fresh blood came spurting out. When I hurriedly pulled out the blade, even more of the dark red liquid came flowing forth.

I did it... probably. As long as I didn’t damage the heart directly, I mean.

“The heart is the organ that helps blood to circulate throughout the entire body. If you can cut one of the major arteries leading from it without damaging the heart itself, then you can effectively drain the body of all its blood.”

The carotid artery would be fine, too, but if I ended up messing up the organs in its throat, the giba could suffocate and its heart would stop. In other words, it would carry a definite risk.

“Honestly, it’d be better to suspend it from a tree for this, but that would’ve been some pretty heavy labor. And this should be plenty fine, anyway.”

Since I didn’t hear a response I turned around to look, and sure enough Ai Fa

had the same puzzled expression on her face as always.

“Why would we need to drain the whole body of blood when we’re only bringing the legs back?”

“Huh?”

“Even if we bring it all back with us, it will just end up going bad before we can eat all of it. Large families may bring a whole giba back in order to skin off its pelt, but for the most part people only take the rear legs.”

“That’s a huge waste! You seriously just throw away a feast like this and head on back?”

“If we simply leave it in the woods, then the mundt and other animals will feast on its corpse and clean things up nicely. And besides, to let food spoil without eating it is a sin.”

“Ah, I see. Well, that’s not a problem, then. But why is it that you bring the legs back? Thigh meat’s not bad, but there are plenty of tastier cuts.”

“That’s not true at all. Giba meat all stinks, but the part with the least stench is the rear legs.”

Oh, so that’s it. I suppose if you don’t know how to bloodlet, then the parts inside the torso really may have a worse stench about them than the legs. And when you cut off a leg you would be hacking through an artery too, which would let out plenty of blood.

Still, it almost felt like they were procrastinating here, hunting giba for 80 years but never stumbling upon the idea of bloodletting. When meat tastes bad, you should keep on studying and experimenting until you can make it tastier. That gluttony is precisely what drove the development of mankind’s great culinary culture!

As that thought ran through my head, the flow of blood finally came to a stop. The previously trembling giba also finally ceased all movement.

In other words, it was dead.

Rest in peace, I silently prayed.

Then, as I carefully washed off the grass, dirt, and excrement that dirtied the

giba's fur using the river water, I turned and looked back at Ai Fa.

"Alright. Now for the next step... Hey, would it be alright if I go ahead and stubbornly insist that we bring the whole thing back with us?"

"Do as you please. As long as the horns and tusks are intact, I don't mind," Ai Fa replied with a shrug of her shoulders and a complex expression on her face that made it hard to tell if she was apathetic or interested.

After shooting her a sidelong glance, I stabbed the knife into the giba's torso. This thing seemed to have a far better cut than the knife I used back in farming camp, so I had to take care not to cut too deep as I opened up the belly of the beast.

What I was handling now was the removal of the innards.

This wasn't all that difficult of a task, but there was one point to it that required particular attention: Making sure not to damage the large intestine, gallbladder, urinary bladder, and the like, as they all had a terrible stench. If that transferred into the meat itself, then the bloodletting would be for naught.

I inserted the tip of the blade into the diaphragm, then started to pull out all sorts of organs.

First up was the small intestine, then the large. Next up was the stomach. Then the liver, pancreas, lungs, and heart.

It was actually kind of fun, picking them out one after another.

Apparently a giba really wasn't built all that differently than a boar after all.

The final hurdle waited for me at the bottom of the nearly empty abdominal cavity: the urinary bladder. I had to be really, really careful so that it didn't burst...

Hm...?

There were still some sort of organs I didn't recognize left below it. Were they something unique to the giba? At any rate, I went ahead and carefully removed them, too.

The two big, elliptical objects had been next to each other, and felt fairly firm.

...Ah.

These are testicles, aren't they?

The boar I'd prepared in the past had been a female, so naturally it didn't have these.

With great respect, I placed them on top of the rock as well.

With that, I'd finished removing its innards.

Naturally, when I turned around, Ai Fa still had the same blank expression.

"It's like I'm watching one of those shamans I've heard tell of performing a ritual. Is it truly necessary to do all of that just to eat meat?"

"It is. Still, it just plain wouldn't be possible to handle the rest here, sure enough. We'll need to get it all the way back to the house, but... how?"

Ai Fa gave a little sigh then tossed out a "hold on for a moment" before disappearing into the forest.

In the meantime, I used water from the river to clean out the giba's empty chest cavity, too.

Fortunately, ticks didn't seem to exist it in this world. If they did, then they would surely waste no time in hopping from the giba's chilling corpse to the warmth of my body.

"Here. This should do fine, right?"

Ai Fa had returned in less than five minutes, holding a wooden pole that was about as long as I was tall. It had a strangely jet black sort of color to it, and though I could spy spots where branches had clearly been removed, it was a perfectly straight pole. I'd guess it was about as thick as my wrist, too.

"It's from a grigee tree. They're hardy, so it shouldn't break easily."

"Uh-huh. So what are we doing with it?"

Ai Fa silently leaned over the giba, then pulled out some leather straps from her cloak and started tying its limbs to the grigee pole.

"I see! So you're used to doing this, huh?"

“I just learned from watching others. This is how the men of large families bring an entire giba home in order to skin it.”

“Huh. But you don’t skin off their pelts? Your cloak’s from a giba though, isn’t it?”

“It takes multiple people to peel a pelt, and besides, that’s woman’s work.”

I’m sure the fact that I was thinking *but* you’re *a woman* was clearly written on my face. I mean, even though I hadn’t said anything, Ai Fa was still shooting me an annoyed-looking scowl.

“It’s possible to offer up tusks in order to buy a pelt. That means it’s more efficient to just use the time it would take to skin a pelt to hunt instead, since if I fail to do so I’ll end up starving to death. And regardless... I don’t have any family left to do it with. Do you have some sort of problem with that?”

“Of course not. It’s just... I figured if you were saying that skinning pelts was woman’s work, then does that mean hunting giba is man’s work?”

“Naturally. There’s no such thing as a woman who hunts giba.”

“B-But you’re a woman, aren’t you?”

I ended up opening my big mouth after all.

Ai Fa looked away in a huff, then started to bind the front legs.

“I’m the head of the Fa household before I’m a woman. My father taught me how to hunt giba in order to survive, so it isn’t any inconvenience for me.”

“I see.”

Still, just what had Ai Fa’s father been thinking, teaching his daughter to be a master giba hunter? She hadn’t been isolated from the rest of the settlement until after his death, because she had earned the animosity of Diga Suun. As a result of that she couldn’t rely on anyone else and had to survive all on her own. The techniques her father had taught her saved her from that predicament, but there’s no way he could have predicted that his daughter would be isolated after his death.

Wait... This isn’t something I should be thinking so hard on.

I mean, my pops had pounded his cooking techniques into my head since I was a kid. And then he told me to go out and look for something I enjoyed even more than cooking.

Maybe that's just how dads are.

Still, even so...

Unlike me, Ai Fa wasn't given any choice. Her only option was to live like a man, by hunting giba. Even though she's such a beautiful, kind woman...

"What's with that weird look on your face?" Ai Fa asked, suddenly standing up. There was a blaze burning in her wildcat-like eyes, and her dark brown face had just a hint of red to it. "Now listen here. You committed a taboo. Normally someone in your position wouldn't even be able to complain if they had one of their eyeballs scooped out. But you saved me from that attack, so I'm overlooking the matter. But if I were to change my mind, I could give you a *real* painful experience whenever I please."

"Huh?" I questioned with a tilt of my head, and then I flew into a serious panic. "I-I wasn't imagining you naked or anything! Just what do you take me for?! And hey, you just made me remember that sight even though I had stored it away in a treasure box in my memories!"

"Shut up! You're making me think I should take away your tongue before one of your eyeballs!"

"Ugh, this is stupid, so let's just stop already! Come on, we're all prepared, right? So let's hurry up and get to carrying this guy!"

Trying to flee from Ai Fa's wrath, I leaned over towards the giba's head. When I did that, I spied the heaping pile of innards I had left. "I really would like to bring these back to try cooking with, too. But considering my skill level and the fact that I don't even have a refrigerator, that just wouldn't be possible."

"Are you actually being serious?"

"Of course. I figure every part of a giba but its cry is probably edible."

People tended to say stuff like that about pigs rather than boars, but whatever.

When I went and placed the end of the pole on my shoulder, I felt an unbelievable weight pressing down on me. Yeah, this guy was definitely in the 70 kilo range.

“If I catch you whining, I’m leaving you then and there and heading back on my own.”

Suddenly the pole lifted up in the rear, lowering the load on my shoulder a bit.

“I’ll work hard for the sake of a delicious dinner. And hey, you just went through that horrible ordeal, so are you really feeling alright?”

“Quiet, you! Don’t bring that moment up ever again!”

Oh, my. Had that incident inflicted even greater damage to Ai Fa’s pride than I had thought? Well, even if she was a strong-minded giba hunter, she was still a young woman. Even if it weren’t for the taboo, it still would have been totally natural to be embarrassed.

But anyway, the real meat of preparing a proper dinner still lay ahead of me.

“Well then, let’s head off! I’ll be sure to make a dinner delicious enough to make up for the effort, so I’m counting on you!”

2

A few hours later, we arrived back at Ai Fa’s house.

“Alright! Well then, let’s get started!” I yelled out, the giba’s huge corpse lying before me.

“Do as you please,” Ai Fa muttered in an annoyed tone, her legs crossed and her back leaning against the wall. She was actually probably simply tired rather than seriously upset. Heck, I was feeling pretty exhausted myself.

Just dragging the giba all the way back from the riverside was a huge undertaking, but after that we also had to make a u-turn and head back for our original goal of gathering pico leaves and firewood. There fortunately weren’t any incidents this time around, but by the time we were done, the sun was almost at its peak. In other words, we were working the entire time from early

morning till nearly noon, excluding our “break” for our death battle with the giant madarama snake.

Since noontime on had been set aside for giba hunting, we suddenly found ourselves with an opening in our schedule. And so, I went ahead and got to work on preparing the giba.

I grabbed hold of the knife Ai Fa had loaned me, glancing over at her as I did so. After lighting the stove at my request, her job was done, so she simply plopped down and started chewing at her jerky, looking as if she didn’t care in the least what I was doing.

I had already done the bloodletting and organ removal, so naturally the next step was to skin the thing.

There had been a broken sliding door stowed away in the storage room, so I was using that as my workbench. I couldn’t find any desks or anything of the sort so I had to work on the ground but, well, there was no helping that. I turned the giba’s body face up, then placed some lumber I had prepared in advance on either side in order to hold it in place.

I’d be starting off with the hind legs.



I cut a single line around its ankle, beneath the tough hoof. Then I pulled my blade up from the inner part of its leg to its abdomen. Finally, I jammed the tip of the knife between the skin and the meat and started peeling it back.

Hmm, it sure is fatty. The area between the skin and meat was absolutely packed. It must have been around five centimeters...

That was definitely a good thing when it came to food, but it sure did make this whole process tougher. With a lean meat like venison, you could separate the meat from the skin in no time at all.

Well, it was all for the sake of a delicious meal, though. I angled the tip of the blade, taking care to not rip a hole in the pelt while also trying to leave as much of the fat on the meat as possible, then strongly pulled at the skin.

Before long, both of the legs were completely exposed. They stood tall, separated from the outer pelt, wrapped in a layer of pure white fat. It actually made for a pretty surreal sight.

By that point, the knife had become pretty dull thanks to all the fat clinging to it. The water in the pot was already boiling nicely, though, so I simply dunked the blade inside to wash it clean.

This was the reason it had been impossible to peel off the skin outside.

The inside of the house was already filling up with the smell of blood and meat.

At any rate, I wiped the knife on a cloth I had gotten from Ai Fa, then got right back to work.

Using the exact same procedure, I started peeling the front legs, too.

Now, this was a lot easier said than done, as an hour had already passed by this point. Still, this was still just the early stages of the process. Now that the legs were all done, I'd finally come to the torso.

I had already sliced its abdomen nice and wide open, so that made for a perfect starting point.

The basic gist of the process was the same as it was with the legs. In other words, I placed the blade between the skin and meat, and then peeled it back

while cutting. The torso didn't make for a nice even surface though, so pulling back the skin as I worked proved fairly difficult. Plus my fingers kept slipping, as I just couldn't get a good grip on it.

To deal with that, I went ahead and opened up a hole on the edge of the pelt, then stuck my fingers right on through. It was a damn thick hide, so even if I pulled at full strength, it wouldn't rip quite so easily. And besides, even if it did rip, I could just open a hole in a different place.

I also frequently needed to wash off the knife, but I just kept on intently tearing away at the pelt. As a result, I was completely coated in sweat by the time I had finished with the giba's right half. By my estimate, it had been around two and a half hours. The light coming in through the windows was still pretty bright, though.

"Phew. Guess it's about time for a bit of a break."

I placed the knife by the giba's head, then plopped down on the floor. For the first time in a while, I turned and faced the master of the house... Yup, Ai Fa still had that blank expression on her face, unsurprisingly.

It sure did warm my heart, the way that her childlike little eyes went all wide. Perhaps it was due to the way that her default expression was that thorny glare, but the difference was seriously striking.

"...You're rather skilled with your hands, Asuta."

"Yeah. Only when it comes to cooking, though."

"You're pretty serious about it, too."

"Right. But again, that's also only when it comes to cooking."

"You can still heat up and eat giba meat, even without needing to go through all this hassle. Why are you so serious about undertaking such unnecessary work?"

I wasn't petty enough to go and ruin the mood, so I went with a nice non-combative response of, "I just like eating delicious food and feeding it to others."

Besides, I wanted to have her judge whether all my work was for naught *after*

she tasted it.

“Alright! Back to work!”

During that break, a certain issue came to mind. Which is to say, there was something I needed to take care of before I set about dealing with the left side: I had to sever the neck.

There were all sorts of organs in the neck and head, like the eyes and mouth and nose.

That was why it was easier to just sever the neck at the start and deal with it separately.

With that in mind, I got to work on chopping off the head.

As I thrust the knife in below its lower jaw, I looked at the giba with its shattered skull and the pathetic look on its face and thought to myself, *Don’t worry, I’ll make you nice and tasty.*

The rigor mortis had already started to set in, so it felt a good bit tougher than it had back when I did the bloodletting. Plus, when I was cutting it open, a pretty significant amount of blood oozed up.

Well, that was just how things were. It wasn’t as if bloodletting got rid of every last drop of blood in the body, and besides, I was just an amateur. I was nothing but a chef trainee timidly relying on knowledge from three years ago.

I only ever dissected a boar once. My only tool on hand was a single hunting knife. I was nothing but a chef in training without so much as a proper workspace, instead stuck on the ground as I struggled to hack the head off of this corpse.

I’m sure anyone but Ai Fa would be unable to hold themselves back from laughing.

Even so, I couldn’t help but enjoy myself.

I mean, it was just this experience of being surrounded by the smell of the animal’s blood and my own sweat!

I suppose that statement may be the kind of thing that could get me mistaken for someone with rather grotesque interests. But psychos who dissect animals

for fun rather than food are lower than dirt.

I just love to cook.

For as long as I can remember I'd looked up in awe at my old man's back, and by the time I hit elementary school I was already helping out around the shop. Maybe I hadn't exactly chosen that path of my own volition, and I was just moving along the rails that had been laid out for me. Even so, I wasn't exactly dissatisfied with the way that things were.

Plus, my pops was always telling me to keep looking for something I enjoyed even more than cooking. Then he'd add with a laugh that if I didn't find anything, I could just give up and take over the shop. I figure that was probably part of the reason he had me go to high school, too.

But even so, each and every day of my life had been nothing but cooking.

Cooking was just so much fun, so why did I need to go out of my way to look for something else to do with my life? I was never able to see the necessity, really.

My goal was to someday make a dish that would make my old man ooh and aah, and that ended up becoming all I thought about.

I just plain love to cook.

"Phew. This sure is tiring..."

Having gotten about halfway through severing the neck, I helped myself to a cup of water from the jug. It wasn't even cold or anything, but thanks to how hot and sweaty I was, it tasted incredibly delicious.

Now then, back to work.

The back of the knife was jagged like a saw, probably for the sake of cutting through horns and tusks, so I went ahead and used that to sever the neck bones.

When I finally finished making my way through the rest of it, the whole head fell down with a *thunk* and rolled along the top of the sliding door.

After thinking on it for a bit, I decided to just peel the skin back where necessary on the head, as I was just slicing off the meat around the neck and

cheeks. There were surely other parts that were edible, and the tongue and the like definitely held some strong appeal to them. But even so, there was a limit to my current skill. If only the hunters had taught me a bit more thoroughly...

After that, I peeled back the skin on the left half, then flipped the giba on its side and set to work on the remaining pelt on its back. And with that, I was finally finished skinning the massive beast.

There were some holes left in it here and there, but I had managed to cut it off as a single connected pelt all the way from the neck on down. The thing had come from a 150 centimeter long, 70 kilo class beast, so when it was all laid out, it made for quite an impressive sight.

The body, meanwhile, was still coated in fat, making for a bundle of meat that glistened pure white all over. A beautiful, massive bundle of meat that was missing a head. It had already hit a point where it would be hard to tell just what animal it was from if you didn't already know.

It was pretty stunning just to look at, but I didn't have time to just stand and stare. After all, I was finally in the home stretch.

Now that I had finished with skinning it, my last task left was to actually pull it apart.

I started by turning the giba's now completely naked body face up once again, then jamming the knife into a hip joint. Cutting between the thigh and rear leg allowed me to then twist the joint around backwards. It made a sort of dull ripping sound, and the tip of the femur ended up sticking out of the pelvis. The smooth, exposed bone was a beautiful shade of white.

Next up, I cut through the remaining muscles and tendons, turned it backwards again, then started tearing away at the meat. I ran the blade alongside it in parallel, then finally tore off the rear right leg.

It sure was a big one. Must be about 10 kilos per leg...

Once I finished with the right, I moved on to the left. Then after I was done with that, I tackled the front legs.

The front legs weren't connected to a pelvis or anything of that sort, so I could just cut them loose.

Now for the climax!

I had completely lost track of time by this point, but the sunlight outside seemed to be taking on a bit of a yellowish tint. It may have been four or five hours since I'd started working...

"...Ah, that's right. Ai Fa, where's your saw?"

Even though it had been quite a while since I last looked her way, Ai Fa unfortunately still had the same old blank look on her face. Though with that said, she looked sort of surprised the instant that I turned to her, so it was impossible to tell what sort of expression she had been wearing previously.

"Oh, were you asleep? Sorry for waking you."

"Of course I wasn't! Who sleeps when it's still this bright out?!"

Why are you so angry at me, then...?

Anyway, Ai Fa stood up with a scowl on her face, then disappeared behind the middle of the three doors. I believe that was the room where she kept tools, lumber, and cooking utensils.

When Ai Fa came back out, she was holding a saw with a roughly 30 centimeter-long blade. Well, it was stored in a leather sheath so I couldn't tell for sure, but once she drew it out, that's indeed what it was.

The width of the thing was about five centimeters, and the thickness of the blade must have been around five millimeters. That was a bit thicker than the saw blades I was familiar with, but it would do. I mean, the people of the forest's edge used these things to make such splendid houses, after all.

"I plan to finish up for now with this, so just hold on a little longer," I said to Ai Fa when she handed it to me. Of course, Ai Fa just turned away and gave me a, "hmph" in response.

The female mind truly was a mystery.

At any rate, I went ahead and sterilized the saw in the pot.

It was time for the climax of the whole dissection process: slicing it down the back. In other words, I'd be cutting straight down the center of the spine. And not horizontally, but vertically. That was, the body would be split smoothly into

a right and left half. *That* is how you dress a carcass.

Once this was out of the way, the rest of the process would be simple... Or at least that's what the nice hunter told me.

Man, this thing is so big that I really wish I had a chainsaw to use for this part... It's not like I could get the electricity for it around here anyway, though. And besides, I was ready to take on any amount of physical labor necessary for this.

And so, I went ahead and got to work.

As expected, this final task really did prove to be the most physically taxing part. But I just kept on sawing away at it, regretting all the while that I hadn't been able to hoist it up to make the work easier.

As far as the cutting edge went, well, I had no complaints. Heck, if I was into home carpentry, I probably wouldn't have much trouble with it. But I didn't have any such hobby, of course, so it did prove to be a plenty difficult task. I mean, it put up a real fight. It was no minor task to vertically saw down a spine that was all slippery with fat.

Occasionally I had to stop to wash the fat off the blade, and I took some breaks here and there. All told, it must have been around an hour later by the time I was done.

I pulled out the split spine and went about removing the ribs one by one, then cut off nearly all of the meat from around the hips. With that, I had completely separated all the meat from the bone. And so finally...

"I'm done!" I yelled out and collapsed flat on the floor, only to shoot straight back up. I had finished the task itself, but that didn't mean that I was done for the day. "Alright, now I've got to hurry up and pickle it in the pico. Can't let any of this precious meat go bad!"

I only had Ai Fa help me here at the end, but we managed to safely submerge the mass of meat in the mountain of spice.

Considering it had been a 70 kilo giba, I estimated we should have gotten between 40 and 50 kilos of meat off of it. Honestly, I felt like I did pretty damn well considering I was just a trainee, and all of this was outside of my field of

expertise anyway.

“Maaaaan, I’m wiped! I feel like I can’t even lift my arms!”

This time, I let myself stay there when I collapsed.

The sunshine coming in through the windows had now completely taken on a sunset hue.

So all the way from noon till sunset... That meant this whole thing must have taken around six hours or so. In the back of my exhausted mind, I wondered if a day was 24 hours in this world, too.

“...Hey. What do you intend to do with all that?” a voice called out.

When I turned to look, Ai Fa was standing imposingly next to the stove.

On top of the door by my feet, there was a large pelt folded in two, a head with the face shaved down on the left and right, and a mountain of bones.

“Ah, right. It’s a shame, but I guess I’ll just have to get rid of the rest of this. What do you normally do with pelts...? Even if you’re just using the legs, you still need to peel them off, right?”

“They’re generally thrown out after shaving off the fat still clinging to them.”

“So it just gets thrown out, huh? What a waste. There are other households that handle pelts, right? What about offering it to one of them?”

“Getting involved with me means making an enemy of the Suun family. No family around here would want a pelt badly enough to do that.”

“Tch. What a narrow-minded bunch... Ah, you use fat as fuel, right? But how do you get it off exactly?”

I tried to sit up as I said that, only for Ai Fa to coldly state, “Stay where you are” and push me back down. “If someone as exhausted as you tries to help out, it will only end up making more work. Just go to sleep.”

“But...”

“Collecting fat and removing the tusks and horns are my jobs. Your task is to prepare dinner, so rest up until then.”

She may have spoken in an incredibly blunt tone, but I was still unbelievably

grateful to hear those words. I had been abusing my poor body since this morning, so by this point I had literally drained every last ounce of strength I had. Honestly, my eyelids had been feeling heavy for a bit now...

Unable to even remember if I said, “You really are kind” out loud or just thought it, I drifted off into dreamland.

3

When I woke up, I found that it was pitch black out.

Ai Fa, who had been transferring flame from the stove to the candles, suddenly shot me a sharp glare.

“So you’re finally up, are you? I was just about to throw some water over you if you didn’t wake up soon.”

“That’s just plain mean... How many hours was I out for?”

Ai Fa silently turned her head back around and threw some fresh firewood into the stove.

Maybe here at the forest’s edge, people really didn’t have a habit of dividing up time into units. When the sun rose you got up, and when it sank you got ready to go to sleep. That was an unwritten rule out there in nature.

“I threw the giba remains down into the valley, and cleaned off the sliding door... I’m quite hungry by now, naturally.”

“Got it. Then I guess it’s time for me to get to work!”

Feeling a little amused at how well this division of labor was working out, I headed off into the pantry. I grabbed six of the pseudo-onions, and four of the pseudo-potatoes, plus one of the giba’s rear legs which I placed atop one of those rubber tree leaf looking things.

Naturally, the giba meat I grabbed wasn’t the stuff that had already been in storage, but came from the one that I had prepared earlier. Normally it would be best to use up the older meat first, but I wanted to let Ai Fa experience the joy of real cooking and a proper meal as soon as possible, so I begged her to let me do so.

“Now then... This is our quota for the vegetables, right?”

I couldn’t help but wonder if the meaning of the word “quota” made it across. At any rate, Ai Fa just shot back a, “If you don’t eat anything but meat, you’ll die.”

Of course, humans needed to eat a properly balanced diet in order to live healthy lives. But even so, I still hadn’t figured out how to deal with these vegetables just yet.

Well, whatever. For now, I’ll just do what I can.

I started off by washing the large board that served as the lid to the pot, then carefully enshrined the giba meat atop it.

And then, I grabbed hold of my old man’s Sakaki knife. The one that held his very heart and soul.

Gripping the ebony handle tight, I pulled it loose from its white magnolia sheath, revealing its 20 centimeter long steel blade.

Even though my old man had used it for more than 20 years, its cutting edge was still perfectly straight and incredibly sharp. Engraved on it was the single word, “Sakaki.”

I’m going to go ahead and borrow this, pops.

I gently, carefully slid the knife into the giba meat. It was pretty tough compared to aged pork, but even so the blade slid on in without any resistance.

I may have been awash in the glory of its cutting edge, but my hands remained calm and composed, starting off by cutting the meat from the bone.

The surface was coated in white fat, but inside it was tightly packed red thigh meat. I went with a pretty rough cut to allow some room so that the blade wouldn’t hit the bone, and then I followed that up by thinly slicing the meat.

I may have called it a relatively tough meat, but it was still plenty fresh. It wasn’t the sort of thing I could go and cut super thin right off the bat, and with my skill 7-8 millimeters was about as good as I could hope for, but fortunately that was just the right thickness for a stew.

After slicing off around 500 grams, I left the rest as a block and returned it to

the pantry. As long as I shaved off the rest of the meat still clinging to the rather impressive femur, that would be plenty for a dinner for two.

“Ah, right, I forgot to ask a pretty crucial question. Hey, Ai Fa, do you have any other ingredients or seasonings?”

Ai Fa had been silently watching me as I worked, and now she looked up at me with a quizzical look.

“Eating giba, aria, and poitan should be enough to stave off any immediate issues.”

“Right. But you had some other smell coming off you too, didn’t you? I don’t know if it was a flower or a fruit or some sort of herb, but there was definitely something else there that I haven’t been able to pin down just yet.”

I seemed to spy a hint of red about Ai Fa’s face after I said that.

“Asuta, I thought I had driven this point in thoroughly enough yesterday, but... Stop saying such strange things about my scent and the like.”

“Hey, don’t worry so much about it. Saying you smell good is a compliment, after all!”

“Maybe so, but I’ll never last if you keep trying to eat me as a result!” Ai Fa yelled, holding the left side of her neck as she stood up in a huff. I guess those teeth marks hadn’t gone away just yet... That made me feel a little embarrassed, too.

Anyway, Ai Fa went stomping off towards the pantry, then returned before long holding some strange little things in her hands. It was a teapot with a wide opening and a round body, and one of those pseudo-rubber leaves that was in the shape of a sphere.

The teapot looked like it would hold about a liter of liquid, while the leaf bundle was around the size of a human fist.

“Fruit wine and salt.”

“Salt!” I yelled out before I could stop myself, much to Ai Fa’s displeasure.

“The salt is used to make jerky. Just this small amount goes for a copper coin, which is the equivalent of one giba horn.”

I opened up the package as a little fanfare went off in my head, and found a clump of beautiful, wonderful crystals with a bluish tint.

This was probably rock salt. The rock salt I was familiar with was pink or yellow, but I'd heard that a bluish type existed, too.

I scraped up a bit of the fine powder with the tip of my finger and gave it a taste, only to be hit by a striking explosion of salty flavor.

Yeah, that was good. Maybe it was because I'd sweated out all the salt in my body over the course of the day, but it was so delicious I could just die.

"Salt is a precious resource. Don't waste any."

"Of course I won't! So, you said this one was fruit wine?"

When I removed the wooden cork-like stopper, the scent of a sour wine filled the air.

"Give that here," Ai Fa said, violently snatching the teapot from my grasp. Then, after a quick gulp, she thrust it back at me.

"Umm... Exactly how old are you, Ai Fa?"

"17," she casually answered, licking the corner of her mouth. It was a real wild, sexy look.

"I see. I'm 17 too, so I guess that makes us the same age... Is this fruit wine valuable, too?"

"I just traded for it with the excess I had left after purchasing what I needed. I mean, I didn't exactly feel like bothering to bring copper coins and the like all the way back here with me... So it doesn't exactly have all that much value when compared to the salt and ingredients."

"I see. This sure seems like it'll be a big help in the future, too... Neither of them seem related to your smell, though, do they?"

"How would I know?! I haven't even touched anything else but the fruit used to ward off poisonous insects, and the herbs used when making jerky!"

You don't need to get so angry...

Well at any rate, this was plenty for the time being. And the introduction of

salt to the mix was something I was indescribably grateful for.

“Ai Fa, could you loan me your blade one more time?”

After taking the knife from the sour-faced girl, I used it to shave the rest of the meat off the bone.

With that, my preparations were complete.

Giba thigh meat, roughly 500 grams.

A pile of shavings of meat cut off the bone, about 400 grams.

Pseudo-onions, six.

Pseudo-potatoes, four.

A pinch of dried pico leaf, which had the flavor of black pepper.

And lastly, rock salt.

Those were my ingredients for the day.

I started off by crushing the rock salt into powder with Ai Fa’s guidance, then added just a tablespoon’s worth into the boiling water in the pot.

Just like last night, the pot was a bit under halfway full of boiling water. I got the feeling that I could go even lower, but this was the amount I needed to use for the sake of trial and error.

Next up, I added the 900 or so grams of giba meat. The red and white flesh swayed and danced within the pot.

“Ah, Ai Fa, you don’t need to add more firewood just yet.”

Ai Fa, who had been moving towards the stove, turned and shot me a quizzical look.

“But if you don’t carefully heat the giba meat after adding it to the pot, it won’t exactly end up as something edible.”

“Right. That’s why the plan is to slowly heat it over a low flame.”

Last night, Ai Fa had rapidly continued to stoke the flames. It had only taken around 20 minutes or so to do it using a strong flame like that. That had been enough to make it so you could tear it apart with your teeth, but it still more or

less had the texture of rubber to it.

Boar was the type of meat where the more you heated it, the softer it got. That was probably the greatest difference between it and domesticated pigs.

“Ah, there it is!”

Around a minute after adding the meat in, an impressive bit of scum made its appearance. Using a wooden ladle and bowl I had prepared in advance, I carefully scooped up all the scum and foam that was bubbling up. Perhaps because I had left even more fat on it, it was bubbling up even more fiercely than yesterday.

Yeah, now that I think back on it, the thigh meat from last night had been a bundle of red flesh with hardly any fat on it. Both boars and giba only had fat in their thighs between the meat and skin, so with Ai Fa’s cooking method of shaving meat off the surface, almost all of the fat would be used up the first time around.

As it was low on fat, boar meat (and likely giba meat too) wasn’t well suited to for being used in a stew. I figured that was why it ended up with that rubber texture last night. *Then what if I used the leftover meat from last night for yakiniku or something...* I thought to myself as I scooped up scum, the scope of my plans rapidly expanding.

“Now then, the real issue is these guys...”

After I got rid of most of the scum, I went and placed the lid back on. Then I took a seat where I could keep an eye on the stove’s flame, and faced off with those imitation onions and potatoes.

“The pseudo-onion... No, the aria, was it? It’s pretty much just like an onion, so I feel like I’ll be able to do something with it. The real issue is this guy... Hey, just what is this poitan thing, anyway?”

“...A poitan is a poitan.” Ai Fa was seated with her back against the wall again, her chin resting on her hands and a sour look on her face. “Two poitan and three aria. Eat those alongside giba meat covered in pico leaves, and you’ll have the energy needed to get through a day. That is the knowledge my people gained over the course of 80 years living here at the forest’s edge.”

And they must gain the necessary amount of salt from the jerky they ate every day.

I replied, “I see,” and gave a nod of my head. “By the way, what’s the average life expectancy for the people of the forest’s edge?”

“‘Average life expectancy’? If you’re asking how long we live for, then it varies. Most die not from illness, but rather from being attacked by giba or other beasts, after all.”

Ai Fa’s gaze suddenly shot downwards. Perhaps she was thinking back on her father.

“But, let’s see... I believe none have died before the age of 60 without either starving or becoming a corpse out in the forest. The oldest amongst us, Jiba Ruu of the Ruu clan, has already passed the age of 80.”

“Hmm... So it doesn’t seem like you people are all that short-lived compared to the ones from back home.”

As I said that, I crawled over towards Ai Fa on all fours. Despite the displeased look on her face, I closely inspected her upper left arm. Her dark brown skin positively shined in the orange light of the fire. There may have been white scars about it here and there, but it was still incredibly smooth.

With a “hmm...” I reached out and touched it, confirming just how soft it was. Naturally, a fist immediately came slamming down onto the top of my head.

“Ah, sorry. Those are some seriously high quality muscles you have there. They’re soft to the touch, but still have some real tension in them. I figure they’re just about the best that an athlete could hope for.”

I had intended to tease her a bit to break the solemn mood in the air, but apparently I didn’t quite stick the landing on that one. Ai Fa had a dangerous look about her now, like a wildcat with its hackles raised.

“No, you see, I just wanted to check how healthy the people of the forest’s edge are! At the very least, it looks like there’s nothing seriously wrong with your diet, Ai Fa.”

That meant I really did have to meet the quota of those vegetables each and

every day, then.

“Hmm, this is a real tough one! I’ll have to start tackling how to deal with those poitan from tomorrow on. But for today, I’ve already got my hands full taking care of the giba meat.”

Ai Fa still had a scary look in her eyes, so I hurriedly retreated back towards the stove. I scooped out the fresh scum that had bubbled up, and carefully regulated the firewood so that the flame didn’t grow too weak. For a while, I just kept repeating those steps.

“...I’m hungry. Just how much longer do we have to wait before eating?”

“Hmm? I’d guess it should be 60-90 minutes... My estimate is that it should take 3-4 times longer than what you did yesterday.”

Once the look of shock passed from her face, Ai Fa gave a seriously disappointed sounding sigh.

“Sorry. I’m getting hungry, too... Looking back on it, maybe I should have started cooking right after I finished the dissection.”

“I’m the one who told you to rest, and I’m also the one who left the cooking up to you. There’s no need for you to feel responsible.”

Despite her kind and fair words, Ai Fa’s face looked pained.

I couldn’t help but feel a little amused at the fact that she was so hungry. After all, an empty stomach is the greatest seasoning you could ask for.

If this didn’t satisfy Ai Fa, then it would be solely down to my skill coming up short.

Win or lose, the outcome of this battle would be decided in the next hour or so.

4

“Alright, it’s done!”

By the time I was able to finally declare that, it had been around an hour and twenty minutes since I first placed the giba meat in the pot, according to my

internal clock. During that time, I was devoted to scooping the scum, regulating the flame, checking the hardness of the meat, pacifying a starving Ai Fa, and occasionally actually saying something that was at least a little bit serious. It was a fun but difficult 80 minutes.

The inside of the house was absolutely overflowing with the irresistible scent of giba meat. I figured the main reason it smelled even more strongly than it did last night was because of all the fat.

Still, I had no interest in such petty matters at the moment. After all, now it was finally time to eat it!

“Sorry for the wait. Go ahead and eat as much as you please.”

I stirred up the contents of the pot with the ladle, then scooped up the first bowl’s worth and handed it to Ai Fa.

In the end, I decided not to add that pseudo-potato, the poitan, just yet. 60 minutes after I started the meat simmering, I added thinly sliced pseudo-onions (aria) and pseudo-pepper (pico leaves), but that was all.

And yet, the soup was still cloudy. It was a semi-transparent white soup, where the meat stock was clearly visible.

Yeah... This was more of a “giba soup” than a “giba stew.” After thinking on it, I decided that name was more fitting, considering I was using a meat base and just salt and herbs to flavor it. And if it’s a “soup,” then there’s no problem with using onions. It sure would be nice if poitan tasted like what they resembled, though...

In other words, self-suggestion is also a key point to enjoying a meal. And so, I presented my beloved benefactor with the dish I had crafted under the name of “giba soup.”

“It’s a strange feeling somehow, not having the poitan as part of the dish...” Ai Fa said with a deeply doubtful look as she smelled the soup.

Well, the stew from last night already had a pretty much perfect smell to it, so there wouldn’t be much difference at this point anyway.

After filling up a bowl for myself, I sat down in front of Ai Fa.

“To be perfectly honest, this is really more of a first try. It’s not exactly like I’m brimming with confidence over here. My plan is to use this as a starting point that I’ll keep iterating upon so, well, go ahead and tell me how you earnestly feel.”

“I don’t care in the least about how something tastes, so I can’t see any point in seeking out my impression.”

“I get it, I get it... Well then, let’s dig in!”

Ai Fa closed her eyes, brought a finger on her left hand to her lips, seemed to almost draw a line to the side, and then muttered something inside her mouth. Perhaps that was the ritual you performed in this world before eating. Though I got the feeling Ai Fa didn’t do all that yesterday...

But I mean, it actually made me feel sort of happy. It would be just plain depressing to be a chef in a world that didn’t know how to show proper respect to a meal.

But putting all that aside, it was time to put my creation to the test.

I started by scooping some of the soup up with my wooden spoon. A shining, invisible membrane of fat floated over the whitish liquid. The black powder sprinkled here and there throughout was made from pico leaves.

In terms of both smell and appearance, it was absolutely perfect. But even so, that wasn’t much different from how things were last night.

I had taste-tested several times throughout, but I didn’t know how it had all come together in the end. My expectations high, I finally gave it a sip to find... that it came out just right, and was absolutely delicious.

I didn’t use any miso or soy sauce in the rather rustic soup, so instead the somewhat quirky flavor of the giba meat was left to be accented by the pico leaves. The flavor wasn’t overly strong, but it had a richness to it that profoundly stimulated my appetite.

Ultimately, about a third of the water in the pot ended up evaporating, so the dish required some rather careful calculation. And I didn’t add any water, either. As a result, I ended up with a soup with some seriously dense, rich flavor to it.

Now, though, the issue was the giba meat.

I had only used a stick in place of long chopsticks to check the toughness, so it really was my very first time tasting it.

I went ahead and scooped up a slice of thigh meat rather than one of the chunks I shaved off the bone, and saw the ivory-white meat and the fat on it wobble rather charmingly. I took the little bit of meat, about four centimeters square in size and five millimeters thick, and chucked it on into my mouth.

As I bit down on it, I could feel the sensation of the meat coming apart. Man was it soft, even more so than I had been expecting. And yet I could still definitely sink my teeth into it, too.

The gelatin-esque fat and more elastic red meat blended together in my mouth, filling it with an absolutely delicious flavor.

Aah... This really is a top notch ingredient, just like I had thought.

There was no way it would lose out to that boar stew I had eaten three years back, even though the meat hadn't even been aged.

Naturally, the effort I put into preparing it, as well as my exhaustion and hunger, were flavoring my thoughts on the matter. But even so, I had no intention of changing my opinion.

I had hardly used any other ingredients, so it was like the delectable meatiness was being conveyed to me directly. That untamed deliciousness of wild meat... I could definitely feel its presence. This was the true worth of wild game... Well, it may be strange for someone who's only had wild game a few times in his life to say that, but that was what I was truly feeling at the moment.

I tried eating some aria along with it too, and now that it was a bit softer than it was yesterday, it seemed to fit just right in the soup. When I put it together with the soup and meat, the depth of the flavor only heightened. It seemed a bit more on the sweet side rather than having the sharp taste of an onion (well, it wasn't actually an onion), I'd say. It really elevated the dish, as an ingredient that didn't over-assert itself in terms of flavor or texture.

Yeah, this turned out pretty damn fantastic for a first try.

I looked back up as that thought passed through my mind, and caught sight of Ai Fa standing up with her bowl in hand. With that usual sour look on her face, she silently headed towards the stove. Had she already finished her first bowl?

I was glad to see that she was eating plenty, but I couldn't help but worry if she was really savoring the taste...

After getting her second bowl, she returned back to where she had been sitting. She wasn't even so much as looking my way... Now that we'd hit this point, the anxiety brewing within me reached a point where I couldn't hold it back any longer.

"So, how is it? I'll admit I'm biased, but I think it turned out pretty darn well."

After taking a sip of the soup, Ai Fa tilted her head.

"What do you mean? I already said there's no point in seeking my opinion, didn't I?"

"No, I mean, you did say that, but..."

For some reason, I just felt antsy all over. There was some feeling I couldn't identify welling up in me, almost like it was trying to lean forwards in search of a place to go. Anger or sadness, misery or unease... I had no idea what it was, but I could tell that it definitely wasn't a positive feeling at all.

"U-Um, I know my dish took a while, so, er, are you still saying that was all meaningless...?"

The look on Ai Fa's face grew even more doubtful. Then, she suddenly looked down at the contents of her bowl.

The orange light of the flames caused her long eyelashes to cast shadows on her cheeks.

What should I do...?

I could feel my heart pounding in my chest like crazy.

All I could feel was an overpowering sense of dread.

"...At least to me, when it comes to food, there is no good or bad taste. A meal is just a means to keep on living."

“Right...”

“I’m troubled, to have you seek an opinion on taste from someone like me. I simply don’t possess the vocabulary to express such things.”

“Yeah, that makes sense.”

“But the one thing I can say for sure...” Ai Fa started, looking up slowly and staring straight at me with her beautiful blue eyes. “Is that this must be that thing they call, ‘delicious.’” Her pink lips seemed to be having a bit of trouble forming words. “It’s like... the act of eating itself can be fun... and pleasant... and bring great joy. Is this what it means, to eat something delicious?”

I was at a loss for words.

Ai Fa frowned, looking just a bit pained.

“I understand now, why you’re so ridiculously passionate and serious when it comes to cooking. Or at least, I think I do... Maybe I don’t, actually, but at the very least, I have no intention of trying to deny the purpose behind your efforts.”

“Ai Fa...”

“I simply can’t find the words I should be saying right now. I can’t explain it any further. But I do believe that you did the right thing.”

And then, ever so slightly, Ai Fa’s beautiful mouth... started to pull into a smile.

“So please, don’t make such a pained face. This cooking of yours, it tastes good.”

I gave a single nod back, then silently devoted myself to eating.

I just couldn’t get what was going on, somehow.

The bundle of anxiety in the depths of my stomach had completely disappeared, but now the back of my neck felt hot, and there were chills running down my spine.

I felt like if I let my guard down, my heart would suddenly clench up.

In all likelihood... I was seriously, incredibly happy right now. And then my

powerful emotions were mightily shaking me up in turn.

I must have craved Ai Fa's approval even more strongly than I had thought, deep down inside.

Ai Fa was still the only one who understood me in this whole world, and I also owed her my life.

She's stubborn, and blunt, and every bit as violent as any man, but she's also kinder than anyone I've ever known, and likely carries some heavy scars deep inside, plus she's had to live without relying on anyone else. This mysterious girl named Ai Fa was strong, beautiful, brave, and delicate, and I... I wanted her to acknowledge my existence.

Damn it...! Still, I'll show you that this isn't all there is to me!

That caused my fighting spirit to roar, and I ended up violently chewing away at the giba meat.

My battle still wasn't over yet.

With that determination freshly renewed, I glared at my hated enemy. It was that pseudo-potato that lay off to the side of the stove: the poitan.

Intermission: Days at the Forest's Edge

In the settlement at the forest's edge, they got rolling early. They woke as soon as the sun was up, and then before long they set about their work for the morning. The contents of that work varied, but when I didn't have any other impending task, I started off by cleaning up after the dinner from the night before.

I'd throw the utensils and tools we used into the pot, along with any cloth that had been dirtied by fat or whatever, and then head off.

Why didn't I clean everything up last night, you may ask? Well, even though this land had been cleared by human hands, there was still a very real possibility of running into dangerous wild animals if you went out at night.

Giba were cautious by nature, so they were rare, but if they were starving then they would intrude into a human settlement. When that happened they would break through the people of the forest edge's settlement, and then go on to attack the fields of the Genos domain that lay to the west.

Aside from giba, there were also the mundt that were said to rummage through carrion, massive mice known as giiz, and all sorts of poisonous snakes and lizards. There fortunately weren't any large carnivores that would prey on humans prowling around, but if any of those things bit you, you could end up catching a serious illness that would be hard to treat.

And so, cleaning up after dinner was a task for the morning. The place where everyone took care of that was the nearest source of water to where they lived. And in the case of Ai Fa's house, that was a small branch off the Lanto river that was about a 10-minute walk away. It was a meagre stream that flowed between rugged rocks. Honestly, it was more like some water trickling from rocks than a proper tributary or anything.

That was where I washed the pot and utensils. The tool for the task was sort of like a scrubbing brush made by drying out giba fur until it grew stiff. Both the pot and utensils were all greasy from the fat, but the short little hairs did a surprisingly good job of getting everything nice and clean.

I also washed the cloth that had gotten dirty with fat at the same time. When I had the time to spare, I squeezed in doing the laundry then, too.

Oh, and when the water jug was running low, I made sure to refill it.

The metal pot and water jug were both heavy, so when I needed to carry them, I used a tool called a “pulling board.” It was a large board with fur affixed to the back of it, so when you rubbed some solidified fat onto it, it made a real helpful tool for transporting things. Then you would use a rope made of vines tied together in order to fix your luggage in place atop the board and have another rope attached to it that went over your shoulder, which you pulled in order to drag it along.

By rubbing fat on it you lowered the amount of friction, making it feel like it weighed half of what it actually did. But if I filled the water jug up to full it weighed 100 kilos or so, so it was still pretty rough.

Anyway, whenever I occasionally ran into someone from another house there, it was always a woman. The majority of them were middle-aged women who looked far hardier than me, but there were also some old ladies and young women now and again, too. They may have used pulling boards too, but none of them looked like they were having a hard time. In other words, I was the one who looked like he had it roughest.

Naturally, it was my beloved landlady who was the one to say, “What a terribly weak man you are.”

By the way, this was my one chance to meet people from other households up close and personal, but just as expected, essentially no one wanted anything to do with Ai Fa. There were some who would occasionally offer a greeting, but they didn’t want any further contact than that, and neither did she. That was what it meant to earn the anger of the Suun clan, who led the people of the forest’s edge.

Plus, it seemed pretty clear that the appearance of a pale guy in a white chef’s outfit or a t-shirt had only earned her more doubtful gazes. Nobody came outright and said it, though. Everyone just stood at a distance and stared at the stranger that was always by Ai Fa’s side, but nobody would meet my gaze.

This is a digression, but they all wore the same sort of beautiful cloths as Ai

Fa. They had a chic coloring to them that emphasized dark greens and reddish browns, perhaps so they wouldn't stand out in the forest, but they had complex designs that wrapped all around that I'd have to call really ethnic and fashionable.

The married women wore one long cloth that wrapped around them, covering all the way from their chests down to their knees. The unwed women, meanwhile, just hid their chests and waists, like Ai Fa did.

Perhaps naturally, none of the other women walked around wearing a cloak or weilding a massive sword, but even Ai Fa only had a knife on her when she wasn't heading out into the forest. And there were certainly plenty of women who walked around with a blade of that size. Even if you weren't out hunting giba, a knife was still a versatile tool that could help when collecting herbs or cutting through vines.

Anyway, it seemed that all of the people of the forest's edge really did have dark skin. The color of their hair and eyes differed, but the most common seemed to be light brown hair and blue eyes. There were also people with black or red hair, or even blonde like Ai Fa, and though I couldn't judge too well because they wouldn't come close, I think I saw black and reddish-brown eyes, too.

Not a one of them had skin like mine, though.

At any rate, once I finished my work at the stream, my next task was done indoors. Which is to say, I went about my daily routine of taking care of my old man's knife. I checked the cutting edge and handle, and if needed I took care of repairs. The whetstones in this world were a rugged, shiny black, and reminded me of obsidian.

Once that was done, I headed for the pantry to check over the ingredients. I also made sure the aria and poitan were doing alright, but naturally the giba meat was the primary concern. I thoroughly stirred around the surrounding pico leaves, making sure all the while that none of the meat had gone bad. The moisture in the meat transferred into the pico leaves, so if you didn't stir it around at least once a day, they would apparently lose their effectiveness at preserving and sterilizing food.

At the same time, I also cut the necessary amount off of the jerky that was buried the same way as the fresh meat, as it was finally time for breakfast. While chewing on the slimy rubber-esque meat, I headed off towards the forest.

My goal was to gather firewood and herbs, as well as wash myself off.

By that time of day, the sun was always out in full force.

In other words, that first morning after I came to stay with Ai Fa, she got up before dawn to take care of her various chores, made sure the preparations for heading out into the forest early in the morning were complete, and then smacked me awake. I couldn't help but feel incredibly embarrassed thinking how I was half asleep even then, and then went and did something incredibly blockheaded on top of that. But whenever I went and apologized for it further, she would kick me in the leg. I think it had happened three times by now, and it seriously hurt every time.

At any rate, I headed off towards the forest.

The first step was heading off towards the downstream portion of the Lanto river to bathe. Yes, bathe...

The one-two punch of being attacked by that giant madarama snake and a giba had left me with some serious trauma, but my beloved benefactor simply shot this frail visitor from another world a cold glare and said, "Things like that only happen incredibly rarely."

Well, it was true though that the madarama and giba were mortal enemies, and those massive serpents taking over the mountain was the only reason that the giba had chosen to live at the forest's edge instead. If those madarama appeared frequently at the foot of the mountain, then the giba would either run even further away, or there would be a drastic drop in their population.

In other words, a madarama coming down to the foot of the mountain was a very unusual occurrence. Its feet... er, scales, must have slipped and sent it tumbling down into the river, and it got washed on downstream. That thing was such a pain...

After having such a stimulating mental debate with myself, I finally had my fill

of bathing.

The average temperature around here was about 30 degrees Celsius, so it really did feel nice. I had never been a morning bather, but that was partially because I didn't need to use it as a time to relax for a moment back then.

This is yet another digression, but I'd like to note for the record that after that first day, I didn't break any more taboos kept by the people of the forest's edge. I swear on my life. I'll seriously never do anything like that ever again.

After finishing up my bath, I set about gathering herbs. The main thing that we needed were pico leaves.

Pico leaves served as a preservative, but as they sucked more and more moisture out of meat, their effectiveness dropped. Even if you made sure to stir them each and every day, they would be completely useless within a month tops.

The meat storage space measured out at two meters by two meters by 30 centimeters. Since it was necessary to gather enough pico leaves to fill that at least once a month, I needed to make sure to grab a decent amount each and every day.

The pico leaves running out meant that the meat was done for, too. That would have a rather serious and direct impact on our ability to keep on living, so I carefully calculated out my daily quota, and if I ever failed to meet it, that became a priority for me for next time.

Once that was done with, I focused on gathering up some grigee fruits and lilo leaves. The grigee fruit was used for warding off harmful insects. In order to protect themselves from the poisonous insects and snakes that lived in the forest, the people of the forest's edge all wore bracelets made out of them. That would get in the way of my cooking, though, so I wore mine around my neck instead. They were also important for spreading out around your house to lower the risk of anything creeping in through the windows at night, so I needed to make sure to gather some for that purpose periodically, too.

Lilo leaves, meanwhile, were herbs that were used when making jerky. They weren't used in as great a quantity as pico leaves, but they were still important to have around.

By the way, these lilo leaves actually turned out to be one of the sources of Ai Fa's tantalizing aroma. It was this kind of cool and refreshing smell that seemed like it would be good for aromatherapy, but it also blended smoothly with the overpowering meat and fat smells. What a truly wonderful herb...

However, I decided not to mention that point to Ai Fa. It would probably just lead to me getting kicked again, after all.

After I was done with those, the last thing that I needed to gather was firewood. I looked around for fallen branches that seemed like they would serve that purpose, and then used the vines that grew in the area to tie them up. If I failed to gather up the proper amount, then I'd go ahead and pluck a sapling and bring it back home to dry it out.

Oh, and around here, there were squall-like rains a couple times a day. They were completely unpredictable, so it wasn't all that rare for my carefully gathered firewood to end up getting soaked. But I didn't let that get me down, and just kept on gathering. It was important to keep the sort of mindset where you could just say, "Well if it gets wet, it gets wet, and then I'll just have to dry it out later." Plus, gathering up this firewood was an important task, since I'd been using more of it than usual in my cooking.

Though I suppose there was no such thing as an unimportant task when it came to the field of work I was tackling. I said that gathering pico leaves was the most important task and it took priority, but if I didn't carry out everything, we wouldn't have what we needed to live. Washing our utensils, gathering water, sharpening my blade, monitoring the pantry, gathering herbs and firewood, hunting down giba... All of that was done so that we could keep on living. If any of that was lacking, it would all come tumbling down.

I worked in order to live. Putting in a full day's work made it so that I could live another day longer.

That was the lifestyle of the people of the forest's edge, which must have been why they didn't have time for thinking about things like improving the quality of their meals.

You could eat giba meat, aria, and poitan as long as you cooked them. Any preparation further than that was unnecessary. You ate in order to live. Just like

all other work, it was just a means to stay alive. There didn't need to be any pleasure involved in the process, and taste simply didn't matter.

If you didn't eat you died, so you ate. That was all there was to it.

That may have been the proper way for an animal to be, in a manner of speaking.

Ai Fa's giba stew and my giba soup couldn't have had much of a difference in terms of nutritional value. In that case, the shorter and easier process really may have been the "right" answer in this world.

I came from a different world entirely, though. I was a foreigner who came from a place where we knew that food was meant to be enjoyed. And so, I had no choice but to do things my way.

My battle in this different world was only just getting started.

Chapter 4: A Tiny Visitor

1

How many times was it now that I'd gone "Hmm..." today?

My hated enemy, the poitan, lay there before my eyes.

It was now the fifth afternoon since I had come to this other world.

I already completed my daily routine of washing the utensils and checking on the pantry, and then I went ahead and made jerky.

This may end up being a bit of a long digression, but that actually didn't end up being mere jerky, but more of a smoked meat. To give a rough explanation, I rubbed salt and pico leaf all over the surface of the giba meat, and then wrapped it up in that pseudo-rubber tree leaf (now that I thought of it, I never actually got the proper name for that one.) On the night of the third day I washed the salt and spice off, and then let it dry overnight. The next morning, I hung the meat on a tree just outside, then roasted lilo herbs and fresh pico leaves beneath it, and let it smoke until the sun reached its peak. And thus, I finished making some smoked giba meat.

Anyway, today was my fourth morning here, so I had been entrusted with finishing the smoked meat rather than gathering firewood and herbs. The task just involved adding firewood and herbs so that the flames didn't grow any stronger, which was pretty simple. That wasn't to say it was easy, though, as it meant manning the fire over the course of several hours. But with that said, I made it all the way to midday without any unexpected problems striking, allowing me to safely complete a large amount of smoked meat.

As I waited for Ai Fa to return from her usual gathering work in the forest, I stowed away the smoked meat in the usual storage space, bringing my current task to an end.

Once I had finished my work for the morning, I was permitted to spend the time between early afternoon and evening experimenting with the poitan. During that time, Ai Fa had headed back out into the forest in order to hunt a

giba. We still had plenty of giba meat left, but in order to get ahold of the necessary poitan and aria, she still needed to hunt down one giba every five days. And since I was an absolute amateur when it came to hunting giba, I'd just get in the way, so I was able to get ahold of this free time.

Perhaps it should be called only natural, but over the course of these last five days, Ai Fa still hadn't taken down a giba. Before I came along and added another mouth for her to feed, she could keep a pace of one giba every 10 days, and they probably weren't exactly easy to hunt. And I mean, she had already caught one five days ago (albeit as the result of unexpected circumstances). Ai Fa just said that she'd be lucky if she could manage to catch one either today or tomorrow.

Anyway, back to me. On that first day I had dissected the giba, and then in the four days since, I had been spending every afternoon experimenting with the poitan. It was proving to be quite a tricky foe, though.

To put it bluntly, I just plain didn't know what it was. All I could figure was that this vegetable didn't exist back in my world.

In terms of its outer appearance, it looked just like a potato. I got the feeling that it was a bit pale for one, but otherwise it was identical to your average spud.

And yet, it was something completely different on the inside.

You couldn't eat it by biting straight into it, as it was terribly bitter, yet also excessively floury. I couldn't help but wonder if it was really a vegetable at all, because it was just so utterly lacking in moisture and flavor.

As you already know, when you cooked it in water it fell apart under the heat and turned into a nearly flavorless muddy water. When I had to go and add it to my completed giba soup, it certainly didn't improve things in the least. But even so, it apparently contained crucial nutrition, so for the past four days I'd been been adding it to the remaining soup after I'd had my fill of meat and aria, then chugging it down.

Finishing off a stew with some rice gruel or udon makes me so happy, but *that* honestly felt more like a punishment. I couldn't help but wallow in self-pity, wondering why I had to gulp down this muddy water.

That was why I was worrying about it so much, but... I still hadn't found a means of overcoming it just yet.

I had Ai Fa's permission to waste one a day for the sake of research, so I'd tried out all sorts of stuff, but nothing had worked yet. When I heated it, it collapsed into a mush. When I baked it, it crumbled into a powder. I tried soaking it in water, but nothing changed. When I fried it in animal fat, I just got a floury lard. On top of that, I tried mashing it, frying it without any fat, exposing it to sunlight, and everything else I could think of, but I had yet to find anything that looked promising.

I had no clue how many times I'd done it today, but I ended up letting out yet another "Hmmmmmm...!"

And then, I was suddenly slapped on the back of my head.

"You're too noisy. Do you really have to make so much of a racket when you're worrying about something?"

Naturally, that bit of violence had come from Ai Fa.

Rather than heading out into the forest all that much, she had spent most of the day rummaging around in the storage shed, though she had apparently finally finished her work in there. Now, she stood there dauntingly in her usual light attire, glaring at my face.

"That hurt! And it's not like I'm whining because I want..." I started to say, but then I noticed she was holding something under her armpit. What was that? It was some sort of bundle of cloth that had some seriously beautiful coloring to it.

Perhaps because she had noticed where I was looking, Ai Fa went ahead and spread out one of them.

"These clothes belonged to my father."

I see. Apparently it was a sleeveless vest that opened in the front. It didn't have any buttons, instead being made so that you tied it with a cord at the bottom. The design was simple, but the whirling patterns and various colors made for a rather chic outfit.

“Ooh, that’s pretty nice. I’m sure it’d look good on you, Ai Fa,” I earnestly responded, only for Ai Fa’s cheeks to turn red for some reason.

“A-As if I could wear an outfit like that! It may be true that I carry out the giba hunting as head of my household, but I’m still technically a woman!”

“Huh? It’s not like I was telling you to wear *just* that!”

It was the sort of vest that Aladdin might wear, so the front was left wide open, with nothing to cover the wearer’s chest... Yeah, that was no good. That just plain wouldn’t meet social standards.

“Naturally, if you wore that, you’d leave on that top you have on now! And I mean, there’s no way I’d treat someone with such a pretty face like a man in the first—”

“Oh shut up already! This is for you to wear!”

As she flipped her lid for the first time in a little while, Ai Fa threw the outfit right at my face.

“That outfit of yours stands out way too much! I’m sick of getting strange looks whenever I’m out with you!”

Oh, so that’s it. I knew full well from my morning trips to the stream and the like that my pure white outfit attracted an awful lot of attention. Plus I was sort of lacking in outfits, so I had to alternate between my t-shirt and uniform every day, and when it came to my pants and underwear, I had no choice but to put them back on sopping wet after washing them. Well, the climate was so warm that they would dry in a few hours, and you could never tell when a localized squall would sweep through and get you wet anyway, so I had already given up and accepted that... Though it did make me feel a bit sad seeing my pure white chef’s uniform grow more and more dirty as I took it out into the forest.

And so, I truly felt deeply grateful to my enraged benefactor.

“T-Thank you so much. But isn’t this really precious to you?”

“That may be so, but if there’s no one to wear it, then it may as well be mere garbage,” Ai Fa said, still looking angry and reaching down for the knife at her hip.

I instinctually took a step back, but Ai Fa thrust it at me still in its sheath.

“This was also something my father left behind.”

Now that I looked closely, I saw that Ai Fa had another identical knife dangling from her hip.

“So... I can use this, too?”

“I’m just loaning it to you, though! It’s a pain having you always getting my knife all smeared in fat! But let me just say that if you fail to take proper care of the grip or the blade rusts or the like, I swear I’ll cut off your ears!”

“Got it. And thank you. I really do appreciate it. I’ll be sure to treat your father’s mementos right. That’s a promise.”

Ai Fa suddenly looked away, but rather than going anywhere she sat down beside me.

“So, did you find a way to make poitan taste delicious?”

“Not yet. It looks kind of like it’s fought me to a standstill. I mean, I can’t think of any vegetable from my world that resembles this thing. Giba are just like boars, and aria are just like onions, but this thing just plain doesn’t have a counterpart.”

“Then how about just admitting defeat? I’m... not at all displeased with how things are now.”

Ai Fa kept stubbornly looking away, so I took the opportunity to look at the side of her face from point-blank range.

“You really aren’t the least bit dissatisfied? I’m so darn annoyed that I can’t even stand it! The giba soup is approaching perfection, but thanks to this thing, it’s all for naught! I may still just be a trainee, but this whole ordeal is thrashing my self-esteem as a chef to bits!”

“Self-esteem...?”

“I mean it’s crushing my pride.”

“Hmm... Well, as I am now at least, I would naturally prefer something to taste good rather than bad. But you can’t just keep on wasting ingredients

forever, either.”

“Yeah. I get that, but still...”

“These tusks and horns aren’t solely for exchanging for food. They can be exchanged for a knife if one breaks, or clothes if you lose your clothing, or medicine if you fall ill,” Ai Fa said, clutching the necklace dangling in front of her chest. “Up until now, I could obtain enough aria and poitan by hunting down a giba once every 10 days, so I was able to build up this surplus of tusks and horns. But now that I need to defeat a giba every five days, I worry that I may need to eat into this surplus. That’s all the more reason that we must treat our food stores as precious.”

“Right. But still, you gave your word that I could use one poitan per day as I pleased.”

With that said, though, I’d already gone and wasted four poitan. That made my comment just now more than a little pathetic.

“But from today on, I’ll stop wasting them. I’ll just take one out of my portion to experiment—”

“You can’t,” Ai Fa yelled out in a surprisingly firm tone, bringing her face closer to mine. “How many times do you intend to make me repeat myself? Two poitan and three aria. That is what the people of the forest’s edge determined as the bare minimum required to live a healthy life. If you decrease that number, then no matter how much giba meat you may eat, you will eventually become ill.”

A blue flame burned bright in Ai Fa’s eyes. I suppose the ethics of the people of the forest’s edge wouldn’t allow for something like me sacrificing my health for the sake of research. No... That wasn’t just limited to them. A chef should never allow such a thing to happen, either. A chef who failed to properly monitor his own eating habits was like a doctor who neglected his health, or a dyer who only wears white.

I mean, I get all that...

A chef supplies their customers not only flavor, but also nutrition. No matter how delicious a dish may be, there was no point if it caused harm to the person

eating it. And no matter how well balanced a dish may be nutritionally, if it tastes bad then it's pointless. Being a chef meant aiming to achieve both of those goals. I don't know about other chefs, but at the very least, that was the sort of chef that my old man was.

Naturally, there were plenty of dishes out there that prioritized taste over nutrition. I mean, I was rather fond of greasy tonkotsu ramen myself.

But that couldn't be the norm when it comes to food. Food that prioritized taste heavily was so impactful and delicious precisely because you only ate it every now and again.

It's because that's how we get the nutrients our bodies need that we desire to eat. We humans may have destroyed our natural instincts as animals, and we may have lost sight of it by and large, but that key premise is something we can never do away with.

Giba meat was truly delicious.

I could sense the fact that it included nutrients that my body needed. And I could feel it being converted into flesh and blood inside of me. Perhaps you'd laugh that off as me just imagining things, but that's how I truly felt.

It was a powerful enough dish to make me think that... And I had been the one to make it.

To have that precious person eat food that was delicious, and also good for her...

Eating poitan should be good for you. Ai Fa is proof of that.

Ai Fa was stronger and more lively than anyone else I knew. And what she had grown up on was giba, aria, and poitan... There had to be some way to cook it so that it tasted good.

I mean, the poitan contains nutrients that are essential for humans...

...Hmm?

Essential nutrients...?

Something that humans need?

In other words...

“That’s it! So that’s what it was!” I yelled out loudly without even thinking and, similarly without thought, grabbed Ai Fa by the shoulders. “I was barking up the totally wrong tree! I mean, what was it that was missing?! Man, I can’t believe that was it...!”

“Have you suddenly lost your senses...?”

Ai Fa tried to pull away like I was being a real nuisance, but I unconsciously pulled her closer.

“It’s because of you that I figured out the answer! You really are the best, Ai Fa!”

I swear I was just doing this all inattentively.

Anyway, I unconsciously threw my arms around Ai Fa’s body, which was slender yet also taut like a leather whip.

It was only natural that a rain of blows came down upon my head seconds later, but my heart was still trembling with excitement at the thought of my victory.



2

“I’ll be tackling a brand new dish today, Ai Fa!” I declared near sunset, only to get a muttered, “Do as you please,” back from the sour-faced young woman. Perhaps my blunder from earlier in the afternoon was still having a lingering effect. Still, it was the kind of incident where I’d be sure to lose in court if she accused me of sexual harassment, so I suppose there was no helping her doubting my character a bit as a result.

“I mean, the giba soup has turned out pretty well, but if you eat the same thing every day, you’ll end up getting bored of it. Look forward to a serious surprise this time around, Ai Fa.”

“Do as you please.”

“...By the way, I decided to go ahead and try on your father’s clothes right away, but what do you think? Does it suit me?”

“It doesn’t. You just look ridiculous. In fact, I wish I never loaned it to you.”

Hmm... Yeah, she was being pretty deeply contrary right now.

Well, I’m sure that once I feed her something tasty, her mood will improve.

By the way, I felt uneasy in the fluttery vest with only my waist down covered, so I had on my t-shirt underneath. It may not be the proper way to wear it at all, but hopefully that can be pardoned out of consideration for my fear of getting burnt while cooking. Plus, hopefully it was acceptable that I still had a white towel wrapped around my head as per usual.

“Anyway, there’s no point in hiding it any more: the poitan is already done cooking. Also, I used up a lot of firewood, but I’ll try to make up for it when I’m out gathering tomorrow, so hopefully you can forgive me.”

Ai Fa remained silent, her face expressionless. Eventually I realized I wasn’t getting a response.

After hitting me she headed off for the forest like always, so she shouldn’t have seen any of me cooking the poitan. Was she really not curious in spite of that?

“Well, whatever. It’s a little early, but should I go ahead and start cooking? If you’re not hungry yet, then go ahead and use the time to build up an appetite.”

I may have been the opposite of Ai Fa right now, being that I was in something of a manic state. I couldn’t help it, though, since I was looking forward to taking on a new dish.

Originally, the plan was to tackle yakiniku for the first time today. I also had all kinds of ideas like steam-grilling or teriyaki, too. But after I figured out what the poitan was, I put those off for later and decided to take on a special dish tonight.

Now, I have no intention of putting on airs: Tonight’s dish was going to be giba hamburgers. Or shortened, giburgers.

I headed off into the pantry while humming a tune, and then carried the necessary ingredients to the stove.

I had about 500 grams each of giba thigh and rib meat.

Six of those pseudo-onions, the aria.

Two pinches of pico leaves.

Fruit wine.

Rock salt.

And then that magical extract I got from the poitan.

There wasn’t all that much of it, so I was just storing it in a little container I had made out of one of those pseudo-rubber tree leaves.

Now then, time to get cooking!

First, I needed to cut off a bit of the roughly one centimeter thick fat clinging to the blocks of thigh meat. It was kind of a shame, but I needed it to serve in place of lard. All of the fat that came off the pelt this time had been processed to be used in the candles, so I’d have to be sure to secure at least a bit for cooking next time around.

It had already been five days since I’d prepared this meat, but it wasn’t showing any signs of going bad. It seemed that pico leaves really were a first-

rate preservative.

But apparently, despite that impressive preserving power, meat would still end up going bad by the time that 15 to 20 days had passed. If that happened, I'd have no choice but to smoke it in order to preserve it. I still had time left since it had only been five days, but there was still a mountain left to use, so I spent each day thinking about how I could best use it.

But anyway, I was cooking now.

I fired up the stove, and as the pot was heating up, I diced two aria.

Once that was done with, I moved onto the meat. I minced up both the thigh and rib meat into little bits, and then finally pounded away at them with my knife. For the first part I used the memento from Ai Fa's father, and for the back part I used the knife that was my old man's heart and soul.

It was roughly a kilo of meat, but it wasn't really all that hard to handle. Hamburgers were a popular dish at the Tsurumi Restaurant, so I was already an old hand at this kind of work.

In less than 10 minutes, I had minced giba lying before me.

I turned around to look at Ai Fa, only to find her sitting in a Buddha-like pose and staring back at me with a displeased look.

Normally she would just sit there silently, like she was showing some degree of respect for me as a cook. But she was looking rather cranky today... Didn't she have any interest at all in why I had turned the precious giba meat into this strange, pink little mound?

While holding back the unnerved feeling I had inside, I went ahead and checked the flame. When I put in a drop of water it evaporated in no time at all, so it seemed to be about right.

I added in a glob of fat, then spread it out with a wooden spatula (self-made), then threw in the minced aria. It was a bit troublesome that you couldn't move a metal pot around the way you could with a frying pan, but I didn't let that get me down and just kept on stirring with the spatula.

Once I saw them gain a certain degree of color, I added in the fruit wine.

Then, I carefully stirred it around until the alcohol evaporated. Once the green aria reached a golden brown, I scooped them out into a separate bowl using the spatula.

Back home, we kept a ratio of one fourth of an onion for every 200 grams of minced meat, so two whole aria for one kilo was a bit on the high side. But the giba meat had a fairly quirky flavor, so there was no issue with going heavy on the aria.

I couldn't move on to the next step until the cooked aria cooled down, so for now I went ahead and chopped up the rest of them. Rather than mincing these, though, I cut them into thin slices parallel to the fiber. When you want to heat them up and get them nice and soft, it was best to cut perpendicular to the fiber, but that texture was going to be important today so I changed up how I cut them.

I piled up the four aria worth of slices atop a pseudo-rubber tree leaf... If you'll allow me to speak a little selfishly, I really do wish I had a few more containers to work with.

At any rate, the aria seemed to have cooled down in the meantime. I went ahead and dumped them on top of a pseudo-rubber leaf along with the minced giba meat. Then I covered it with powdered salt and pico leaf, and finally... It was time for my magical extract to make its appearance. I went ahead and drizzled the sticky, cream-colored paste over the mountain of meat. And then I just started intently mixing it.

After a couple of minutes of kneading it, it stuck together just like I had expected.

I'd shaved the fat off of the thigh meat, but I made sure to add plenty to the rib meat, making for something that was just perfect in terms of feel and color.

I could feel the excitement tingling in my spine in anticipation of my victory.

I scraped off the meat paste that had stuck to my hands, then rubbed the leftover giba fat on them to act as a lubricant and prevent that from happening again. Then, I set about molding the meat.

Regulating the heat would be difficult if I made them too big, so I scooped out

one sixth or so of the bundle of meat, then formed it into an oval. I threw it back and forth between my hands with a *pat, pat, pat*, not forgetting to make sure I got all of the air out of it.

In the end, I had six miniburgers, around 160 grams each. They sure were cute... And they were a really beautiful pink color that just made me want to bite into them right then and there. That would have to wait, though. Now, how was the heat looking...?

Hmm. That may be just a bit high. I pulled out the firewood just a bit, which tested my nerves a tad at the same time.

Having to measure out the heat by eye while cooking was the big obstacle this time around.

First the fire would be too high, and then too low... Having to regulate all that was honestly pretty tricky. But nothing comes from nothing, so I just had to tackle this to the best of my ability. It would be a test of my flexibility and creativity. And lastly, my decisiveness.

I dropped some fat into the pot, then waited for it to get crispy and the grease to boil out, at which point I finally added the giba patties. An absolutely intoxicating smell filled the room alongside the satisfying sizzling sound.

The bottom of the pot was rounded, so I had to take care that the patties didn’t all stick together as I hurriedly added them and then waited a few seconds.

If I messed up here, it would all be ruined. While paying attention to even minute changes in smell, I used the wooden spatula to check the sides that were cooking.

Did I need to weaken the flame? I’d already been regulating it for six minutes now.

Well, it was better to do that than to burn them, right? Even if a bit of the flavor dissolved, I still believed that wouldn’t be enough to exhaust the giba meat’s deliciousness.

After a few more seconds of waiting, they looked to be the right color, so I flipped them.

And so, I hurried on to prepare the next step and... I stepped backwards, only to run into something. At some point, Ai Fa had started peeking into the pot from behind my back.

“Gah, you scared me! You were back there, Ai Fa?!”

“Why should I have to leave my own house?”

“No, that’s not what I meant... Ah, sorry, I’ve just got something I need to prepare.”

Dodging around Ai Fa, I picked up the teapot full of fruit wine and the pseudo-rubber tree leaf bowl full of sliced aria. When I got back to the pot I put down the teapot and checked the color of the patties. They looked about 80% of the way there, so I figured it was about time.

“Ai Fa, something hot may come flying, so watch out, alright?”

I didn’t get a response back, but there was no time left for hesitating. After pouring in the fruit wine, I hurriedly put the lid on the pot.

There was a grand sizzling, crackling sound, though it was a bit muffled.

This cooking method was my own original idea that I came up with for the giburgers.

Normally, with a hamburger you’d first quickly fry both sides using a high flame so that the flavor wouldn’t escape, then slowly heat it on a low flame so that it’s cooked all the way through, or perhaps move it into an oven instead.

Those options weren’t available to me, though, so I chose to bake it in a covered pot. This way, I could heat it all the way through without burning the surface.

I’d made the patties small and thin for exactly this purpose.

I wasn’t able to do any fine adjustments on the heat, but it was absolutely necessary that I cooked both sides on high flame... In that case, I had no choice but to leave it all up to a strong flame. In other words, I had to make the patties small and bet it all on a sudden death battle.

But even at this size, if I waited for the flame to heat them all the way through to the center, they would end up completely charred. In that case, using a quick

bake was my only choice.

It was an incredibly simple, logical conclusion.

“Alright, it should be good now.”

As I opened the lid, a powerful explosion of scent burst forth, this time with the fragrance of the fruit wine added in.

Using the wooden spatula, I split one of the patties in two. The meat inside was a beautiful ivory-white, without any red left to it whatsoever.

“Ai Fa, could you grab me a bowl?” I yelled out as I fiddled with the other patties using the spatula to prevent them from burning. In no time at all, a wooden bowl was passed my way without a word. I hurriedly moved three of the patties into it, then I took a second bowl and placed the remaining three inside of that one.

“Alright, now I just need to deal with the aria.”

In the bottom of the pot, I simmered the sauce made from fat, meat juices, and fruit wine. And then, I threw in just a pinch of salt and pico leaf, as well as the thinly sliced aria. Once the aria were nice and soft, it was complete.

“Could I have one of the bowls again, Ai Fa?”

Just as I’d asked, I was handed one of the bowls with the patties. Hmm? I wasn’t certain because I hadn’t been able to take my eyes off of the pot, but had she been holding the bowl and waiting all this time?

She certainly was thoughtful. It was proof of just how good and honest this blunt girl was, to even pick up on something like that.

But I should set that matter aside and return back to the task at hand.

I placed an equal amount of aria in each bowl, then poured the sauce overtop, finishing off the giburgers.

“Oh, could you just have a seat and wait a moment?”

I ran off to the pantry, and brought back the poitan that I had left in waiting. It probably wouldn’t be possible to recognize them as poitan at this point, though.

When she saw what was resting atop the pseudo-rubber tree leaf, Ai Fa tilted

her head.

They were rounded, evenly shaped, slightly burnt-looking cream-colored little things. If anyone from back home saw them, they may be tempted to call them Indian naan, or perhaps just really plain okonomiyaki.

This is what the poitan really were.

“Now then, let’s dig in before it gets cold! I’ll explain it all later.”

3

I’ll start from the conclusion I had reached: The poitan was a grain, in all likelihood.

Naturally, this was all just me guessing, as I didn’t have any way to research it properly. But at any rate, thanks to that hypothesis, I was finally able to find a way to cook it.

The big hint had been “nutritional value.”

It actually wasn’t anything all that complex in the end. Heck, even an elementary schooler may be able to figure it out.

The protein and fat came from the giba meat. The vitamins and dietary fiber came from the aria, which was a green vegetable. So then where were the carbohydrates coming from? When that question came to mind, I finally had my revelation.

I didn’t know how exactly the bodies of this world’s people were laid out. But we looked so similar that applying a bit of my world’s common sense shouldn’t be a problem.

At the very least, I could see that Ai Fa was incredibly healthy. Her skin was simply stunning, and her finely toned body was probably stronger than mine, frankly.

For her to be in that sort of shape, she had to be eating a properly balanced diet.

So, I knew that Ai Fa ate meat, as well as vegetables. In that case, it would be

weird if she wasn't eating her carbohydrates. I mean, to start with, those are our source of energy. I couldn't imagine that Ai Fa, who had more strength and energy than most wild animals, wasn't eating any carbohydrates whatsoever.

"The poitan is a grain, which makes it a carbohydrate."

The other big hint that helped me reach this conclusion was the poitan's texture.

The first time I ate it, I thought, *It's almost like someone went and dissolved flour in water.*

Flour. In other words, milled wheat, which was a type of grain.

There was no need to roast it or parch it or bite into it raw. I mean, the answer had been right before my eyes from the very start.

I should have paid more attention to the eating habits of the people of the forest's edge. Boiling it was the one perfect answer, after all. When it was heated to a high temperature, the poitan's astringency was released, and it dissolved into the water. That allowed it to meet the base qualifications of being edible.

It was just muddy water without any taste like that, though. It was ultimately still roughly the same as flour dissolved in water. But if you dissolve flour in water, then all you need to do is turn it back into flour.

Thanks to that thought process, I realized how to overcome the poitan.

I heated the poitan in a small amount of water to make a sort of mushy poitan broth, then heated it further right up to the limit. By heating it just up until when it was about to burn, I was able to make it into a sort of slime-like batter. Then I exposed it to sunlight for an hour, finally hardening it into a solid shape.

I broke that apart and gave it a taste, and... it was just a powder, without any real flavor to it.

It really did resemble flour... And in that case, it meant I could treat it like it *was* flour.

My hunch really had hit the mark.

I dissolved the powdered poitan in water, then heated it, but I didn't boil it

the way I had with the original poitan, so instead it sputtered and started to burn a bit. It really did look just like okonomiyaki with nothing added to it.

I only had a little bit of my sample batch left, so I went ahead and cooked up the slime that hadn't been exposed to sunlight, but that was no good. All that happened was the moisture evaporated, leaving just a burnt powder behind.

Apparently completely drying it out once was the real clincher.

I had no idea what sort of change was going on in the poitan's molecular structure or whatever, but I didn't really feel the need to know that, either.

At any rate, I'd figured it out. At least for my purposes, this was the right answer.

And also... When I finally accepted that I had won out over the poitan, I was overcome by a great, uplifting sense of joy. If I had a "flour" to act as a bonding agent, then I could take on the challenge of making hamburgers right away, even though I had put it off for later.

A "bonding agent" referred to a food that helps to connect together the minced meat. Normally, you would just use egg yolks or breadcrumbs or something.

Naturally, it was still possible to make hamburgers even without any bonding agent. Heck, I'd heard adding it in was something that was unique to Japan in the first place. I'd also heard people say all sorts of stuff, like "As long as you add salt, you'll be fine," or even, "You don't need to add anything at all. Just mix it all up."

But at any rate, the Tsurumi Restaurant used a bonding agent in theirs, and I had no experience making them without any, so I just couldn't come to grips with the idea of making them that way.

If I *had* a bonding agent, though, well that was a different story.

I could take on steam-grilling or teriyaki anytime I wanted, and I honestly didn't think it would be that much harder than making a stew. So in that case, I wanted to at least give it a try.

Hamburgers were what was referred to as a processed food. It was a type of

cooking that didn't keep the meat in its original form. To me it was pretty much the most standard dish imaginable, but to the people of this alternate world, it was sure to come across as some sort of profound mystery.

Just how much would I surprise Ai Fa if I could pull this off...?

As that thought ran through my head, I could feel my heart throbbing in my chest like a lovesick maiden.

◇

After many twists and turns, it was finally time for dinner on my fifth night in this new world.

"The shape has changed quite a bit, but this is a poitan. It still doesn't have much flavor in and of itself, but if you chew into it alongside meat, it should be plenty passable."

I had placed the sliced onions atop the three little giburgers, and slathered on plenty of the sauce that I made with a fruit wine base. And then there were those round little okonomiyaki-looking baked poitan. They were about 30 centimeters in diameter and roughly one centimeter thick.

"Well then, let's dig in!"

Ai Fa once again ran a finger on her left hand alongside her lips, then muttered something inside her mouth. Then she grabbed her bowl and spoon, and unsurprisingly looked scrutinizingly at the giburgers.

While sneaking a glance at her, I went ahead and scooped up some of a patty with my own wooden spoon.

Yeah, there didn't seem to be any issues in terms of firmness. And I was seeing from the cross-section that it was insanely juicy, so this was looking like it may have turned out really well.

Still, the issue remained of whether or not the ingredients would prove to be compatible. I mean, I couldn't imagine there were that many people out there who would make a burger with boar meat. My guess was that meant boar meat wasn't all that suited to being cooked up as a hamburger.

Boar meat was softer than pork, but that probably only held true when you

were boiling it. I mean, I'm pretty sure the fat content was the reason, but at any rate, boar meat just got softer and softer the more that you boiled it. But if you ate it after using some other cooking process, you'd probably categorize it as a pretty tough meat.

Naturally, if you followed the proper steps when preparing it, it wouldn't end up all that tough. But still, it would probably never be softer than beef or pork.

And besides, beef was considered the easy choice when making a hamburger. The next choice after that was to use a mix of beef and pork, which was quite popular in its own right. I haven't really heard of a pure pork hamburger before, though. And seeing how boars were the ancestors of pigs, their meat was unsurprisingly similar.

So boar meat absolutely wasn't suited to being made into hamburgers, and giba meat had the exact same taste. Just how would a burger made with giba meat turn out, then? Even if I did manage to surprise Ai Fa, would I end up being satisfied with how it turned out? At any rate, that fight was already on.

Using the wooden spoon, I tossed the chunk of giburger I had scooped up into my mouth. The meaty juices were still so hot that it felt like they may end up burning me as they spread through my mouth.

My initial impression was... *That's sweet.*

What the heck? It was seriously sweet. Was boar, no wait, giba meat's fat this sweet?

Alongside that mild sweetness, there was also the slightly quirky taste of the meat, and the fragrance of the fruit wine sauce... Yeah, it was tasty.

Sure enough, the meat had a pretty chewy texture for a hamburger. It was still like this even after I minced it up so carefully...? Still, it wasn't an unpleasant texture. Rather than the sort of thing I'd say was overly tough, it was something that you could really bite into. And when you did bite into it, even more juice came spilling out and filled your mouth with deliciousness.

Ah, but that won't do...

I really did have a much stronger fondness for meat with a quirky taste than most folks. Whether it was boar meat, or lamb, or duck, I loved those sorts of

powerful flavors. And so I earnestly did think this was delicious... but I couldn't really offer an objective opinion.

Seriously though, it was crazy good!

I added in some sliced aria and a heaping helping of sauce, and brought it all into my mouth.

It was delicious. Just so, so tasty...

I'd probably end up thinking exactly the same thing about a boar meat hamburger, I'd imagine.

It was a bit embarrassing giving such high praise to something I made, but it really was good.

If I were to give one critique, it would be that I really would like to try it with thicker patties. As is, the thoroughly cooked outsides just had a lot more relative importance to the dish when compared to the juicy inside. That was the one thing I could think of that was bugging me.

I bit off a chunk of poitan, and sure enough, that was good too.

The ideal would be to have some white rice, but it really was essential to have meat, vegetables, and carbs. Well, that may not be the case in other countries, but it was at least true of the one I was raised in. And it was the case for the house I grew up in, too. You needed meat, carbs, and vegetables. If any of those were lacking, it couldn't be called an ideal meal.

And it had been a while since I had experienced this familiar dull, grainy taste.

I apparently had been craving carbohydrates a lot more than I had thought.

Poitan wasn't as puffy as white bread or naan, and in the end it was like an okonomiyaki without anything in it, not even eggs. But even so, I couldn't help but find it delicious.

I only had one single poitan for my three burgers. The giburgers were pretty rich in flavor, so I got the feeling that I could easily eat two more of the poitan alongside them.

I broke out in an awkward chuckle, thinking on how much I had tried to avoid the poitan. And then I got a cold, "Just what are you laughing about?" back.

That was my first time hearing Ai Fa talk in a little while.

That's no good. I got so absorbed in eating that I stopped paying attention to her.

I reflected a bit on how stubbornly fixated I could be on eating.

"Ah, Ai Fa, what do you think of the taste?"

Looking over her way, I could see that Ai Fa had chewed off more than half of her poitan, and was already finished with her second giburger. Man, she was fast. I only just finished my first one.

After she finished swallowing what was in her mouth, Ai Fa simply responded with, "Tasty."

"I'm glad to hear that! But it would also be nice if you could offer a bit more detailed impression..."

All I got back to my earnest request was a, "Don't want to."

"You don't want to...?"

"I don't feel like telling you my thoughts."

"Huuuuh? Why? Are you still angry about what happened around noontime?"

"Noontime?" she questioned, tilting her head. "Ah. You mean when you lost control of yourself and acted insolently. I had already completely forgotten about that."

"You forgot... Then why won't you tell me your thoughts?"

"Stop asking! If I don't want to tell you, then that's all there is to it!"

And then, an inexplicable phenomenon occurred: Ai Fa hung her head down and seemed to try to cover her beet red face with her bowl.

"Just drop it! Don't look at me!"

I just plain didn't get it.

Well, whatever. Her emotions seemed to be all over the place today, so I'd just have to ask her what she thought some other time. At the very least she seemed to be dodging my questions, but she *did* say it was tasty... That alone

was enough to make me super happy.

While such thoughts were running through my head, an unexpected voice from an unexpected direction said, “Hey, what is that that you’re eating?”

Ai Fa and I both looked in that direction, dumbfounded. It had come from the window beside the stove. It had grown pretty dark out, but I could see a small face staring at us from beyond the bars.

“Hey, hey! It smells really good! Is that giba? What’s that white thing there?”

“Rimee Ruu... I thought I told you not to come near my house.”

When I saw the surprise vanish from Ai Fa’s face as she nonchalantly said that, I calmed down a bit. If she was an acquaintance, then it shouldn’t be a problem. And it’s not like we would do anything shady, anyway.

Still, just what was the deal with this kid? She was short enough that all I could see through the window was her reddish-brown hair and round eyes, so I couldn’t even tell what her face looked like.

“No way! This is my first time seeing you in a while, so why are you being so mean? Hey...! What are you eating? What does it taste like? Who made it? Is that guy your husband, Ai Fa?”

“Don’t be stupid! Why would I go and marry this pale fool?!”

Those words inflicted quite a bit of damage on me.

But... As she was ranting and raving, Ai Fa’s face was redder than I’d ever seen it before. Hmm...

Let’s just go ahead and say those two things cancelled each other out.

“Hey, who exactly is that kid?” I asked Ai Fa, but the girl herself was the one to respond.

“I’m Rimee Ruu! The youngest daughter of the Ruu household! And also, Ai Fa’s friend!”

“Stop messing around. I don’t recall ever becoming friends with you, Rimee Ruu,” Ai Fa said in an even chillier voice than usual as she scooped up the last patty with her spoon. “I’m not fond of noisy brats like you. Now hurry on

home.”

So then... The girl who called herself Rimee Ruu stared blankly for a second, and then an instant later, exploded with a, “Bwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!” and started sobbing uncontrollably.

“H-Hey, Ai Fa, you shouldn’t act so immature towards—” I started to chide, but the wailing drowned out my voice.

She seriously could cry. I mean, I could even feel my eardrums pounding.

“But I looooooove you Ai Faaaaaaaaaaaa!” I somehow managed to make out from within her sobs.

At any rate, that was how my meeting with the youngest daughter of the Ruu family, Rimee Ruu, went. Little did I know how it would affect my fate...

4

“See, I really love Ai Fa, and I loved Gil Fa too. When Gil Fa was still alive, he and Ai Fa played with me lots and lots!”

A few minutes had passed.

The mysterious young visitor, Rimee Ruu, was jammed in between Ai Fa and me, smiling widely as she talked. It was hard to imagine that she had just been bawling her eyes out.

I had invited her into the house and tried to console her to get her to stop sobbing, but those tears kept on flowing from her big old eyes. And yet she stopped in an instant when Ai Fa said, “I was lying when I said I hated you,” while rubbing her temple like she had a headache.

“But still, it isn’t a good idea for any member of the Ruu family to come near me, when I’ve earned the animosity of the Suun clan. I must have explained that to you countless times by now.”

“We’re not afraid of the Suun family! My papa is always saying so! And they won’t last long with that dummy of an heir they’ve got, either! The Ruu clan will be leading the people of the forest’s edge before too much longer!”

“The fact that the head of your household, Donda Ruu, is that sort of person only makes the matter that much more important. If your two clans fight, it could lead to the destruction of our entire settlement!”

Once Rimee Ruu’s tears had stopped, Ai Fa started acting even colder than usual. But in spite of that, there was a bright smile on the young girl’s face. She sure did look cute...

She must have been around seven or eight years old. I mean, she certainly was small. She only reached up to around my chest. Her hair was short and reddish-brown, and was fluffy in a way that reminded me of a dandelion. Her skin was naturally a dark, chocolaty sort of color, and her eyes sparkled the hue of a clear spring sky.

Her clothes were made of a beautifully patterned cloth and wound from her right shoulder to down past her hips, making for a little miniature one-shouldered dress. Her slender legs and arms were completely exposed, but she was still just a child so there was nothing wrong with that.

And hanging in front of her chest was a necklace made using three fangs and tusks. There was no way such a young child went out hunting giba, so I figured it either had to be some sort of amulet, or was just purely for decoration.

“Hey, you’re an outsider, aren’t you?” Rimee Ruu asked, looking at me with her big round eyes. They really were a pretty shade of blue. And though they were both blue, they were completely different from Ai Fa’s eyes, which were a deeper color that sometimes reminded me of a burning flame.

“Supposedly a ’spicious outsider is staying at the Fa house. And he may be a forn... foreigner who will cause us trouble, so until we know who he is, I shouldn’t go there. That’s what my papa told me!”

“Hmm. And yet you went and came right here?” I responded in a kindly manner, despite the fact that my attention was half on the giburger steadily losing its heat.

“I didn’t! But then today, I saw you wearing Gil Fa’s clothes! I thought that meant you weren’t an outsider anymore!”

I’d already more or less figured as such, but it seemed that Gil Fa really was

the name of Ai Fa's father. At the moment, I was having trouble figuring if it was alright or not to keep throwing his name out there so lightly.

"Hey! Since you gave him clothes from our people, that means he's part of your household, right? So that makes him your husband, doesn't it, Ai Fa?"

"As if I was following that ancient custom! It was an eyesore always seeing him look so filthy, so I simply lent him some spare clothing!"

Yeah, that stung. But still, her face was beet red. I prayed that wasn't purely out of anger, to offset the pain.

"Rimee Ruu, it's time for you to leave! I have no intention of being the spark that kicks off a battle between the Suun and Ruu families. Leave this place, and never return."

"I don't wanna! My papa only told me not to go near outsiders. So if this guy isn't an outsider anymore, then it's fine," Rimee Ruu responded with a chuckle.

The red-faced Ai Fa simply responded, "Do as you please," and picked up the half-eaten plate of food. All of a sudden, the little girl's face lit up with curiosity.

"Hey, what's that? Why does it smell like that? Is it giba meat? And what's that flat thing that's the color of a poitan?"

Rather than responding, Ai Fa silently resumed eating. I reached out to do the same, but the young girl's head suddenly turned towards me.

"You two carried a whole giba back before, right? Is this the meat from that giba? Why is it in a shape like this? And where'd the poitan soup go?"

"Um, you see... I made this. It may be a weird shape, but this is giba meat, and this one is a poitan."

I didn't have the skills necessary to ignore such an innocent child, so I ended up responding as such. The look of curiosity in Rimee Ruu's eyes grew even stronger, and the words I had been expecting ended up coming out of her tiny mouth next.

"What does it taste like? I want to try it!"

While holding back a sigh, I turned and looked at Ai Fa.

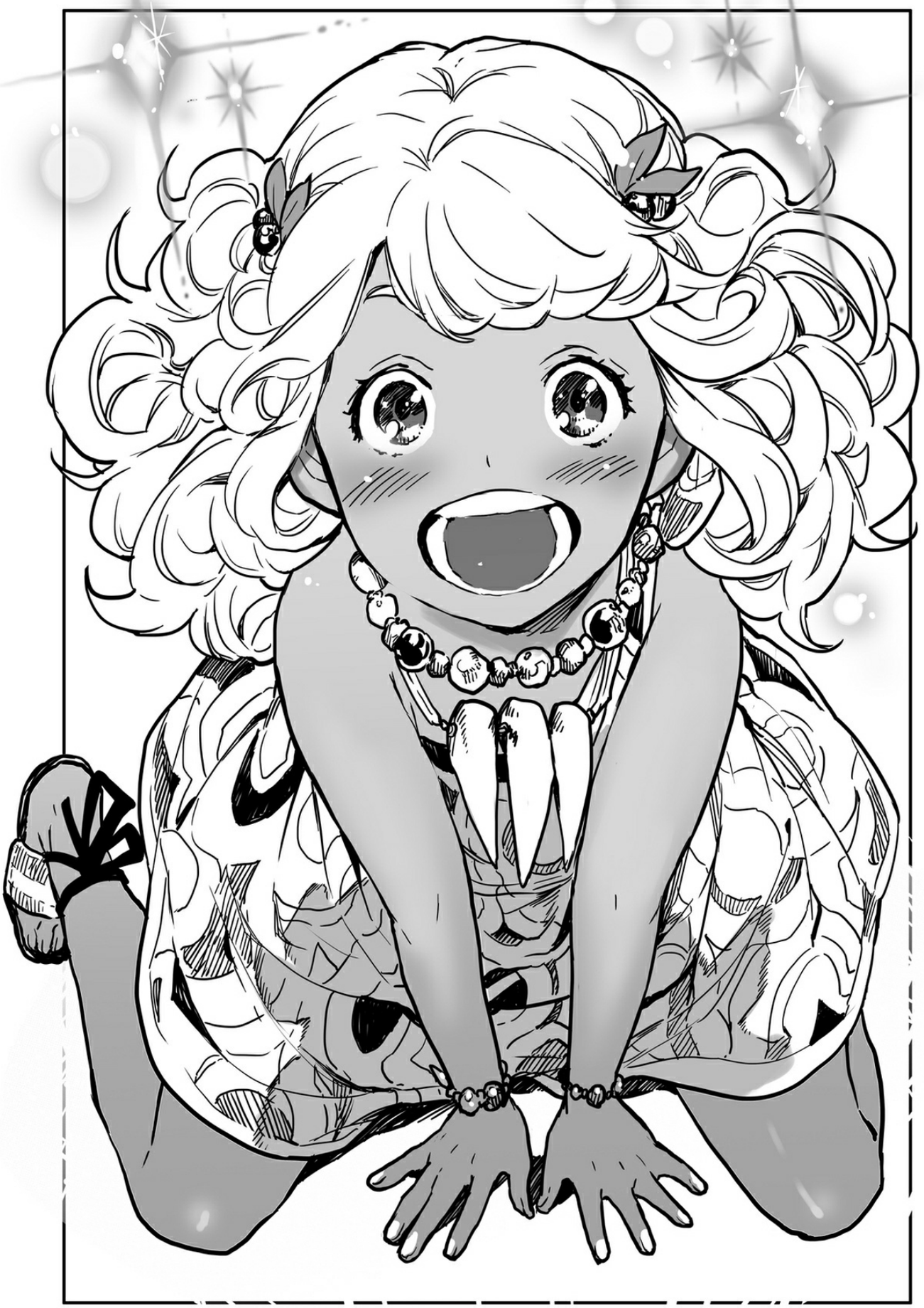
“Hey, Ai Fa. Is there any taboo about giving food to people from another household?”

“As if such a thing would be a taboo...” Ai Fa responded with a look of extreme displeasure, but at least for now she didn’t stop me.

Well, I didn’t mind then. I could be a bit of a glutton, but not *that* much of one. Besides, as a chef, getting a third-party’s opinion was incredibly valuable.

“Alright then, go ahead and have a taste. It’s completely different than usual giba meat, so don’t be too shocked, okay?” I said, offering her my plate. Then the young girl smiled and opened wide with an “Aah.”

Didn’t she have any wariness about her at all?



While sensing Ai Fa's cold glare on my right cheek, I cut a mouthful sized bit of burger and sliced aria in half, then spooned it into her little mouth.

The girl's tiny mouth closed shut, and she started to chew. Suddenly, her big, round eyes grew even rounder.

"Um, how's it taste?"

"Aah."

That's no surprise.

Well, I suppose I could let her have a second bite. But any more than that and it might have an impact on my nutrition, you know?

As that thought passed through my mind, I broke her off a bit of poitan, too.

Chomp.

Nom nom.

Gulp.

Her eyes went wide.

It was rare finding a kid who made so many faces that perfectly matched such varied sound effects.

"It's..."

"Hmm?"

"It's delicious!"

With that, she grabbed hold of me.

Ah, so it felt this shocking to suddenly get grabbed by someone who lost control of themself, huh? I really will have to apologize to Ai Fa for doing that.

No, wait, this was no time for that!

Rimee Ruu's tiny fingers had a tight grasp on my t-shirt, and she was now shaking my body with an amount of force that was hard to imagine coming from a child.

"It's delicious! Seriously yummy! How is it this tasty?! This is giba meat,

right?! So how is it so soft?! Come on, tell me!”

It took so much effort to squeeze that praise out of Ai Fa the first night, but now it was being fired off non-stop like it was nothing.

But still, it was high praise, and as a chef that was definitely nice to receive.

And man, she was way too strong. Did people in a hunting community really start building up their muscles differently when they were this small?

“Will you please stop that? You’re interrupting the meal,” Ai Fa butted in, saving me. She then grabbed hold of the girl by the scruff of her neck and easily pulled her off, apparently having finished cleaning her plate at some point.

“A meal is a means to stay alive. Did the head of your house not teach you that to interrupt one is taboo, as to do so is to threaten the life of another in a way?”

“I’m sorry...”

Rimee Ruu quickly bowed her head, still half suspended in the air by Ai Fa. Then in no time at all, a downhearted expression shot across her face.

“It really was yummy. Thanks. And I’m sorry for getting in the way. I...” she said, then tilted her head to the side suddenly, looking rather cute. She really was an expressive kid.

“I don’t know your name. What is it?”

“I’m Asuta Tsurumi. If that’s too hard to say, you can just go with Asuta.”

“C-Churu...? Okay, Asuta. I, Rimee Ruu, offer a sincere apology to Asuta of the Fa household.”

“No, it’s fine. You just surprised me is all. And thanks for the praise. Oh, and thanks for stopping her too, Ai Fa.”

“Hmph,” Ai Fa let out a curt snort, and she sat back down where she was originally seated.

Rimee Ruu sat right down where Ai Fa released her, but then she wrapped her arms around her little legs and didn’t say a word.

I don’t really get the people of the forest’s edge...

Still, though she may have acted pretty wild, this was the first person of the forest's edge that I'd met after five days in this other world who didn't avoid Ai Fa. The rest of them were too afraid of the Suun family to have anything to do with her. In comparison, this girl was showing such open fondness towards her that it was hard not to smile. It really wouldn't be so bad to get along with her a little more openly...

In the end, though, neither of the two girls said another word, so I just sat there and silently kept on eating. It had gotten pretty cold, but it was still tasty. The dish had turned out great, at least in my opinion.

"That was good. Now then... It's gotten pretty dark out, so will you really be alright heading home on your own, Rimee Ruu?" I asked. In response, the girl suddenly looked up from her cradled knees, making a face as if she had just remembered something.

Just when I thought she was about to stand up, she instead planted both legs on the rug, then presented both of her arms to me.

"I, Rimee Ruu of the Ruu household, have a request for you, Asuta of the Fa household! Please, won't you lend me your strength?"

Troubled by the sudden question, I looked to Ai Fa out of the corner of my eye. She was seated with her knees up, furrowing her brow in displeasure.

"Please grant the elder of the Ruu household, Jiba Ruu, the blessing of your different cooking! Jiba Ruu, she... At this rate, she's going to die soon!"

The tears started pouring from Rimee Ruu's big blue eyes once again. She wasn't sobbing wildly this time, though. Instead, she seemed to be bearing it, not letting out a sound as they rolled down her face.

5

"Do you intend to go to the Ruu house, Asuta?"

It was nighttime now.

"I'll come again tomorrow morning," Rimee Ruu had said with a bow, and then she left. "You can wait till then to give me your answer. I'll spend tonight

getting my family to say yes," she added on the way out.

After placing the utensils and cookware we had used into the metal pot, my work for the night was done. Normally I'd spend some time talking to Ai Fa, and then drift off into sleep. But this time, Ai Fa had sat there, expressionless and silent, for a long while.

I really did need to learn the common sense of this other world. So before sleeping, I'd ask her about all sorts of things like the vow held by the people of the forest's edge and their taboos, or anecdotes about the kingdom and gods, or about the Genos post town I still hadn't seen. But today, I didn't try to ask her anything.

And when she finally did talk, it was just to ask me that question. She was sitting with her back against the wall, and her gaze was fixed on the darkness out past the window, rather than trying to look at me.

The stove had died down, leaving only the candles to light the dark room. In that light, the side of Ai Fa's face looked strangely cold. As I stared at it, I quietly responded, "I was thinking... that I'd like to."

To let the elder of the Ruu household, Jiba Ruu, taste my food... Rimee Ruu's request had come out as a bit of a mess, but it wasn't all that confusing of a matter.

As an 80 year old woman, Jiba Ruu had lost almost all of her teeth, and was no longer able to eat proper meals. For now, the most she could do was wash down finely minced giba meat and vegetables with soup, and apparently she could handle less and less each day.

"There's no point to living on by having to constantly fill the inside of your mouth with this awful muddy soup..."

Apparently she had spent each and every day saying things like that, tears streaming down her face.

Just a few years ago she had been happy and healthy, but now her heart was completely withering away too. Just how much must Rimee Ruu, the youngest daughter of the family, have suffered?

When I thought about her pain, it made me really want to go.

“But you can’t give your approval, right, Ai Fa?”

“The Suun family leads the people of the forest’s edge, but the Ruu family is no lesser in terms of size. And there has been animosity between them for generations,” Ai Fa responded in an emotionless voice.

“Animosity?”

“Over 20 years ago, one of the Suun clan kidnapped a girl who was supposed to marry into the main Ruu house. The men of the Ruu house charged the Suun home in a frenzy, but the former leader of the Suun clan said that girl had committed infidelity with someone from another house and was punished for her crime, and then presented her corpse to them.”

I was at a loss for words.

“In all likelihood, she killed herself before they could have their way with her. But as there was no proof, all the Ruu men could do was sheathe their blades while muttering curses. After all, a battle between the Suun and Ruu would effectively mean civil war for the people of the forest’s edge, and perhaps our total annihilation. But if the Suun family hadn’t returned the girl, the Ruu family would have taken up blades. They wouldn’t do that for the sake of a corpse, though. So the clans cut their ties, and even now the animosity between them remains.”

“That story just sickens me. So the Suun family is a clan of good-for-nothings, then?”

“Well, at the very least, it seems the bloodline of the family head can’t produce a man who’s a decent a human being,” Ai Fa muttered, her expression and tone unchanging. “And then two years back, after my quarrel with Diga Suun began, the head of the Ruu clan, Donda Ruu, came and asked me to marry into his family.”

“M-Marry...?”

“He said with a laugh that if I did so the Suun family couldn’t lay a hand on me, and if they tried to anyway, he’d grind them into dust. But when I turned down that offer, my relationships with the Ruu family were also cut off.”

“Ah... So that’s what you were talking about when you said you didn’t want to

be the spark that kicks off a battle between them.”

“Even without the backing of the Ruu clan, I won’t go and yield to someone like Diga Suun. I don’t intend to have anything to do with either side.”

“I see. I get it, now. So if I lend my support to the Ruu family while being under your care, that wouldn’t exactly be something you’d be happy about.”

With that, I gave a heavy sigh.

Ai Fa remained looking away, but her lips twisted into a scornful smile. That grin was just way too unlike her.

“But even so, you want to help Rimee Ruu, don’t you? That’s the type of man you are, Asuta.”

“Hmm? Well, yeah... She seems like she’s a good kid, and I’d also like to help her grandmother remember the joy of eating, too.”

“That’s what I thought. In that case, do as you please.”

“Huh?”

“It’s nothing complicated. If you want to help Rimee Ruu and Jiba Ruu, then just cut all ties with me. Then you just need to rely on the Ruu family. See, simple, isn’t it?”

“What’re you saying? I can’t go changing partners so willy-nilly, like some kind of hussy.”

I shrugged my shoulders, still completely unable to grasp how Ai Fa truly felt.

“It’s not like I’m *that* worried about it. It’s a shame, but I’ll go ahead and turn down Rimee Ruu’s request.”

“...Why?”

“No matter how cute of a kid she may be, I only just met Rimee Ruu, and I’ve never even seen her grandmother. You may think me cold-hearted for it, but I’m not willing to support them strongly enough that it puts you in a bad position.”

“But why...?” Ai Fa asked, whipping around. There was a look of utter shock frozen on her face. I couldn’t help but smirk at the way that she was acting

more and more unlike her usual self.

“I mean, you’re more important to me than someone I only just met and a complete stranger. Geez, don’t make me go and say something so embarrassing!”

Ai Fa didn’t respond.

“What? It’d be a problem if I got involved with the Ruu clan, right?”

“As you’re at least temporarily considered a member of the Fa clan, if you were to help the Ruu clan, then it’s possible that Donda Ruu would repay that debt by once again offering to have me marry into the family. And if I were to turn them down again it would be like dragging their family’s name through the mud, which would truly earn me their animosity.”

“That old guy sure sounds like a pain in the butt... By the way, aren’t there any charming young gentlemen in the main Ruu house? I mean, we’re talking about Rimee Ruu’s big brothers, right?” I asked, half out of jealousy and half out of pure curiosity.

The response I got back was a blunt, “I decided to live my life by hunting giba. Women gather herbs, tan hides, and simply wait for the men to return home, which doesn’t suit me. Instead, I plan to live my life in the forest as a hunter, and die there too. That was the decision I made when my father, Gil, passed away.”

“Hmm... What a waste, when you’ve got such a pretty face.”

She didn’t respond to my teasing. Instead I just saw some unknown passion in her eyes, flickering like a will-o’-the-wisp.

“At any rate, it’s not anything for you to worry yourself over. I’ll turn down Rimee Ruu’s request and we’ll keep on going as we have been. I mean, it doesn’t seem like the people of the Ruu clan will get angry with us over that.”

Rimee Ruu had said something like, “I’ll talk my papa into it!” In other words, this whole thing was her idea alone, and the other members of her family would likely be against the idea of seeking help from some suspicious outsider.

“Why...? If you just cut ties with me, you would be able to do as you pleased.

So why won't you do so, then? And it should be far more desirable for you to rely on the Ruu clan rather than a loner like me."

"That wouldn't be desirable in the least. You've helped me out so much, so I can't stand even the idea of leaving you like this to run off with some complete strangers. Hey... You've been acting odd for a while now, haven't you? Just what exactly do you want me to do?"

Ai Fa didn't answer me. So I stood up, and plopped myself back down right in front of her. Though that passionate flame still burned in her eyes, Ai Fa looked down.

"Ai Fa... If I'm nothing but a burden to you and you want me to leave here and now, then that's what I'll have to do. But that's not how it is, right? If it was, then you could just come out and say so."

"..."

"I don't understand, so please tell me what you're thinking. I want to hear it in your own words. I'll base my actions on what you want me to do most."

Ai Fa slowly lifted her face, and looked straight at me. With that violent flame still in them... her eyes started to water up just a bit.

"It's been two years now since my father, Gil Fa, passed away," she whispered with her cherry blossom-colored lips. "Up until then, both my father and I got rather close to Rimee Ruu. We didn't have any official relationship with the Ruu clan, but I had met Jiba Ruu, who doted on her granddaughter, many times since I was very little."

"I see..." I responded, my heart breaking upon seeing her eyes wet with tears.

Ai Fa furrowed her brows, looking a little pained.

"I don't wish to enter into a relationship with the Ruu household. But even so... It would pain me to see Rimee Ruu and Jiba Ruu suffer."

"Then... Do you want me to cut all ties with you, and then help Rimee Ruu and them as someone completely unrelated?"

The instant I said that, I was grabbed by the collar. Her eyes that were like a blue flame glared at me, almost as if they were eating into me. And then... The

tears that had been pooling in those eyes started to slide silently down her silky cheeks.

"I..." she started, her voice shaking a bit. "...I don't know what I want."

Why didn't she know? If I just cut my ties with her, then Rimee and Jiba Ruu would be saved. If she wanted to lend them support from the shadows without directly becoming involved with the Ruu family, then that would be the only option. But...

Ai Fa's fingers were still firmly gripping my collar. It was as if she was worrying that if she let go, I would just up and disappear.

"I see," I said, placing my hands on Ai Fa's shoulders.

I could feel the warmth coming off her smooth, exposed shoulders... and also the way that they were trembling ever so slightly. Without even thinking, I pulled her in closer. Ai Fa's slender body fell up against my chest, offering no resistance whatsoever.

"Well if you don't know, then there's no helping that. I mean, I'm not exactly sure of the best path, myself."

That smell of Ai Fa's that I loved so much gently tickled my nose. As the scent filled my heart, I quietly came to a realization.

"But I know clearly what I want most. If you won't tell me how to proceed, then is it alright if I choose what to do?"

Ai Fa didn't say a word.

"I want to help out Rimee Ruu. However, I also don't want to have to leave you. So as a freeloader of your household, I want to fairly and openly help those people you hold dear," I said, giving Ai Fa's complexly done up blonde hair a gentle pat. "Who cares about the animosity between the Suun and Ruu clans? I mean, do you really have to abandon people you care about over such a stupid grudge? Just leave the heavy matter of the future of the settlement up to the old fogeys, since it's their responsibility anyway. It's not right to bury your own feelings over something like that."

"..."

“I’ll save them. As if I care about what Rimee Ruu’s father will say about that. And if he starts bugging you about marriage again, then tell him to bring you a man who’s even tastier than any giba first!”

Ai Fa didn’t respond to what I had said. She just kept on clinging to my collar as her tears streamed down onto my t-shirt.

Chapter 5: The Ruu Clan

1

And so, we ended up heading to the Ruu's main house. I was glad that was what we decided on, but it wasn't as if there weren't any issues whatsoever. I first learned of that the next morning, when Rimee Ruu showed up as promised.

When I returned from cleaning and started working on my old man's knife she suddenly popped up. And when I told her, "I'll help," she broke out in a huge smile of pure joy and yelled out, "Thank you!" And then she added, "In that case, come to my house before sunset! I'll be sure to get the ingredients all ready!"

I couldn't help but tilt my head with a, "Huh?" upon hearing that. "What do you mean, 'ingredients'? I was planning on cooking here and then delivering the finished dish."

"You can't! You need to eat food in the house where it was prepared!"

I didn't really get it so I asked for more details, and apparently that was part of the vow taken by the people of the forest's edge. Or to be more precise, it said, "When treating someone to food, you must eat the same dish in the same place as them."

In other words, it was probably meant to prohibit people from harming others using cooking.

"Hmm. It still hasn't fully clicked with me, but does that mean I just need to go to the Ruu household, cook food, and have your grandmother eat it along with me?"

It added a bit of pressure, cooking in a place I was visiting for the first time, but that wasn't enough to discourage me. The real issue was still to come, though.

"Yeah. But it's not just Granny Jiba. It'll be tough because there are a lot of

people in my house, but I'll try hard to help!"

"Huh? So I have to make enough not just for your grandma, but the rest of your family too?"

"Yeah. I mean, that's what it means to borrow someone else's stove, right?"

"Is that how it is?"

"Of course it is! You're really weird, Asuta!"

I'd finally been recognized by the girl of seven or eight years old as a weirdo. Come on, give me a break... I mean, I just haven't studied all the customs of the people of the forest's edge just yet.

"Alright, got it. So I just need to make food for the whole family, right? It's not like I don't want to, and it's honestly more worthwhile to cook for a large group of people anyway. So, how many people are there in the Ruu household?"

"Um..." Rimee Ruu murmured, and then she started counting on her fingers. By the time she had folded down the little fingers on both of her hands, I couldn't stop myself from thinking, *Oh, come on!*

"So, counting me, it's 13 people!"

"T-Thirteen, huh? That's quite a large family."

"Ah, but Kota Ruu is still just one year old and only drinks milk, so you just need to prepare for 12. And the other women in the family who were supposed to be in charge of the stove will help out!"

"12 people, huh? Well, if that's all then I should be able to manage. There's no problem if we go with the dish from last night for everyone, right?"

"Yeah, of course! I'm really looking forward to it, too!"

"Hmm... Well, thinking more on it, just feeding your grandma this one time wouldn't have solved the issue here anyway. If I give the women of the Ruu family a lecture on how to make a delicious meal, then that would make things easier from tomorrow on..."

"What's a 'lecture'?"

"Ah, well, I can't be manning the Ruu stove each and every day, right? So I've

got to teach you and the rest of the women how to cook tasty food for your grandma.”

“Huh?! We’ll be able to make food that yummy?!”

“The way I managed the heat last night was a little tricky, though. Hmm... Ah, if you have a family of 13, then you probably have more then one pot, right?”

“Pots? We have four of them.”

“Four?! That’s great!”

Ultimately, I ended up getting a little worked up. I’d be using four pots to make food for 12 people... No wait, adding in me and Ai Fa, it was 14 in total.

I was up against an old lady with hardly any teeth, as well as a powerful man in the settlement who was likely less than fond of outsiders. Honestly, I could feel my spirit as a chef getting a bit fired up by this development.

“Got it. Well then, I’ll prepare the giba meat over here, so could you make sure we’ve got enough aria and poitan for everyone? And then we’ll also need rock salt and fruit wine.”

“Huh? But we’ve got lots of meat at our home, though.”

“The meat’s the most important part. If I get the chance, I’d love to instruct you all on how to prepare giba meat so it’s nice and tasty, too.”

In the back of my mind, I had already started plotting out how the cooking would go. As I did, Rimee Ruu walked on over my way and timidly grabbed onto the hem of my clothing.

“Thank you so much, Asuta. Now Granny Jiba won’t have to keep sobbing and saying how she wants to die. I’m really grateful you’re doing something so big for us.”

“Don’t cry, you big dummy. I mean, it’s not even like it’s a guarantee just yet that everything will go smoothly.”

“No, it’ll be fine! Your cooking really is yummy!”

Then Rimee Ruu turned to Ai Fa, who had been silently working on her blade in a corner of the room.

“Thank you too, Ai Fa! Once Granny Jiba’s all better, we’ll all play together again! Well then, see you this afternoon!”

“Ah, my cooking needs some extra time to prepare, so is it alright if I show up a bit earlier?” I added, in place of the still silent Ai Fa.

“Yeah! No problem!” Rimee Ruu responded with a brilliant smile, and then she left the house.

Geez, that girl was a bundle of energy in a completely different way than Ai Fa. I couldn’t help but break out in a smile, too.

“What are you grinning to yourself about? You really are gross.”

“Oh hey, you finally said something, Ai Fa! What you said may have been incredibly rude, but I’m still a little relieved!”

“You’re so tiresome...”

She just kept on carefully looking over her gleaming, silver blade, not even so much as glancing my way as she sat with her back against the wall. And her face remained every bit as expressionless as always, too. Well, she showed her weakness to someone like me just last night, which I’m sure she was seriously regretting. I could certainly sense something like that about her.

“Still, I never figured we would get pressured into sitting down to dinner with them, too. You must have known it from the start though, right?”

“Of course. That’s what it means to man someone else’s stove.”

Hmm... That was a splendid custom, having some responsibility behind manning the stove.

“That means I’ll definitely be meeting Rimee Ruu’s father face to face, though... You’ll be coming with me, right?”

“What are you, an idiot? You think I’d send off someone who doesn’t even properly know the ways of this world to someone else’s house, all on his own?!” she practically roared as she glared at my legs. “...If you don’t intend to cut ties with me, it’s only natural that I accompany you.”

“Right. You’re really saving me. I mean, I’d feel pretty lonely on my own.”

I walked a few steps closer to Ai Fa, and sat down so that I was just barely out of reach. Her gaze remained fixed in place, so it fell somewhere between my feet and my chest.

When I planted my hands on the floor and looked up, though, rather than her gaze, it was the tip of her blade that pointed at me.

“I’m sorry. It was just a joke.”

“I can’t believe you... Do you honestly think that you can man the Ruu family stove like that?”

The tip of her blade pulled back, but her glare remained every bit as sharp.

To be honest, this was the first time since waking up that I’d locked eyes with Ai Fa today.

Sometimes her face was really easy to read, and right now she was clearly getting worked up. She soon declared in a harsh tone, “To man a house’s stove means to take that family’s very lives into your hands. So if a member of the Ruu clan becomes sick from your cooking, neither you nor I will get off lightly. We may have both ears cleaved off, or all our teeth broken, or even be exiled from the forest’s edge!”

“Huh... I’m surprised you gave such an important task to me like it was nothing.”

“I don’t give the slightest damn about such old-fashioned customs! Many of the people of the forest’s edge still do, though!”

“Okay, I get it. But there’s no way that I’d give anyone food poisoning. Just who do you think I am?”

I had intended to get a quip like, “A 17 year old chef trainee?” back, but Ai Fa just bit down on her pink lips and didn’t say anything for a while. Her face was flushed beet red, and she was wearing the expression of an unruly child.

However, this was all very much just like her. Compared to how she was all down in the dumps and acting unlike herself last night, this way was far more adorable.

Anyway, after a rather long period of silence, Ai Fa muttered, “I was just

telling you not to take this too lightly. I'm more aware of your skill than anyone. I'm sure you're capable of saving both Rimee and Jiba Ruu. But it's also still very possible for you to let your guard down and get tripped up."

"Whoa... I'm honestly a little moved, here."

I'd love to move a little closer and take her by the hand if I could, but with the way she was today she may really kill me if I did that, so I restrained myself.

"If you're willing to say all that, then I'm sure I'll be fine. Don't worry, I swear on what little honor I have that I'll save them." And then I dared to add, "For your sake too, Ai Fa."

I'd be wielding my kitchen knife for the sake of people who were precious to Ai Fa. As if I'd let my guard down or get conceited in a situation like this!

As I looked at Ai Fa's perpetually angry face, I could feel a burning-hot fighting spirit running through my entire body.

I would complete my task, no matter what. All for the sake of the first person I thought of as precious in this other world.

2

"Wow... So this is the Ruu clan's headquarters, huh?" I said in admiration without even thinking about it.

Judging from the position of the sun, I estimated that the main Ruu home was about an hour south of the Fa house. There wasn't any big imposing building there, though. In exchange, there were a greater number of buildings clustered together here than anything I had seen yet in this world. Naturally, there was still plenty of space between them, but the difference between this and how other dwellings were spaced out was pretty easy to notice.

In the center of the buildings was a yellow, trodden down space that looked like a sort of plaza. The total area was about half the size of a school's grounds, and surrounding it were seven wooden houses. And each of those homes were at least twice the size of Ai Fa's.

Even if the family has 13 people in it, they still shouldn't need this many houses, I thought, tilting my head.

“The one to succeed the family becomes the new head of the clan, while their brothers take wives and live in a new residence nearby. Most of these belong to such brothers, I’d say,” Ai Fa explained while holding a bundle of five kilos of giba thigh meat carefully wrapped up in a pseudo-rubber tree leaf.

I gave a nod and said, “I see,” holding a similarly wrapped 5 kilo bundle of shoulder roast. “So what about this plaza in the center? It seems big enough that you could probably hold an athletic meet here.”

“An ‘athletic meet’? This space is meant for wedding or funeral services. If you gathered everyone related to the Ruu family, without a doubt you would end up with more than 100 people.”

So of the 500 people of the forest’s edge, one fifth of them were related to the Ruu family? Well, if you think of it as just being a settlement of 500 people, I suppose it’d be full of relatives in no time at all without fresh blood coming in.

“Anyway, that’s enough idle chatter. Let’s get going,” Ai Fa said and got moving into the plaza, with me following along after her. When we reached the center of the plaza, a small figure came darting our way from out of the shadow of the middle of those seven buildings.

“Ai Fa! Asuta! Welcome to the Ruu home! You really did come early, huh?”

Naturally, this was Rimee Ruu.

By the way, the sun was currently midway between its zenith and when it started to set. By my estimate, it was probably a bit past 3 PM.

“Is it still too early? I was just thinking I’d like to have some leeway for getting things done.”

“You’re fine! Oh, and let me hold onto your steel!”

Ai Fa silently handed over her blade and knife. I hadn’t considered this, so I was left feeling a bit flustered.

“Hey, Rimee Ruu... I wanted to cook using my own knife, but is that not going to work out?”

“Hmm? We have plenty of knives for cutting meat, though.”

“No, you see, mine’s made a bit differently,” I said, pulling out my knife from

its sheath at my hip like I was in a yakuza movie or something.

By the way, back in Japan wearing a colorful vest over a t-shirt, with my waist to my shoes covered all in white, and a white towel wrapped around my head would be considered a rather unique sort of hybrid fashion. I really would have liked to undertake this challenge in the pure white outfit chefs prided themselves on, but I ultimately ended up deciding it was best not to play up how I was a foreigner too much, resulting in this ensemble.

Anyway, Rimee Ruu looked over my knife with great curiosity, and then let out a, “Hmm...” and tilted her head. “Then just let me hold it until we get to the stove! I can’t show you around the house while you have a weapon, after all!”

I gave a sigh of relief, and then handed the young girl the kitchen knife.

While reverently holding a large blade, two small knives, and my kitchen knife in her little hands, Rimee Ruu said, “Well then, follow me!” and turned around.

There was no telling what may happen, but at any rate I stood at the entrance to the Ruu household. The people we ran into between the entrance and the back of the building, though... were all soft, supple women.

Right, I suppose the men must all be out in the forest at this time of day.

I still compared pretty darn pathetically to them, while Ai Fa looked perfectly normal, but at any rate, we both soon found ourselves with six women standing in a row in front of us.

“I brought some visitors! This is Ai Fa and Asuta of the Fa clan!”

None of them so much as hesitated to shoot curiosity-filled gazes my way. I’d been politely ignored by everyone for the last five days, so this frankly came as unexpected. Rather than being treated as if I wasn’t there, I was actually the center of attention.

There were thirteen people in the family, and it wasn’t strange at all for half of them to be women. Still, this was kind of overwhelming, somehow.

There were three married women wearing a single long cloth outfit each. The other three were all unmarried, with long hair and only their chests and waists covered.

One of the married women was an old lady. However, she didn't seem to be the Granny Jiba I had heard so much about. After all, she was pleasantly plump and still seemed to have plenty of energy about her. Plus, the smell of animal fat was positively wafting off of her.

Another of the married women was middle-aged. She must have been about my old man's age. She looked to have a seriously healthy and robust physique, and on top of that she was also pretty tall. Honestly, she was giving off the impression of a dyed-in-wool mother.

The rest of the group, meanwhile, were still young. Two of them seemed to be older than me, both looking to be somewhere around 20. Of those two, one of them was wearing a long outfit and was cradling a very small baby.

Then there was one who looked to be around my age, and one who looked to be younger.

That added up to six of them in total. Adding in Rimee Ruu and the baby brought the total up to eight.

"That's Granny Tito Min, and next to her is my mama, Mia Lea. And then there's my brother Jiza's wife Sati Lea, and her baby Kota. And lastly there's my big sisters, Vina, Reina, and Lala!"

"Hey, don't just throw them all out there at—" I started, only for my heart to skip a beat. "Hey, did you just say Reina?"

"Yes?"

The girl who seemed to be about my age tilted her head, looking confused. Her hair was black, a somewhat unusual color for the people of the forest's edge, and she had it done up into two braids. The way she was short and compact with a totally innocent expression on her face reminded me of Rimee Ruu... And sure enough, she had dark skin and blue eyes.



Well, that's no surprise. Seriously, what was I thinking?

This girl just happened to have the same name as my childhood friend is all. And she was completely different from the Reina I knew, anyway. My old friend had a more childish face, and she wore her hair short. Plus she just plain wasn't this much of a beauty. The only real similarity was that they both only came up to about my shoulders.

"Sorry, it's nothing. I just happen to know someone with the same name, so I reacted without thinking."

"Oh, my. You're acquainted with someone who shares my name?"

The way she broke out in a positively cherubic smile was just like Rimee Ruu, too.

Ah, my Reina could probably pull off a smile like that, as well. Actually, the way that she was more innocent and childish than her age would imply was also a lot like this girl and Rimee Ruu.

"I am the head of the Fa clan, Ai Fa, and I have come here together with this man, Asuta. At Rimee Ruu's request, we have been invited to man your home's stove," Ai Fa declared, using a somewhat stiffer tone than usual.

The old woman who smelled of animal fat responded, "Welcome, Ai Fa and Asuta of the Fa clan," her voice deep yet gentle in a way that perfectly suited her appearance. "The Ruu family welcomes you. Lala, take her hunter's cloak."

"Huh? Me?!" said the girl who looked to be the youngest, sounding clearly displeased. She must have been around 13 or 14. She had a stubborn look on her boyish face, and her limbs and torso were slender, but she was actually a bit taller than that Reina girl. Her hair was a more brilliant shade of red than Rimee Ruu's and was done up into a ponytail, and her eyes were a vivid blue that was like the color of the sea.

Although she was reluctant, the girl named Lala approached Ai Fa and took her cloak. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw that Tito Min granny giving a wide grin.

"You said you wanted to start working the stove as soon as possible, so we

hurried up and dealt with the fat already. We'll leave the rest up to you, though. Um, who was supposed to be in charge of the stove today, again...?"

"Me, Granny Tito Min, and big sis Reina!"

"Ah, that's right. Me, Rimee, and Reina will help you out."

"Got it. Thank you!"

This honestly felt like something of an anticlimax. I'd worked myself up to be plunging into enemy territory, but these people... I mean, they all seemed totally gentle and downright friendly.

The only one who didn't look to be having a good time was that red-haired Lala girl, as everyone else was wearing wide grins. The difference between them and the people I met at the river where I did the washing or along the way there was positively striking.

They seriously were calm and composed despite being faced with Ai Fa, who had once turned down a request from the head of their clan to marry into the family, and some stranger from a foreign country (actually another world entirely).

"Um... There's something I'd like to confirm before all that..." a strangely coquettish voice called out. It had come from the younger girl who was still older than me, but didn't have a baby. Her long chestnut-colored hair ran down in a straight line over her right shoulder. And her body, with only her chest and waist covered, had some insanely sexy curves about it.

"Asuta of the Fa clan... You were born in a foreign nation, weren't you? Is there some reason that you didn't raise the matter of where you were born?"

"No. It's not like I'm trying to hide it, exactly."

I had discussed that matter with Ai Fa pretty early on. What sort of stance I should take in this world when I couldn't prove who I was, I mean. I didn't exactly have many options, though, so it made for a pretty easy decision.

"Apparently the country I was born in is completely unheard of in this land... I come from a place called Japan."

This was the path Ai Fa and I had chosen: Telling the truth.

“Six days ago, I awoke at the forest’s edge at the base of Mount Morga, but I frankly haven’t the foggiest as to how I got here. The people here know nothing of a country called Japan, and I’ve never heard of the Amusehorn continent before, either. And yet we’re still able to converse with one another. I still have absolutely no clue as to what happened.”

If you keep on building up your lies, eventually it will all come tumbling down. And on the off chance there was someone else in this world who had the same thing happen to them, trying to do so may lose me the chance to find them.

And so, I decided to leave what I didn’t know as a big question mark and openly expose my background. I did leave out the particularly crazy point about how I was supposed to be dead only to come back to life in a whole other world, though.

“Hmm... A foreigner who hasn’t ever heard of Amusehorn? And for such a person to be right smack in the middle of the continent...”

Her strangely drawn out way of talking and the sidelong glances her eyes made, along with everything else about her made this girl seriously sensual. But the way that she had her doubts about that matter showed that she was surprisingly the most cautious member of this group, and that she may have been a pretty quick thinker. I made sure to make a mental note of all that.

“I really don’t have any clue about what happened. Anyway, Ai Fa is the one who found me out there in the forest, and she’s been helping me out a lot ever since. Well, apparently she’s also been worried about letting me wander around when I don’t even know the laws of the forest’s edge, too.”

“Hmm... I didn’t know that you were such a good-natured girl, Ai Fa of the Fa clan... I thought the only thing you had any interest in was hunting giba like a man...”

There wasn’t *exactly* any ill-will behind those words, but it was a combative enough statement to make Ai Fa break out in a frown. The older girl, meanwhile, just shot the naturally silent Ai Fa a sidelong glance and gave a little “Hehehe...” Then she continued on, “Well, at any rate, I’ll be looking forward to all this. And I mean, you came here for the sake of our precious Granny Jiba, didn’t you? Apparently Papa Donda wasn’t too happy about it, but we’re all

welcoming you with gratitude, right?”

“Right. Much obliged,” I responded, looking like an idiot. This time around she brought her fingertip up to her plump lips and gave a little giggle. Was she the sort that had to imbue her each and every action with sex appeal...?

“I’m Vina Ruu, the oldest girl of the Ruu family. The next youngest is the black-haired Reina, followed by the red-haired Lala, and lastly Rimee. You’ll meet my brothers when they get back from the forest, alright?”

Next up, her smooth arm with just the perfect amount of oil on it moved to point out the older women.

“This is Tito Min, the wife of the previous head of the clan. She’s our grandmother, and she’ll be helping you out. Next to her is our mother, the current clan head Donda’s wife, Mia Lea. And then there’s my eldest brother Jiza’s spouse Sati Lea, and her son Kota. Our poor great-grandmother who you’re trying to take pity on is sleeping inside the house. We’re counting on you, Ai Fa and Asuta of the Fa clan.”

3

“Please, follow me.”

The one leading the way was the second daughter of the Ruu household, Reina Ruu.

Rimee Ruu was dealing with our blades, Tito Min Ruu was cleaning up from when they wrung out the fat, and the rest of the women each departed for their own tasks, meaning our little gathering dispersed pretty quickly.

The stoves were installed in the rear of the house. Apparently, when a house was this big, the reception room and kitchen were kept separate. There was a small separate building less than half the size of the main home, which served as the kitchen and pantry, as well as the place where giba were dissected.

“Huh? Those are stoves there too, aren’t they?”

Off to the side of the building were two stone stoves like the one in Ai Fa’s home, sitting there conspicuously. They were outdoors, but were stocked with

firewood and even had roofs installed overhead. And both of them were wide open in the front, making it sort of feel like I was being stared at by blank faces.

Neither of them had an iron pot on them, though.

“These are used for grilling meat. Papa Donda likes it better to have giba that way than in a stew,” the slender girl with long, black, braided hair said with a smile.

“I see! Giba meat makes a lot of smoke when you grill it, so something like this sure would be helpful. If you don’t mind, could we use these today, too?”

“Huh? You’ve grilled giba meat before, Asuta?”

I was a little taken aback when I looked into the girl’s big round eyes. What was that about? It felt strange, somehow, having this girl with the same name as my childhood friend call me by name. Well, my Reina kept on calling me “Asuta-chan” even when we were in high school, though.

“Yeah. In fact that was actually part of tonight’s schedule. Is that odd or something?”

“Yes, well... I heard from Rimee that she had eaten incredibly soft meat. I was sure that meant you were going to boil the giba meat...”

“Oh, I see. That really did use a cooking method that involved grilling, though. Well, it involves all sorts of crazy techniques, but I’ll handle all the confusing parts, so just lend me a hand, alright?”

“Of course! Jiba Ruu is a precious, irreplaceable member of my family, so I’m truly grateful to you! And I’ll give my all, too!”

This girl really may have been a lot like Rimee Ruu. She was bright, innocent, full of energy, and had an incredibly honest look in her eyes. On the other hand, though I don’t really care myself, she was pretty darn short, and in terms of build, she seemed to have inherited the same genes as that bundle of sex appeal that was her older sister.

She had a fine amount of meat on her arms and legs, and her chest and rear had some rather womanly curves. Her waist pulled in tight so she certainly wasn’t fat, but... Well, let’s just say I had trouble knowing where it was alright

to look.

In the first place, the women of this settlement just wore way too little. Not only did they just cover their chests and waists, but it was with a thin cloth wrapped around them, which made the contours of their bodies stand out more than they needed to.

And unlike the other women I'd seen around the settlement up until now, these girls had on "decorations." A bracelet made of grigee fruit was the norm around here, but in addition to that, they had on shiny, dark grey, metallic hair accessories, earrings, leg bracelets and the like. And also...

"...Ah. That necklace..."

"Huh?"

"You're all wearing necklaces with three horns or tusks or whatever. Is that a good luck charm or something?"

"Yes. You see, we women don't hunt giba, after all. So the men give us horns and tusks. They're imbued with the hope that we live a healthy life here at the forest's edge," the girl explained with a joyous smile, holding the necklace that had been swaying on her boldly rising and falling chest. "Children receive them from their fathers, and wives from their husbands. As proof that we didn't hunt them ourselves, they're made with just three tusks and horns, rather than a full set."

"Hmm... That's an interesting custom," I responded. As I did so, I felt a sort of crackling feeling on the back of my neck and turned around, only to find Ai Fa glaring at me with a truly chilling gaze as she leaned up against the wall of the building.

I hadn't gone and forgotten you, of course. My attention just got a little diverted when we arrived at the building, my master.

"Umm, you said you had four pots, right? For now, let's just light up one of these ones outside."

"Right. I'll show you the way," Reina Ruu said with a smile, then walked in Ai Fa's direction.

After giving a slight bow to my blank-faced benefactor, Reina Ruu slid open a door that was right next to Ai Fa.

“This is the kitchen.”

I walked forward with a “Hey there,” to Ai Fa, but my beloved benefactor simply frowned and passed through the door before me.

What was that about? I didn’t really get it, but this may turn into a real pain. But at any rate, I walked on inside, too.

“Wow... This certainly is something, isn’t it?”

The room looked to be only about twelve square meters in size, but it also didn’t have all that much furniture, making for a rather open room. In the center were the four stoves, lined up facing one another. I was a little impressed by the way that there was a log set up off to the side of each one as a surface to work on, as well as a jar with plenty of water.

The floor was simply the exposed ground, the walls were made of wood, and the ceiling had the beams showing, which wasn’t much different from Ai Fa’s home. However, along those walls were knives both big and small, ladles, what looked like a wooden pestle, and a doorless shelf lined with bowls and wooden utensils.

This really was a proper kitchen. A cookhouse.

Though I hadn’t expected it, I could feel my heart beating a little faster.

As I inspected the various tools on display, Reina Ruu, who had been crouched down in front of the stove, gave another carefree smile and then called out, “Is it alright if I light the fire? I’m prepared to do so.”

Prepared to do so, she says... She was incredibly innocent, but she also had some definite elegance about her.

By the way, they lit their stoves the same way that Ai Fa did. That meant tying something called lana grass that had been all dried out to the tip of a thin bit of firewood, then quickly rubbing it across the other firewood until the friction ignited it like a match. Then you simply transferred the fire to the firewood before that ember died out.

I still failed two out of the three times I tried, but Reina Ruu naturally managed it on her first try.

“Great. Now could you fill up the pot halfway with water? And use a strong flame?”

“Right,” Reina Ruu responded, then briskly transferred the water.

...I soon sensed a gaze on my neck again, but at this stage I still shouldn’t have made any mistakes yet.

“Alright, Ai Fa, hand me the giba meat. And um, you, is it alright if I lay the meat out on this surface?”

“Yes, of course. Um, and if you don’t mind, could you please call me Reina Ruu?”

“Ah, right. It just feels a little strange, since I know someone with the same name.”

After receiving the package of giba meat from Ai Fa, I opened up the pseudo-rubber tree leaf. As I did so, I caught sight of Reina Ruu staring at my face from the side and smiling.

“Was this other Reina an important girl in your life, perhaps? Is that why it’s hard to call me by that name?”

“It’s not exactly like that, but still...”

Why was it, then? I didn’t even know the answer myself. But I mean... She was probably the person I had spent the most time with outside of my family, so even though I didn’t have even a hint of romantic feelings for her, when I thought of how I’d never see her again... It really hurt.

So I didn’t want to say that name too often, or hear it either.

I figured that wasn’t the kind of thing I should be telling to someone who just happened to have the same name, though.

“Huh...?”

As I opened the leaf bundle, a small, dark brown hand overlapped with mine. When I looked up in surprise, I found that Reina Ruu’s face had gone from a

bright smile to looking like she was about to cry.

“I’m sorry. I said something I really shouldn’t have, didn’t I? I never intended to make you look so pained, Asuta...”

“No, not at all! I’m totally fine! I was just doing a bit of thinking!”

What was going on? I didn’t come all this way to act out a romantic comedy, did I?

Ugh, the back of my head was hurting. It felt like a drill made of ice or something was grinding on in. Did I have the talent of a master fencer or something, to be able to sense someone’s glare physically like that?

It was then that I felt something slash across my back as someone said, “Thanks for waiting! Here’s your knife, Asuta!” causing me to scream out, “Agh!” I had thought a certain someone had gone and cut me with a kitchen knife.

“Rimee, you shouldn’t play around with knives!”

“Huh? But it’s in the sheath still, so it’s fine!”

As I wiped cold sweat from my brow, I quickly snatched the knife away from Rimee Ruu.

“A-Anyway, I’m going to cut up the meat, so could you get me enough poitan for everyone? And then add all of them to the pot once it reaches a boil.”

“Got it! Let’s go to the pantry, big sis!”

“Right.”

The two close sisters left the kitchen, leaving just me and my benefactor there. I hurriedly got to work brushing off the pico leaf stuck to the block of thigh meat, then took a quick glance to the side as I inserted the knife.

My benefactor was sitting cross legged with her back to the wall.

“...It doesn’t seem there’s any task for me here at all.”

“That’s not true! You’re my emotional support! It’s because you’re sitting there watching over me that I’m able to relax and cook!”

“What are you getting all worked up over?”

I am *not* getting worked up. If anything was getting to me, though, it's the way that your voice is cold and low right now.

Still, this was a valuable chance to have a one-on-one conversation with Ai Fa. At any rate, I decided to force out the feelings that had been building up inside of me, even while wincing from her cold glare.

"You know, the Ruu family are a lot friendlier than I'd been expecting, somehow. I kind of imagined a much more hot-blooded family of hunters, you know?"

"As if I'd understand how you think. And besides, this is my first time meeting any of the women of the family aside from Rimee and Jiba Ruu."

"Ah, so you've met the men, then?"

"Donda Ruu took his three sons along when he asked me to marry into the family. If you want to see hot-blooded folks, then just wait for sunset."

"Hey, it's not like I *wanted* that..."

By the time we reached that point in the conversation, the two sisters had made it back. They were each holding what looked like a sort of flat basket, which had a mountain of those pseudo-potatoes, the poitan, in it. 14 people x 2 each = 28 total, which was certainly a sizeable amount.

Still, the sisters had one more helper behind them now. It was Granny Tito Min Ruu, with her plump physique and hair that was going white.

"Sorry for the wait. I'll be helping out now, too. Ooh, this is a splendid giba leg."

With her wrinkly face with a great complexion to it, she then turned towards Ai Fa.

"Ai Fa of the Fa clan. I heard that you've been managing the Fa house all by yourself, so does that mean that you're the one who finished off this giba?"

"Yes, that's right," Ai Fa responded with a nod, her tone completely unchanging. She did move to stand up, though.

"That's certainly something. And the Fa bloodline has grown much thinner than the other houses, hasn't it? I truly can't even imagine your way of life, for a

woman like you to live all on her own without relying on anyone.”

“It’s really not such a big deal. My father had taught me how to hunt giba, as well as everything else I needed to survive at the forest’s edge. I’m able to keep on living just fine on my own.”

“Living, and then dying too?” the old woman asked, wearing a smile as if she had seen through something. Ai Fa opened her mouth to respond, but then closed it again without saying anything. “If a woman goes hunting, then she can’t give birth to children, right? You’ll live on your own and die the same, and the Fa clan will go down with you. Would you be satisfied with that, Ai Fa of the Fa clan?”

“There are countless examples of clans that have died out like that even here at the forest’s edge. It’s not as if every house possesses the power of the Ruu clan.”

“Oh? And what is power, then? Reina, Rimee, or I most certainly couldn’t take down a giba. No, not just that, there likely aren’t many men who could hunt down a giba on their own, either. By that way of thinking, there are few folks out there as powerful as you, wouldn’t you say?”

“That’s...”

“But the Fa bloodline is wasting away while the Ruu bloodline prospers. Now why is that...? If you think on that question, maybe the Fa bloodline won’t need to end after all.”

“Hey, what are you talking about, Granny Tito Min?” Rimee Ruu asked, looking quite bored as she poked at a poitan. Her grandmother looked back and narrowed her eyes, seeming like she was rather enjoying herself.

“The day will come when you understand, Rimee. Now then, it looks like the pot has started boiling, doesn’t it?”

Apparently they didn’t use last names when talking amongst family.

“Ah! I’ll put them in!” Rimee joyfully declared, grabbing a thin kitchen knife from the wall. Then, she looked down at the bubbling pot and let out a, “Huh?” along with a tilt of her little head. “Isn’t this way too little water? And also, we’re gonna heat all these poitan in just one pot?”

“Yeah, that’ll be fine. If you want to eat poitan like you had last night, then chuck them all in.”

“Alright!”

She cut into the poitan in the mountain, and then plopped them into the pot one after another. It was around that time that I finished cutting the thigh meat. After cutting off the fat that I’d use for cooking, I cut up the red meat into bits that would be easy to mince, so it wasn’t that big of a hassle. There was probably roughly five kilos of the stuff in total.

Then, Granny Tito Min turned to me with a smile.

“Asuta of the Fa clan. You’re more skilled at cutting meat than even women are, aren’t you?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah. I was a chef in training back in my country.”

“Hmm...” Granny Tito Min shot back, her eyes narrowing even further. “A woman who hunts giba, and a man who specializes at the stove. You two certainly make for an interesting pair. I suppose there may not be any need for me to go butting in, after all.”

“That’s right, Granny Tito Min. It’s not good to go butting into the affairs of other houses,” Reina Ruu chimed in, using a somewhat childish tone.

There was a really cozy feeling in the air, somehow. I didn’t let that get my guard down too much, though.

I looked over to see how Ai Fa was getting along, only to find my benefactor with a rather sour look on her face.

4

Now then, time to change gears and focus.

I got the feeling that I had been distracted by the voices all around and had been starting to neglect the task at hand. And doing something like that would soil my honor as a chef, wouldn’t it? And if that happened while I was using my old man’s knife, he would never forgive me.

“The cooking method for these poitan isn’t actually that tricky. I’d imagine you could even start making them yourselves tomorrow, assuming your grandmother Jiba Ruu likes them.”

As I made that statement, I saw the poitan start to boil. When I went to stir them with a ladle so they wouldn’t burn, I found that they were already getting pretty sticky.

“Um, could it be that you intend to heat them until all the moisture is gone,” Reina Ruu asked.

“That’s right,” I replied, only for a troubled look to appear in her round eyes.

“But if you do that, the poitan will harden like clay, won’t they? I don’t think it would be possible to eat that...”

“Huh? You’ve heated a poitan that much before, Reina Ruu?”

Reina stopped and stared for a second, but then responded, “Yes!” with a twinkle in her eyes. “I tried out all sorts of methods to see if there was a way to make poitan easier to eat. Everyone yelled at me not to waste food, though.”

Huh? Despite what she was saying, there was a wide grin spreading across her face. Why would she make an expression like that now? It couldn’t be because I called her by name for the first time, right?

Gah. Focus, focus...

“Well then, I’ll leave the poitan up to you, Reina Ruu. Still... I’m glad to hear someone amongst the people of the forest’s edge was experimenting with cooking methods, too.”

“Right. If Granny Jiba hadn’t ended up like that, I don’t think the matter would have ever bothered me, though... So I just need to wait for all the moisture to be gone?”

“Yeah. And take care so that it doesn’t burn.”

“Right!”

Now then... There was still some time till sunset, but we had taken care of everything that we could for now.

“Now then, I’m going to start preparing the giba meat. Regulating the heat is pretty tricky with this cooking method, by the way. But I think you could apply it in a lot of different situations, so definitely feel free to memorize it.”

As I said that, I went ahead and opened up the bundle of shoulder roast. When I did so, Rimee Ruu let out a big, “Huh? That’s a weird shape! Is it really giba meat?”

“Hmm? What’s so strange about it? It’s just the meat from between the giba’s back and shoulder.”

“Wow! I’ve never eaten that before!”

“Huh? But big families like the Ruu clan bring back the whole giba, right?”

“That’s just to skin off the pelt. We only eat the rear legs, Asuta,” Granny Tito Min replied.

“But why? The rear legs alone shouldn’t be enough feed such a large family, surely.”

“It is, because the men of the main Ruu house hunt two giba a day. The hind legs provide enough meat that sometimes we even have some go bad.”

“*Two a day...?*” I was a little shocked to hear that.

Well, if we’re talking a giba in the 70 kilo range, then the rear legs would amount to about 20 kilo, which meant two would add up to 40 kilo... It certainly would be hard to eat such a large quantity of meat in a single day. Even considering the amount that they smoked, the legs really may be enough.

Something else came to mind, too: One giba’s horns and tusks only got you enough aria and poitan for ten people. That meant that hunting one giba a day wouldn’t provide enough for the 12 people (plus one infant) of the Ruu family. It left quite a surplus, but they needed to take down two a day.

Of course, I did understand that this system would always result in excess meat. That was plainly clear even from looking at our pantry.

The meat from the giba Ai Fa took down six days ago was around 45 kilos, which shrunk to about 40 kilos after the pico leaves absorbed the moisture. But Ai Fa and I could only eat around a kilo a day and it would only stay preserved

for about 20 days, so at this rate I'd end up having to smoke over half of it.

On top of that, Ai Fa needed to hunt down one giba every five days for their tusks and horns, so the only choice for handling that excess was to simply leave it for the animals out in the forest.

And so, since it was a waste to use all that meat I had carefully bloodlet and prepared just for smoking, I was actually happy for the chance to use up around 10 kilos of the stuff today. Plus it was just sad to imagine a family this size having only ever eaten thigh meat.

As I cut up the shoulder roast, I glanced up at the bright, cheerful face of Granny Tito Min, who was standing right in front of me.

"So after you skin the giba and removes its tusks, horns, and hind legs, you just throw the rest of it away?"

"That's right. So that it does not end up in the hands of the people of the forest's edge, we throw it down into the valley. There's a mundt nest down there, so they return the souls of the giba to the forest."

"Wait, 'so that it does not end up in the hands of the people of the forest's edge'...?"

"Yes. If someone who lacks the strength to hunt giba was to find it they may end up eating nothing but discarded meat, giving birth to a people lacking in pride."

The pride of the people of the forest's edge, huh?

Seeing as I was born in another world, I couldn't just accept that quite so easily.

Well, what I could accept least of all, though, was the way that they treated such delicious roast and rib meat as garbage!

"Just for reference, what becomes of families whose men are injured or grow old and are unable to hunt giba?"

"They have no choice but to rely on extended family. And in cases where family cannot support them, they need to rely on a more powerful family in turn. But as long as they are capable of at least doing some sort of work,

everyone should have the right to eat giba meat, even if they cannot hunt them down."

"I see."

That explanation was enough to quell the ethical concerns I was having.

"I got it, now. Thank you. Now then... After the meat is more or less cut up like this, the next step is to beat it into ground meat with your knife."

Once more, my attention turned back to cooking. It wasn't the time to be gathering information right now.

"It's easier to use a bigger knife to start with. You can rely on the weight of the knife rather than putting too much strength into it, then tenderize the meat thoroughly like this."

"What's that?! It looks fun! I wanna try!"

"Hmm? Right, then... I suppose I can leave that much up to you."

We still had leeway left, after all. And as long as I handle the finishing touches, it should be fine. Plus thinking of tomorrow on, it was important to teach them at least a bit about making giba meat taste delicious.

"Whoa, it's all slimy! This is neat!"

If you just heard that you would think she was playing around, but I couldn't see anything unsafe about the way that Rimee Ruu was handling her knife. Though she was still young, she seemed plenty capable when it came to work around the house.

"U-Um, Asuta...! I'd like to give that a try, too!" said Reina Ruu, looking over my way as she continued to stir the poitan soup.

Even if she didn't ask so desperately, there was still 14 people worth of giba meat, 7 kilos or so in total, to make into hamburger meat. If she wanted to pound it, she could do as much as she pleased.

"Ah, the poitan are looking pretty good. Um, could you carry them like that?"

"Two of us can carry them if we pass a pole through to act as a grip!"

"That would be a big help. Well then, Ai Fa..."

“If this is all you need, then I should be able to handle it,” Reina Ruu said with a smile and a grigee pole in her hands.

In that case, it would be Ai Fa and Reina Ruu... Or so I thought, but my animal instincts were screaming that I shouldn’t pair those two up.

And so, I passed the grigee pole through the sideways handles while taking care not to get burned, and then Reina Ruu and I carried it on outside.

Ai Fa didn’t have as much of a chilling gaze right now, but ever since she had that conversation with Granny Tito Min, she seemed to have been thinking about something with a bit of a gloomy look in her eyes. And man, I hated that. Ai Fa all down in the dumps was the last thing that I wanted to see.

“So, what do we do with this pot now?”

“Right, we should place it in a spot where it’ll get lots of sunlight, and then let it dry out. And I suppose we should spread a bit of water around the outside of the pot so that it doesn’t burn.”

“Got it!”

In spite of my current concerns about Ai Fa, I couldn’t help but be impressed by the work ethic of this Reina Ruu girl. Not only did she work swiftly, she was also a quick learner. I guess this was what you’d call being highly intuitive. You could tell her one thing, and she’d learn ten. And just like Rimee Ruu, she seemed to earnestly have a strong desire to learn the techniques in order to help out her grandmother.

Not long after we carried out the poitan, Reina Ruu set to work pounding the meat and did an even better job than Rimee Ruu, resulting in such beautifully minced meat that I didn’t even need to add any finishing touches. And there were plenty of knives so Granny Tito Min joined in too, meaning it wasn’t long before the seven kilos of giba meat was converted into a little pink mountain.

They really were excellent pupils.

“Huh? Asuta, there’s still meat left over here! Should I make this all slimy, too?”

“Ah, just leave that as is. It’s for a bit of something different.”

I figured if her teeth were so bad we might need some soup, so I set aside three kilos of the roast for that in addition to the seven kilos of meat we had for the burgers. Rimee gave a disappointed sounding “Tch!” and pouted.

“It’s a little out of order, but let’s prepare the aria next. We need a number of other things for this, so could you lead me to the pantry, Rimee Ruu?”

“Yeah!”

“Ah, and could you please light the stove for another pot soon? Ai Fa, I’ll need your help carrying things, alright?”

With an indifferent expression on her face, Ai Fa took her back off of the wall.

Tito Min took charge of the stoves, while the other four of us headed off for the pantry.

There were three doors to the small building, leading from the right to left to the kitchen, the pantry, and the dissection room. When Rimee Ruu led me through the middle door, I couldn’t help but let out a “Wow...”

I hadn’t been expecting this.

The pantry had rows and rows of ingredients I had never seen before all lined up.

“What is all this? It’s amazing, like some sort of mountain of treasure!” I yelled out, unable to stop myself.

Doorless shelves lined the roughly 12 square meter-large room. On them were stupidly big pumpkin-looking fruits that were bright red like a tomato, green vegetables that looked like roses made of lettuce, some mysterious mass that looked like a bundle of coiled snakes, a blue-skinned fruit that was all spikey like a durian... At any rate, there were a whole ton of ingredients aside from just aria and poitan.

There were the familiar pico and lilo leaves hanging from the walls. Hanging next to them, though, was a mysterious two meter-long plant that was thick like bamboo but also hairy like burdock root, as well as what looked like yellow dried persimmons.

And yet, I didn’t see the giba meat anywhere. There was a door in the back of

the room, though, so that was probably where they stored it. In other words, this 12 square meter-large space was almost entirely filled with new ingredients. Honestly, it made for a truly heavenly sight.

"Asuta, the aria are over here!"

Rimee Ruu had been darting amongst the shelves, and now she was approaching a corner on the right side of the room. Sure enough, there were both aria and poitan over where she was. And a truly impressive number of them, at that.

"So there really is a huge variety of vegetables in this world, too..."

"World...? But yeah, it's neat how the taste changes depending on what you put in the pot! I really like tarapa! And big sis Reina, you're fond of tino leaves, right?!"

"But Rimee Ruu, people can live off of just aria and poitan, right?"

"Hmm? Ah, yeah, apparently so! But it'd get boring eating the same thing each and every day, right?"

I see. So all these foods were luxury items for a powerful family, huh? But I'm sure they were still highly nutritious. Even if they were luxury items, they probably weren't full-on indulgences.

Now that I thought of it, all the women here had some meat on their bones, aside from Rimee and Lala Ruu. Plus, they looked incredibly healthy on top of that. And ever since I figured out the poitan was a grain I had been thinking that the aria being the lone vegetable in a diet may be a little insufficient, so I assumed they must have been getting the missing nutrients from these vegetables.

But still... No matter which vegetables they may be using, they're still just chucking them in a giba stew with dissolved poitan, right?

What a waste. I mean, just imagine all the fantastic dishes I could make with all these ingredients... Ah, just thinking of it caused me to tremble.

"Do you want to use these ingredients too, perhaps?" Reina Ruu asked with a reserved smile.

Though I could feel myself being incredibly tempted, I ultimately gave a firm “No,” back. “There’s no time for tasting, so although it’s a shame, we’d better not. It would be a real issue if I used ingredients I had never seen before and ended up wrecking the dish, right?”

I mean, it had taken me four whole days to figure out the poitan. I couldn’t exactly just toss aside Ai Fa’s feelings and my pride as a chef to head off on that adventure.

Now that I think of it... I thought, turning around to look at Ai Fa, only to find her looking at the various ingredients with little interest. *Right... She needs to take down one giba every five days in order to obtain the bare minimum amount of food we need. I can’t let myself go getting all envious of folks who are better off...*

As someone who grew up in an eatery, I had nothing to do with ingredients like caviar and foie gras. So I just had to think of these as similar luxury items, outside of the reach of common folk.

At any rate, we grabbed enough aria, fruit wine, and bundled up rock salt for 14 people, and left the pantry.

And then... they were there waiting for us.

“What’s this? Giba crap? Don’t go leaving junk in the middle of my path!”

His thick, vulgar voice resounded like thunder. And I could clearly see the tension in Ai Fa’s face.

“Hmm? Oh, Papa Donda, welcome home! You’re pretty early today, aren’t you?!” Rimee Ruu happily exclaimed while holding the wine flask as she ran towards him.

Immediately after we left the pantry, we had found four men with an animalistic stench about them standing in our way. The large man in the lead who had stared down at the pot of poitan in disgust was now glaring straight at me past Rimee Ruu.

“Oh, so you’re the outsider who’s been staying in the Fa house? I’d heard you were pale, but man are you ever one white kid!”

Even the breath of this large, bearded man stunk of animals.

Naturally, this was Rimee Ruu’s father, the head of the Ruu clan, Donda Ruu.



Chapter 6: Blessed Night

1

The aura these four men of the Ruu family were giving off was seriously fierce.

The one standing in the lead must have been the head of the clan, Donda Ruu. I had little doubt about that, thanks to both his age and his personality. I'd guess his height at over 180 centimeters, and his weight at no less than 90 kilos.

He had on a giba fur cloak, a sleeveless vest, a cloth around his waist, a necklace made with a crazy number of fangs and tusks, footwear held on by leather straps, and a positively massive blade and knife. The other three were all dressed in the same manner. They didn't hold a candle to the overpowering presence of Donda Ruu, though.

He was a mountain of muscles from his arms to his shoulders to his thighs to his calves, his chest was incredibly bulky, and his waist was thick like a massive old tree. And his face was overpowering too, with blackish-brown hair reminiscent of a giba's stiff fur, a beard on the lower half, a big mouth, nose, and eyes, and deep wrinkles on his skin that reminded me of the cracks you would see on a rock face.

The man should have been decently along in years, but it was hard to remember that when looking at the piercing glare from his blue eyes, his massive boulder-like frame, or the almost physical pressure coming off of him. This was clearly a man full of vitality, whose mind also remained sharp.

To sum it all up, this brawny, huge man was like a giba given human form.

Compared to that, well...

The men standing behind him at least looked like actual human beings. The one on Donda Ruu's right in particular looked rather gentle and good-natured. He may not have been as big as his father, but he was still awfully big. His arms looked to be about as thick as my lower legs, and they were currently easily carrying a young giba that must have weighed around 50 kilos. His face also had

the same sort of deep, rocky wrinkles as his father, but his dark brown hair was cut short, and perhaps because of his thin eyes, he looked like he was grinning about something. On top of that, his mouth had a very calm expression about it, too. But though he seemed gentle and good-natured, he looked like his large frame held even more power than his father's, making me clearly feel that he was someone I would never want to piss off.

He seemed to have a number of years under his belt too, but the other two were definitely still young. One looked to be a bit older than me and was both slender and tall, with a taut face that reminded me of a young wolf. He had a bit of a long face with a high nose, and a rigidly tight mouth. Honestly, he may have just been a pretty handsome man. He had black hair, which was rare for the village, and he grew it out long and tied it up behind his neck. However, his wide, slitted eyes beneath his thin eyebrows were just like his father's, glaring like some sort of wild animal. In terms of the impression he gave off, he may have actually been a lot like his old man.

The last of the brothers was clearly younger than me. Back in my world, he probably would have been in middle school. He was a bit shorter than I was, which made him look strikingly small compared to the other men. Of course, despite that, there wasn't even a hint of weakness about him, and together he and the previous man were carrying a giba that looked to weigh around 100 kilos on a grigee pole. His yellowish-brown hair was neither long nor short, his eyes were a bit of a pale color, and if it weren't for the rebellious, bratty look on his face, he would actually probably be pretty cute. His face honestly reminded me a lot of that Lala girl who unhappily took Ai Fa's cloak. By the way, on his opposite shoulder from the grigee pole he had the first bow and arrows I had seen in this world.

At any rate, those were the men of the Ruu family; the head of the clan, Donda Ruu, and his three sons.

"Ooh, this is a nice way to greet me, Rimee!" the girl's father said, his rough fingers snatching the container of fruit wine from his daughter's arms.

"Ah, you can't! We need that for cooking!"

"Ha! 'Cooking'... that's a pretentious little word you used there."

He pulled the lid off of the container with his tough white teeth that looked like a giba's tusks, and then poured the red liquid inside down his thick throat. The fruit wine wouldn't have as much alcohol as your average wine but it should still definitely have some, and yet he drank it dry in one go and then threw the empty container on the ground.

"Hey there, little Fa hunter girl. We haven't met since your father passed away, so I guess that means it's been about two years now, huh? This is our first time seeing each other in a good while, but I don't believe I heard a greeting out of you..."

His fiercely shining eyes were fixed clearly on Ai Fa. My benefactor, meanwhile, practically pushed me aside and stood face to face with the large man.

"It has indeed been a while, Donda Ruu, leader of the Ruu clan. I am visiting here today as per a request from Rimee Ruu, accompanying the member of my house known as Asuta as he mans your stove."

"Hmph. I see you're just as much an uncute brat as always. Even though if it weren't for that sharp glare of yours, you'd be every bit the looker your mom was."

His massive face that was like a mix between a giba and a lion got so close to Ai Fa's that it was almost touching her nose.

"I see you're still pretending to be a man, hanging giba horns around your neck. So you still don't understand that no matter how much you may polish your skills, you're still just a weak little woman, Ai Fa of the Fa clan?"

"I protect my house, as the head of the Fa clan. And I've achieved that for two years, now."

Surprisingly, Ai Fa didn't back down even an inch despite being faced with such a terrifying man.

I couldn't see her expression from where I was standing, but the fire burning in her eyes surely wasn't losing out to Donda Ruu in the least.

It was almost as if a wildcat were facing off with a herd of giba.

“Ha! What do you think of that, Darmu? Maybe we should have you marry into the Fa clan instead, huh? Then their clan wouldn’t have to die out. You’d have to handle the stove and raising the kids, though!”

The large man’s thunder-like laughter boomed through the air.

The second young son, the one with the same eyes as his father, responded. Those violent-looking eyes were glaring at Ai Fa with clear scorn.

“Sorry, but I’ve got no interest in a woman with eyes like a beast. You know, rather than a man or a woman, she’s really just a good-for-nothing.”

Instinctually, I started to step forward. However, Ai Fa, who was standing diagonally in front of me, soon took control of the situation.

“We have to prepare dinner. We’ll see you again once we’re done.”

“That’s right! We still have a lot of cooking to do! Papa, you and my brothers better not get in the way!”

I suppose even this massive beast of a man was still just her father to his daughter. When Rimee Ruu picked up the empty container and started complaining, she didn’t show even the slightest hint of being intimidated.

On the other hand, Reina Ruu, who was holding a flat basket filled with aria, looked a little troubled by the face-off between Ai Fa and the men.

Donda Ruu looked at his daughters, gave another “Ha!” and then turned around. “How ridiculous. It’s still this bright out, but you’re putting off other work in order to prepare dinner? There’s no point to wasting time and effort when it comes to devouring the life of a giba!”

“I told you, it’s for Granny Jiba! The food Asuta makes is really soft and yummy!”

As his angry youngest daughter yelled that at his back, Donda Ruu changed his tone just a bit.

“When people of the forest’s edge become unable to eat giba meat, they simply die. Even if that’s a member of the Ruu family, and our great elder at that, we simply can’t go against the natural laws of the forest.”

With that, he started walking heavily off. And then, something unbelievable

happened: Rimee Ruu landed a flying jump kick squarely in the middle of his back.

“Papa Donda, you dummy! Why do you say such awful things about Granny Jiba?! Don’t you care about her?!”

“That’s right! Granny Jiba is the oldest person not just in the Ruu family, but in our whole settlement, right?! Should the head of the Ruu clan really be looking down on her like that?!” Reina Ruu loudly added, her eyes tearing up a bit.

Donda Ruu simply let out a disinterested “Hmph,” and disappeared into the shadow of the building.

“Well then, shall we finish putting away the giba?” a deep voice asked as if nothing had happened. The mood had been incredibly tense, but that actually helped to calm things down a bit.

“Right. Now that I think of it, we actually haven’t given our names yet, have we? I’m the oldest son of the Ruu family, Jiza Ruu. Ai Fa and Asuta of the Fa house, you have my deepest gratitude for coming to help the elder of our clan, Jiba Ruu.”

Naturally, that had come from the large man with the good-natured look and narrow eyes.

“With that said, the Ruu family letting someone else man their stove is something that likely hasn’t occurred since we devoted our blades to the western god Selva. Please understand that our clan’s head, Donda Ruu, is not in a position where he can openly welcome that.”

“Heh! Pops has always been soft on little Rimee!” the yellowish-brown haired boy chimed in. With that, Rimee Ruu turned to face him.

“Oh, you want to go at it, *little Ludo*?!”

“Hey, a squirt like you has no right to call someone else little!”

The two were glaring at each other, reminding me of little puppies. Compared to what had just happened, it was a downright adorable sight.

“That little fellow is our youngest brother, Ludo Ruu. And this is the second son, Darmu Ruu. It pains us all to think of Jiba Ruu’s future. If you’re able to

save her soul, then you'll earn the true gratitude of all of us, as well as our deep respect."

His mouth was making a relaxed smile, but perhaps because his eyes were so narrow, I couldn't read how he was really feeling.

"...However, if you injure the members of our family while manning the Ruu family stove, we'll have no choice but to take up our blades. Please make sure to keep that in mind. Well then, let's get going, Darmu, Ludo."

The three brothers disappeared into the dissection room, carrying the two giba along with them. Once they were fully out of sight, I gave a deep sigh.

"Man... They sure were something. This was actually my first time seeing any of the men of the forest's edge up close and personal. Are they all like that?"

"The Ruu clan holds an especially great amount of power amongst the people of the forest's edge. It's only natural that the men who support that family would also be strong," Ai Fa said, looking me in the face for the first time in a while. "Even if you're getting cold feet now, there's no turning back at this point, Asuta."

"Nah, maybe it's because I'm used to living with such a scary benefactor, but I'm not losing my nerve at all... Ow!" That was me being kicked in the leg. "But still, it's certainly the case for the father too, but that oldest brother is seriously scary. This is honestly getting me all fired up!"

With that, the two close sisters suddenly turned toward me in perfect sync.

"Asuta, you're amazing!"

"Huh?"

"The one who's scariest when you get him mad is big bro Jiza. I still weep like a little kid whenever he scolds me."

"H-huh..."

"And... he was actually the one who was most opposed to inviting you two here, not papa. He places rules above everything else, so apparently he really couldn't accept the idea of letting someone else man our stove."

"That's important information, so thanks. Now I'm getting even more fired

up!”

I wanted to scratch my head, but both my hands were occupied by aria, so I couldn’t.

“Anyway... Rimee Ruu, is there any fruit wine left in the pantry? To be honest, we’ll be in trouble if we don’t have any to work with.”

“It’s fine! We’ve got lots, because papa will sometimes drink three or four in a day! And it’s a bit of a trip to the post town to be doing that very often.”

Phew, that’s good. Looks like we’re still hanging in there, somehow.

At any rate, what I had to do still hadn’t changed. I just had to use everything available to me to make the best dish that I could.

I’m not just up against Granny Jiba. There’s also that father who’s like a giant giba, and the older brother who looks like he might be in charge behind the scenes. My life might really be in danger if I don’t satisfy all of them...

With such an intense clan head and heir, the future of the Ruu clan was certainly secure.

Ah, now that I think of it...

This actually wasn’t my first time being face to face with one of the men of the forest’s edge. The night after I was dropped into this other world, I met a perfectly fine example of a man. One who planned to use Ai Fa’s despair over losing her father as part of a wicked plot, had the tables turned on him, and was tossed into the river. Yes, a *splendid* person indeed.

That guy’s the heir to the Suun clan, right...?

Didn’t that go to show that if there was a war between the Suun and the Ruu, it was already clear who would come out on top?

As such silly thoughts floated through my head, I returned to the kitchen alongside my benefactor and the rest of the women.

2

“Oh, my... Are the preparations for tonight’s dinner already complete...?”

By the time this new person arrived, we really were just about to hit the climax of our preparations. The aria and giba soup was complete, and we had already baked up a good number of the watery poitan, so all that was left was cooking the hamburger patties and aria.

“Oh, how strange, Vina. It’s rare for you to come here to the kitchen when you’re not on duty,” Granny Tito Min said, turning to the girl.

The one standing in the doorway looking us all over was Vina Ruu, the oldest daughter of the house. She was listlessly playing with her long, chestnut-colored hair and giving a seductive smile.

“I wasn’t busy, so I figured I’d come take a look... but by all appearances there isn’t anything left for me to help with, though.”

Just as she had guessed, we had already finished the preparations for dinner, even though there was still a good bit of time till sunset. What led us to this result was the fact that Rimee Ruu, Reina Ruu, and Tito Min were all far more skilled than I had expected.

But, well, that was a happy miscalculation, I suppose.

“All that’s left is to cook the giba meat, so it’s fine! Big sis Vina, if you help out all the cooking will end up as a charred lump, so could you leave us be?”

“Cut it out, Rimee. Not in front of the guests...” Vina Ruu said, her overly elegant limbs wriggling in embarrassment.

That girl seriously was like a bundle of sex appeal.

“Still, I’m just a bit worried... I mean, Papa Donda certainly seems like he’s been in a bad mood since yesterday, right?”

“Oh, just don’t pay him any mind! Asuta and Ai Fa came here and took on this big job all for Granny Jiba’s sake,” yelled out Rimee Ruu from her place at Ai Fa’s side, and then she puffed up her cheeks.

Just an aside, the person standing next to me right then was Reina Ruu. Vina Ruu’s pale eyes gently moved back and forth between me and her little sister.

“You may say that, but if Papa Donda or Jiza get angry, it’ll be a real problem, right? What do you think, Reina?”

“I’m sure it’ll be fine. Asuta really is amazing at cooking, after all! I’m sure Granny Jiba will happily eat this meal!” Reina Ruu said, with such overwhelming trust in me shining in her eyes that I couldn’t help but feel a little grateful.

After looking into her sister’s eyes, Vina Ruu gave a “Hmm...” and broke out in a smile that told me she was enjoying herself. “Your specialty is manning the stove, Reina, so if you’re willing to say all that, then I feel a bit relieved myself... By the way, what is all that stuff piled up there?”

“Ah, this is poitan. When you heat up poitan, dry it out, rehydrate it, and then bake it, it ends up like this,” I replied, only for Vina Ruu’s slightly droopy eyes to shoot open wide in surprise.

“This is poitan...? And that meat is in a sort of strange shape, too...”

“Ah, with that we chopped giba meat down into fine bits and then reformed it. Doing so makes the sort of tough giba meat a whole lot softer,” I replied, causing Vina Ruu to give another “Hmm...” as she thought the matter over.

“I’ve never seen such strange cooking even in the Genos post town. You really did come from a far off country, didn’t you?”

“That’s right. This stuff isn’t considered strange in the least back where I come from, though,” I replied, then I looked back toward Reina Ruu at my side. “Still, it’s probably pretty hard to memorize this cooking method after only seeing it once, right? It may be good for you to try putting meat chopped up like this in broth from tomorrow on...”

“Put it in broth, you say?”

“Yeah. If it’s chopped up this finely, you can pretty much drink it down without any real chewing. And don’t you think that if you put it over a little heat after chopping it, it’ll strengthen the flavor and make it taste even better?”

“Chop up the meat, heat it a bit, and then add it to the soup, right? In that case, should I use a low heat and cook it slowly like we’re doing today?”

“That’s right. You’d probably be fine adding the sliced meat and aria together at the end, but I really do think it’s best to add the finely chopped meat at the start and then cook it over a low flame. It’ll act as more of a stock that way, and make the whole soup more delicious.”

“I understand. Thank you so much... You really do know all sorts of surprising things, don’t you, Asuta?”

“No, well, it’s just that my family made a living by cooking, so I guess I’ve picked up a few tricks.”

When faced with such a look of earnest respect, it was frankly a bit painfully embarrassing. I mean, I was still just a half-baked chef in training, after all.

But even so, Jiba Ruu was someone precious to Ai Fa and she had grown so weak, so I wanted to do anything I could to help her reclaim the joy of eating.

Ai Fa had said that eating was a means of continuing to live. Even if they were a people who didn’t pay any heed to the matter of taste, as long as they still placed such importance on eating, then I should be able to draw forth that joy.

Both Ai Fa and Rimee Ruu had called my cooking delicious.

I’ve sought out meaning, and value, and happiness in delicious food. In that case, I should still be able to be of use, even in this completely different environment with its own sense of values.

I have no idea what sort of prank threw me into this world, but I’d still live my life in a way that was true to myself. My one and only redeeming feature was my cooking skill, but if I could use that to help even a little to heal the hearts of the people Ai Fa cared about, then what more could I wish for?

It was then that a third “Hmm...” escaped from Vina Ruu’s sensual lips. “You’re a mysterious man, Asuta. I had heard that people who made a living as chefs only existed within the stone walls of the city...”

“I wasn’t born in any place as impressive as the capital. I guess we can just chalk it up to having different cultures, though.”

Just what was Vina Ruu’s attention fixated on? She didn’t have the open animosity about her that Donda Ruu and the other men had shown, and she didn’t seem all that wary of me, either. However, I also couldn’t wipe away the impression that I was being calmly, carefully inspected.

“Well, I’m not all that well versed in cooking anyway. But if you can cause Granny Jiba to find at least a little happiness in life, then I would really

appreciate it. So give the rest your all, I guess."

With that comment, Vina Ruu exited the kitchen.

Once that supply of excess pheremones was gone, I silently breathed a sigh of relief.

"That Vina Ruu certainly is unusual."

"That's certainly true. Vina may just be the most different one out of all seven siblings," Granny Tito Min replied in a rather informal tone, looking rather pleased. "She's certainly not a bad person, but there are times where I just plain have no idea what she's thinking. I mean, she's already 20, but she hasn't seriously considered any talks of marriage."

"Huh... That's certainly unusual, considering how lovely of a woman she is."

The instant I said that, stares suddenly shot my way from all directions. Well, maybe that wasn't the right way to put it, since there were only five people here in the kitchen, myself included.

"So you like women like big sis Vina, Asuta?" Reina Ruu asked, staring intently at my face with a strangely pained look.

"Hmm? No, I meant more in a general sense rather than my own point of view, you know?"

"...Right. Even I think of her that way, despite being family."

So then why were you looking at me like that?

"But big sis Vina is 20. You're 17 just like Ai Fa, right, Asuta?" Rimee Ruu asked. She had a bit of a puzzled look on her face.

"W-what does my age have to do with this? And wait, why is everyone paying so much attention to what I said in the first place?"

"...When you so openly praise a woman, it's only natural to think that you may wish to take her as a wife," Ai Fa chimed in, despite having been silent for quite a while now. Her chilly tone and gaze had me at a loss for words, but I soon pulled myself back together.

"Oh, is that so? I suppose I acted pretty ill-mannered there. I'm still pretty

inexperienced with the customs of the forest's edge, so I beg your forgiveness. But I most certainly didn't mean it in that way."

"You don't need to be so formal about it. There isn't anybody around who would feel bad about having a family member praised, after all," Granny Tito Min said, but Reina Ruu still looked depressed, Rimee Ruu kept looking at me with a puzzled expression, and Ai Fa... Well, with the way she was turning her face away, I certainly couldn't say that she was in a good mood.

I really didn't mean it that way, though...

I mean, I wasn't exactly in any position to go falling head over heels for anyone right now, anyway. But this was a whole other world. Their views on love and marriage were probably totally different then they were back in my world, so I'd have to be more careful about how I treated such matters in the future.

But still, at any rate...

At least for now, Ai Fa had a monopoly on my heart.

What exactly was this feeling, anyway? Was it gratitude and a desire to repay my savior? The natural affinity felt for someone I was living together with? A feeling of respect for her and her character? Even I didn't really get it.

But I definitely thought that it was only because I had someone like Ai Fa around that I was able to live confidently in this other world. That much was for certain.

"Well then, should we get started on finishing up?"

When I said that, everyone's varied expressions gained a bright, lively hopefulness once again.

We may have been from different houses and walks of life, but right now we were all able to strive for the same goal: To bring peace of heart to Jiba Ruu, the oldest of the people of the forest's edge.

3

The time to settle things had come at last.

It was twilight, the time when day blended into night.

We were in the banquet hall, which was lit by candles placed here and there throughout.

Reina Ruu was accompanying the grand elder of the Ruu family, Jiba Ruu, who was staggering into the room. With that, everyone had gathered at last.

The room sprawled out over twice the area of Ai Fa's, at around 30 square meters. There wasn't much difference in the room itself, but the walls were imposingly decorated with the men's swords, bows, fur cloaks, and short spear-looking weapons suspended from what seemed to be hooks made out of giba bones. And on the wall behind the head of the household was a monstrously huge giba's pelt and ominous skull. Just how much must that beast have weighed when it was alive?

Given my occupation, I shouldn't have had any real interest in pelts or animal skeletons, but even I couldn't help but feel a little in awe at the size of the thing.

"Hmph. Looks like we're all finally here," Donda Ruu contemptuously muttered as he heartily chugged down fruit wine.

Jiba Ruu sat down quietly by his side. It was hard to tell if she was incredibly small, or if the man was just far too big, making her look that way.

She wore not only the normal single-piece attire of a married woman, but also a cloth jacket that looked like a shawl, and something that seemed like some sort of magical tool jangling around her neck. She was so small that she almost looked like some sort of shriveled up fruit.

It was hard to tell because her back was bent, but she was definitely at least shorter than Reina Ruu, and her silver-haired head didn't look like it would come up much higher than Rimee Ruu's.

That hair that was utterly lacking in color was done up in twin braids like her granddaughter standing by her side, and her face made me think of a wrinkly monkey. In fact, she was so wrinkled that I couldn't even tell where her eyes were.

The fingers peeking out of her shawl were like withered branches, looking quite thin and weak. It was as if her very existence was a dying flame flickering

out, and when Reina Ruu sat down beside her and let go of her hand, the old woman practically seemed to collapse from exhaustion.

Well... At least she still has the energy about her to get up and walk.

The idea of having an old woman like this primarily subsist off of meat was ridiculous to start with. Still, the die had already been cast. The only thing left was to watch how it played out.

There were two stoves installed at the sides of the dining hall, and on top of each was an iron pot making a cute little boiling sound. They weren't for cooking, though. Rather, they were little stoves meant for keeping in the warmth.

They didn't cook here in the dining hall, and the pantry was in a separate building entirely, so the smell of fat hadn't seeped into the room that strongly. As a result, the only scent filling the air was that of our cooking.

There were fourteen of us seated in an elliptical shape, almost as if we were being sandwiched between the stoves. And at the peak of the ellipse were the head of the clan, Donda, and the clan elder, Jiba. Ai Fa and I were down one step lower, facing each other. Off to my right were the three brothers, Jiza, Darmu, and Ludo. A little further away were the sisters Lala and Rimee. On the left were the next oldest person, Granny Tito Min, the clan head's wife Mia Lea, the oldest son's wife Sati Lea, and the eldest daughter Vina. To the left of Vina Ruu was a bowl meant for Reina Ruu.

As the representative of those who manned the stove today, Reina Ruu was set to help Jiba Ruu eat, after which she would begin her own meal. Apparently that wasn't something special for today, and was a role that someone needed to take up every day. After all, in her old age, Jiba Ruu now had difficulty eating on her own.

By the way, Sati Lea Ruu's infant Kota Ruu was slumbering away in a cradle behind his mother.

"We give thanks for the blessings of the forest..." Donda Ruu declared in a tone far more solemn than I would have expected from that beast of a man. He held up a finger on his left hand — so thick it looked like he was wearing gloves — to his bearded mouth.

“We offer our gratitude to Tito Min, Reina, Rimee, Ai Fa, and Asuta, who manned the flame and gave us our life for this night...”

Everyone repeated those words and gently moved their fingertips across their lips. It was the exact same ritual Ai Fa performed each night before dinner. She had only ever muttered the words in her mouth, so I had never been able to pick up what she was saying. So it was a prayer like this, then? It was sort of a strange feeling, realizing that Ai Fa was quietly chanting my name every night.

And after that prayer was done, dinner kicked off very suddenly.

They didn’t seem to especially be waiting for Ai Fa or me to pick up our spoons or anything. In other words, if we had poisoned the food, we could have wiped them all out while being just fine ourselves. I guess trusting the other person wouldn’t do such a thing was what it meant to let them man your stove.

That’s precisely why we weren’t allowed to fail. Or perhaps I should say why *I* wasn’t allowed to fail.

It may have been true that all five of us made the meal together, but I was the one giving the instructions. If something were to go wrong tonight, it would all be my responsibility. Anyone who said otherwise would simply be trying to take the load off my shoulders.

I wouldn’t let them lay even so much as a finger on Rimee Ruu, Reina Ruu, Tito Min Ruu, or Ai Fa, naturally.

So I’m counting on you, Reina Ruu. Please do a good job of supporting Granny Jiba, I yelled out in my mind as I finally picked up my bowl, but my attention was on Reina Ruu drawing close to Granny Jiba just a few meters away.

As per Rimee Ruu’s request, tonight’s menu was the same as last night’s: Hamburgers made with giba meat topped with fruit wine sauce and roasted aria. For tonight, though, that was accompanied not just by baked poitan, but also by giba soup.

The soup wasn’t the main dish, though. It was ultimately just a side, using a moderate amount of meat and aria. That was what was being heated up in the pots at the moment.

After the prayer had finished, Granny Tito Min stood up, and then started

pouring soup into the bowls of the folks silently eating away. All the while, Reina Ruu didn't move an inch after drawing close to Granny Jiba.

Everything was going according to plan.

As that was going on, I checked how tonight's dinner had turned out while also looking around at everyone else. And honestly, they were all just silently shoveling food into their mouths.

When we brought out the dishes before dinner, they were all saying stuff like, "What's that?" "Is this really giba meat?" and "What's this weird flat thing?" like Rimee Ruu had done last night. But once I offered a simple explanation and told them how to eat it, they were so silent that you would almost think you were at a wake. They all still reacted differently though, with some looking clearly displeased, some with eyes sparkling with curiosity, and some who sat there quietly with a blank expression on their face from start to finish. At any rate, they all kept their mouths shut and waited intently for Jiba Ruu to get seated.

And now, there was a sort of impatient, bated-breath feeling in the air as everyone single-mindedly moved their spoons.

Hamburgers made with giba meat. Giba and aria soup. Baked poitan. These three items combined to a single set meal.

Women ate less than men so I used around 300 grams for their hamburgers, while the men got about 700 grams, and Ai Fa and I got our usual 500 grams. I went especially light on Granny Jiba's, though, using only around 200 grams.

Oh, and as a special point of note, I was able to make full sized burgers rather than mini ones this time around. The Ruu household was equipped with several stoves, so I could just use the standard method of cooking the surface over a high flame and then following up by steadily cooking it through over a low flame. The women got one patty while the 700 grams for the men were split in two, but at any rate everyone got nice, thick, bulky patties.

And naturally, to pack in plenty of flavor, I baked them with fruit wine at the end. But at any rate, I figured the change in size alone would have a great effect on the final product. I mean, with this, I had cleared away my one point of dissatisfaction, that the mini-burgers had felt a little lacking.

It really had turned out to be the right answer, as when I bit emphatically into my three-centimeter thick hamburger, even more juices flowed forth than last night, filling my mouth with a tremendous intensity of flavor. The chewy texture that had already been there was only enhanced, and on top of that the inside hadn't been cooked on a high flame this time around, making it even juicier and softer.

At least to me, this was a first-rate dish that I was highly satisfied with.

As for the Ruu family's reactions... Well, they were still silent.

Some were making the same bitter faces as they did before eating, some looked to be relaxed and enjoying themselves, and some didn't have an expression on their faces whatsoever. I couldn't really especially read their impressions. Maybe it really was a custom to stay silent during the meal, the same way that Ai Fa did.

By the way, a representative of those showing dissatisfaction was the chief, Donda Ruu, one of the pleased ones was the seductive older daughter, Vina Ruu, and Darmu Ruu was part of the expressionless group. They all seemed to fall somewhere in those patterns, though.

Rimee Ruu was naturally chewing away with a big smile on her face, but her big blue eyes occasionally looked over at Granny Jiba with clear concern.

"Here, it's dinner time, Granny Jiba. It was specially made to be extra tasty today. Our visitors put in the effort to make something especially delicious for you," Reina Ruu told her grandmother, bringing the wooden spoon up to the old woman's mouth. On top of the utensil was giba soup and torn up bits of baked poitan. Looked like my plan was moving along smoothly.

"Granny Jiba should be able to eat meat this soft, too!" Rimee Ruu had happily declared. But as someone from a different world, I couldn't wipe away the impression that a hamburger was too heavy a dish for a woman over the age of eighty.

And so, I felt it was best to do things in order.

First up was baked poitan soaked in soup. Next up was aria from the soup. And if she made it through all that, then we would go with the giburger.

However, the burger would be soaked in soup too at first. That way, even someone without teeth could have the ground meat practically melt in their mouth.

If she was able to eat all that and seemed to be up for eating the burger as is, then she could go ahead and give it a try.

I didn't even know how many teeth Granny Jiba had left to start with, after all. And I figured that even if she didn't make it all the way to the burger, it should still be fine. That was why I had prepared the giba soup. Essentially, I had made it just for Granny Jiba's sake. It was just that it turned out well enough that I'd have no problem adding it to the regular menu, so I figured it was good to let the others have their fill, too.

But even so, this menu was ultimately meant for Granny Jiba. And so, I cut down the aria thinner than was my personal preference, then cooked them so thoroughly that they hardly had any crunch left to them. Plus, I had already used plenty of giba meat in the burgers, so I didn't think of the amount used for the soup as anything but a means of providing the stock.

That was the core of what made this a menu especially prepared for Granny Jiba.

"Ah..." Rimee Ruu let out in a quiet whisper. Naturally, I had noticed the change, too.

Even when Reina Ruu had called out to her, Granny Jiba had just slowly shook her head, but now she looked like she had given up on everything, and was finally slurping down the contents of her spoon.

"See, isn't it good? And we've got a whole lot left," Reina Ruu happily declared, then dropped some more torn up poitan into the bowl.

However, Granny Jiba didn't move. It wasn't proper to think this way, but it was almost like she had passed away after that single bite. She wasn't even trembling at the moment.

"What's wrong? It's delicious, right? Rimee, Granny Tito Min, and I helped to make it, too."

Reina Ruu thrust the wooden spoon towards her mouth, seeming to be

rushing things a bit. There was no need to get impatient, though. It was fine to let her eat at her own rate. As I thought that, however, Granny Jiba's mouth opened slightly. With a look of clear relief, Reina Ruu slipped the spoon in through that crack.

"Well then, shall we try some aria next? It should be nice and soft and yummy, too."

When we were cooking, I had Reina Ruu give everything a taste test. After all, I figured if she was going to be suggesting food to Granny Jiba, who had been avoiding meals, it was best that she was also familiar with how everything tasted.

"You're putting so much thought into this for Granny Jiba, who you've never even met..." Reina Ruu had said with teary eyes, but it was only natural to think all that through, considering my position. After all, it was also for Ai Fa and Rimee Ruu's sake, as they cared deeply about Granny Jiba. Plus, I was a chef. Just how delicious would she find my cooking? Any chef who didn't consider such a thing was hardly qualified to be a chef at all.

"It's good, isn't it? Well then, do you want to try a little meat? The meat is also really soft."

Reina Ruu spooned up some giburger at last, about half of a mouthful, which she then dipped in the soup.

How would this go?

I had chopped up the diced aria mixed in with the burgers even more finely than usual, but still, I made them in the usual manner, more or less.

I instructed Reina Ruu that at first, she should avoid the harder surface as much as possible and stick to the softer inside. If all of her molars were missing, then it was possible the ground meat and aria could get stuck in her throat, so I made sure Reina Ruu was thoroughly warned of that risk.

At any rate, the chunk of meat and soup slid into Granny Jiba's mouth. Her wrinkled mouth started to chew away. And then...

Clear tears started to flow forth from where I figured her eyes must be.

“What delicious meat... Is this really, truly giba meat...?”

That withered voice clearly resounded throughout the silent banquet hall.

4

“Yes, it’s giba meat. It’s delicious, right? How about some more?” Reina Ruu asked, clearly tearing up a bit herself. While still holding her bowl, Rimee Ruu started openly sobbing. And Ai Fa... Ai Fa stopped eating, looked down a bit, and tightly closed her eyes.

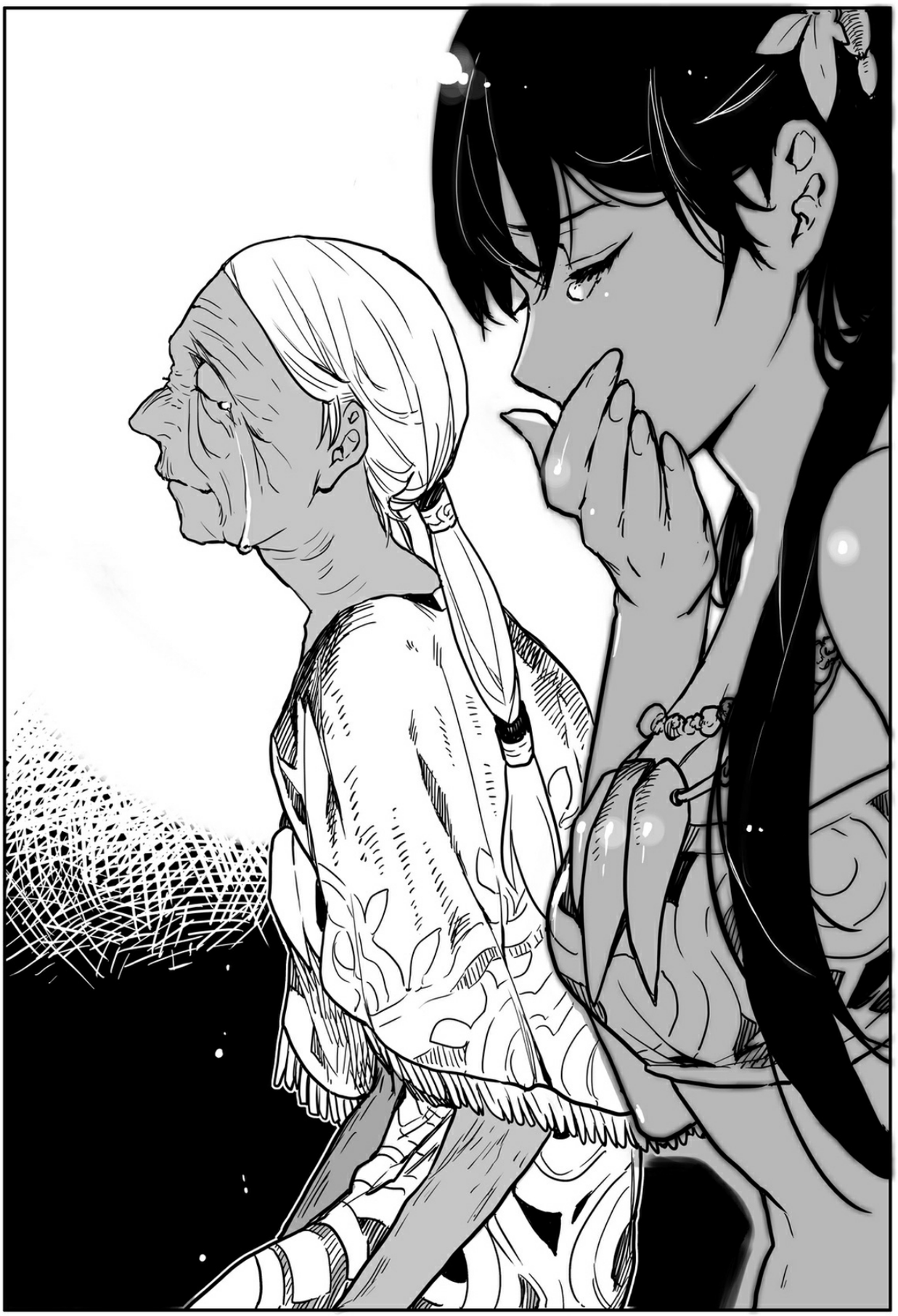
“Then how about trying the meat on its own? This red stuff is made with fruit wine, so it’s really sweet and tasty.”

After Jiba Ruu had eaten a number of mouthfuls, Reina Ruu sliced off a bit of giburger and offered it to her grandmother as is.

I figured the old woman’s front teeth must have been all gone. At any rate, Jiba Ruu opened her mouth wide and it looked like a cave, which the giburger was then enclosed within.

With a very clear chewing sound and a lot more obvious effort, Granny Jiba chomped down on the meat.

“It really is delicious... So very tasty... I can’t believe that giba can taste this good...”



“What’s so good about it? Meat that’s so flabby I’d think it’s gone bad isn’t fit for people to eat!” a voice like thunder roared. Naturally, that was the head of the clan, Donda Ruu.

Apparently he had finished his meal before everyone else, so he threw down his empty bowl and seemed to almost desperately gulp down fruit wine.

“Of course it was sweet when you went and poured fruit wine over it, but the aria are so mushy it’s practically like they’re rotten! And hey, you didn’t just use giba legs! There’s shoulder and back meat mixed in here too, isn’t there?!” Donda Ruu roared, his disheveled hair like a mane as dangerous-looking wrinkles formed on his face. “Only scavengers like the mundt eat the giba’s torso! I’m not some beast from the forest! I’m a human being! A proud hunter of the forest’s edge! Just what the hell were you thinking, making me eat the same thing as a mundt?!”

“You certainly are a yappy child. You really haven’t changed at all since becoming head of the clan, have you?”

Granny Jiba’s eyes, hidden within her wrinkles, slowly turned to face the head of the family.

Donda Ruu may have led the family, but at the same time, he was also this woman’s grandson.

And yet, the man glared back at this old lady who must have been less than half his size with a fire burning in his eyes.

“If this is what mundt eat, then I’d have to say they’re living better than us humans. Well, that may actually be the truth of the matter out there in the forest...” Maybe I was just imagining things, but the old woman’s voice sounded noticeably stronger than it did just moments ago. “But if that’s how you want to think, then that’s all well and good, clan chief Donda. It’s up to everyone to decide what they believe... And this old lady believes this meat is right and proper.”

“Amazing... Granny Jiba is all full of energy and talking like she used to...” Rimee Ruu muttered.

I still couldn’t quite tell where the old woman’s eyes were, but this time they

turned steadily to face in that direction.

“You helped make this too, didn’t you, Rimee? It’s incredibly delicious. Thank you, Rimee.”

“Not at all!” Rimee said while shaking her head, then started shoving the rest of her hamburger in her mouth as tears streamed down her face. After watching over that sight for a short while, Granny Jiba muttered, “Ai Fa... Are you there?”

I looked over to my side, and saw Ai Fa’s shoulders suddenly twitch.

“I’m sorry, but this old lady’s eyes really have given out. I can’t see a thing in this light... If you’re there, could you come this way and let me see your face?”

Ai Fa wasn’t moving, so I said, “Hey,” and nudged her in the side with my elbow. She shot me back a seriously dangerous glare, but then she slowly stood up. And for some reason, she was firmly holding me by the wrist.

“Huh? Hey, hold on!” I yelled out and then hurriedly placed my soup bowl on the floor. Pulled along by strength that paid my intentions no heed whatsoever, I was dragged over alongside Ai Fa and ended up kneeling next to Granny Jiba. Donda Ruu, meanwhile, was glaring at me with a seriously overwhelming look in his eyes.

“Jiba Ruu... I am Ai Fa, of the Fa clan. This is Asuta, of my household.”

Naturally, Granny Jiba couldn’t see me either, but at any rate she reached her wrinkled fingers out towards Ai Fa’s face. Her dry, rough fingers that looked like little more than skin and bone touched Ai Fa’s silky smooth cheek.

“Ah, it’s been a while... How many years has it been, now? I’ve been wanting to see you for quite some time, Ai Fa.”

Now that I was seeing her up close, I could tell clearly that Granny Jiba was a proper human being, rather than some dried up old fruit. Both her face and fingers were wrinkled, her large nose and thin lips had what almost looked like fine fissures running through them, like her age had been carved into her, and perhaps because of her lack of front teeth, it was hard to understand what she was saying. But underneath her drooping eyelids, there were blue eyes shining with an inconceivable amount of wisdom, and her face like a dried fruit wore an

expression that was overflowing with affection.

What a truly kind face. What a soft, gentle expression. It really may have been the first time in my life that I had ever seen an old lady wear such a joyful smile.

“Reina Ruu, you should partake in this delicious meal, too. Ai Fa, will you help this old woman to eat?”

“...If that’s what you wish for, Jiba Ruu.”

As Ai Fa gently took Jiba Ruu by the arm, Reina Ruu stood up while wiping away tears from the corners of her eyes.

“What do you want to eat? Meat? Or poitan?”

“Giba meat. This truly is delicious meat...”

Ai Fa remained expressionless as always as she somewhat clumsily brought the spoon to the old woman’s mouth.

“Ah, it’s so good. You made this, didn’t you, Ai Fa...?”

“No, I largely just watched. This meal was made by your family, as well as Asuta here.”

“Asuta...”

With that, her terribly thin eyes pointed my way. If I were this close to that eldest brother, Jiza Ruu, would I be able to tell how he was feeling, too? Because right now, a light of clear jubilation was shining forth from this old woman’s hardly visible eyes.

“Asuta of the Fa clan... You made this meal?”

“Yes, at Rimee Ruu’s request. My father was a chef in a far off nation. I was nothing but a trainee who assisted him, but if you like what I’ve made even so, then I greatly appreciate that.”

Granny Jiba’s hands wandered through the air, trembling as they went. After silently looking over at Ai Fa, I nervously took hold of them. Her dry, wrinkled fingers felt even more withered than an old branch, but I could feel a clear warmth from them as they gripped my hands.

“Thank you... It had become tiresome for this old woman just to keep on

living. I'm not able to walk properly, and I couldn't even eat a proper meal... I've just been growing old while being nothing but a nuisance to my family. Every day, I did nothing but suffer, questioning why the gods hadn't taken this ancient soul up into the skies."

"You're not a nuisance!" Rimee Ruu shouted out, only for her red-haired sister by her side to give her head a nudge to quiet her.

"You see, this old woman came here to this forest back when she was five years old. Yes, I was one of that initial thousand to renounce the Southern God Jagar and devote ourselves to the Western God Selva."

"I see..."

"But I just couldn't come to love this place. The southern forest was a bountiful place, and the only animals that would attack people were large monkeys and poisonous snakes. And we could pick fruit whenever we wanted... At times we would dig up bugs from the earth, and we would eat lizards that sparkled all the colors of the rainbow... The people from the city looked down on us as savages, but I was happy..."

Granny Jiba's eyes no longer seemed like they were looking at me or Ai Fa. As she gazed at some far off place, tears started to well up in her now crystal clear eyes.

"But our forest was burned down by soldiers, and we fled to the west. Then, we moved in here to the western forest's edge. The people of the western capital ordered us to hunt giba, and forbade us from laying a hand on the blessings of the forest. But even so, everyone still seemed happy at the start. There wasn't any more need to eat lizard meat, or gather rotted fruits and mushrooms. We could eat as much giba meat as we wanted, and partake in the fruits of man's fields, they said..."

"Right..."

It may not have even been necessary for me to chime in at all. After all, the old woman's eyes were now staring at the sights of days long past.

"But this forest's edge turned out to be a horrifying place. In the first year alone, one hundred men were killed by giba. And the following year, we lost

another hundred. Men kept on dying one after another, and then a similar number of women and children would die of starvation. In those first few years, over half of my thousand brethren were wiped out."

"Right."

"The Gaaze clan fell to ruin. The Reema clan, too. After that the Suun and Ruu clans took charge of our people, and we somehow managed to establish our current way of life... Eating the meat of giba we hunt down, and selling their horns and tusks for the blessings of the fields, that is. With that, we had finally found a way to survive here at the forest's edge, but... The whole time, I wanted to return to the forest where I was born."

I noticed that nearly everyone had finished eating, and were all quietly listening to their elder's words.

"But our forest burned to the ground long ago, and those who knew it died out one after another, until I was the only one left. I was sad, and lonely, and always thinking of a place that wasn't here, despite being surrounded by so much family. And giba meat wasn't even a little bit tasty. The fruits of people's labors in the fields weren't delicious in the least. And as I thought that, one tooth after another fell out, until finally I couldn't even eat giba meat. Ah, I felt like I was experiencing the anger of the western god... But now, I finally feel like I'm back with everyone else. Why did I feel like that, only ever praying to return to the southern forest as soon as I could...?"

Her dry, cracked hands grabbed mine with a surprising amount of strength. At some point, her clear blue eyes had returned back to me.

"I only ever thought of my dead family and my burnt forest. But today, I was able to think of my living family and this forest's edge. My soul is finally in service of the Western God Selva rather than the Southern God Jagar. I'm here with my family, eating giba meat and staying alive. I feel the need to keep on living. I finally went and remembered something so completely obvious..."

"I'm sure your feelings simply weakened because your teeth fell out and you weren't able to eat anything delicious any longer," I said, offering a rather foolish response. Ai Fa looked a touch surprised in response.

I mean, what did you expect? I'm nothing but a chef trainee. There's no way I

would have the skills needed to carry out a refined conversation with the elder of the forest's edge, who had lived for over eighty harsh years.

"I'm sure you must have thought of those people as precious to you before you started growing so weak. Otherwise, Ai Fa and Rimee Ruu would have never been so desperate to help you. It was precisely because they wanted from the depths of their hearts to save you and make you remember the joy of living that I felt the need to muster up what little strength I had."

Granny Jiba silently turned towards Ai Fa. My beloved benefactor bit down on her lip a bit and glared back at the old woman as if she was angry.

"If you're going to thank anyone, then please thank them. I'm already plenty satisfied just by hearing you say my cooking was delicious."

"It was... It truly, truly was. This old woman hated giba meat, and thought that poitan wasn't meant to be eaten by man, but now I want to eat more. I want to keep on living here at the forest's edge." With a gentle smile on her face, Granny Jiba whispered, "Ai Fa, could you please remove my necklace?"

Ai Fa, still looking angry, did as she was told and removed the necklace, then placed it in the old woman's small hands. With her trembling fingers that looked like twigs, she then removed the giba tusks and horns from their string.

"Ai Fa and Asuta of the Fa clan, Jiba Ruu of the Ruu clan offers you her gratitude. Please, accept it."

There were only three horns and tusks in total, but she offered one each to both Ai Fa and myself.

"Hey, elder, that's...!" Donda Ruu shouted out, only for Granny Jiba to start laughing, her back still facing him.

"It's these giba tusks and horns that govern the lives of the people of the forest's edge. It is my wish that they become the flesh and blood of you two, who I feel a great debt of gratitude towards. I, Jiba Ruu of the Ruu clan, offer your souls my blessing."

That was the very first firm payment I had received for my work here in this other world.

Intermezzo: The Youngest Daughter of the Ruu Clan

Rimee Ruu first laid eyes on that foreigner on the 25th of the yellow month.

After finishing her work for the morning at the river, she took off intently, running down the yellow trodden path through the forest, towards the Fa house. Today was a rare day when she didn't have much work after the sun hit its peak, so she got her mother's permission to go out and then practically flew away from the Ruu home.

As Ai Fa had to take care of her entire household on her own, she was far busier than Rimee Ruu. In the two years since Gil Fa, her father, passed away, they had hardly even had a chance to see each other at all.

When was the last time she had met with Ai Fa? It may have been about 10 days at this point.

Just the thought of getting to see Ai Fa was enough to cause Rimee Ruu to naturally break out in a smile. And yet, no one was at the Fa house. Rimee Ruu thought maybe she was at the river, cleaning up after last night's dinner, but Ai Fa wasn't there either.

Worried and nervous about the thoughts that maybe she was kidnapped by the Suun clan, Rimee Ruu knocked on the door of the nearest house to the Fa home, which belonged to a small clan known as the Fou.

"Excuse me, this is Rimee Ruu of the Ruu clan! Is anyone there?"

The door slowly opened, and a terribly thin, pale woman's face peeked out.

"What is it? What business could someone from the Ruu clan have with the Fou clan?"

"Pardon me! I was looking for Ai Fa. Do you happen to know where she went?" Rimee Ruu asked the woman, who she had seen many times in the past. However, the woman seemed to have wasted away far more compared to how she looked in the girl's memories, and her eyes seemed positively listless. On top of all that, she was cradling a little baby in her arms. The Ruu family had the

baby Kota Ruu around, but this one was even smaller. Somehow, she couldn't help but worry if he would have a chance to grow any bigger.

"Ai Fa, is it...? It seems she headed out to the forest this morning..." the thin woman weakly replied.

"The forest? This early in the morning?"

"Yes... She had some foreigner I didn't recognize with her."

"A foreigner?"

Rimee Ruu didn't quite understand the meaning of the word.

Apparently there were loads of foreigners down in the post town, but they never stepped foot in the forest's edge. The people from town treated giba and the people who hunted them like they were demons.

"What do you mean, a foreigner? What is Ai Fa doing with someone like that?"

"I don't know... She was walking around the settlement with him last evening, too."

"Hmm...?"

She still didn't get what was going on at all, but Rimee Ruu figured that was best to ask Ai Fa directly, so she gave the woman a small bow.

"Thanks! Well then, I'll go wait at the Fa house for Ai Fa to return home!"

"Ah... Please hold on. Um, Ai Fa is still refusing to marry into the Ruu clan, isn't she?"

"Huh? Yeah... What about it?"

"Then... Wouldn't it be best for you not to be involved with Ai Fa anymore, considering you're part of the Ruu clan...?"

There was a desperate light in the woman's lifeless eyes.

"Last night, the eldest son of the Suun clan was prowling around the Fa house... If the Suun and Ruu clans fight, the forest's edge will be destroyed..."

"Yeah, but that shouldn't mean Ai Fa and I can't have anything to do with one

another!” Rimee Ruu said, raising her voice without thinking. The woman shrunk away, looking clearly frightened. She was surely afraid of the Suun and Ruu clans, which held the greatest power at the forest’s edge. And she was also avoiding Ai Fa, who had cut ties with both of them.

That was why Ai Fa was left all on her own.

Feeling a little sad over how things had gone, Rimee Ruu gave a “Goodbye” and one more bow. However, the woman called out to her again.

“Please hold on. I know I’ve already given you impertinent advice, but I think that being involved with a foreigner such as that would also be bad for the Ruu clan. Don’t you believe you should be sure to get your clan head’s permission first?”

The image of her father, the head of the Ruu clan, Donda Ruu, popped into Rimee Ruu’s head. It certainly was true that he was always saying not to get involved with foreigners. Rimee Ruu pretty much never left the forest’s edge, though, so she essentially didn’t have any chances to interact with any in the first place, though. As a result, she didn’t know exactly how strong of a taboo it may be.

If Rimee Ruu were to make the wrong choice here and now, there was a chance she could end up banned from interacting with Ai Fa entirely. And that was something she absolutely couldn’t stand.

I just want to be friends with Ai Fa...

Currently, Ai Fa herself was also trying to cut ties with Rimee Ruu. The reason behind that was the same one the woman had mentioned. Ai Fa had earned the animosity of the Suun clan, and she also shouldn’t have anything to do with anyone from the Ruu clan. On top of that, she had also turned down an offer to marry into the main Ruu household. That hadn’t been enough to result in bad blood, but it was definitely true that Donda had given up on Ai Fa after that point.

Honestly, the idea of Ai Fa becoming part of her family had never felt real to Rimee Ruu, so she really didn’t care about all that. The issue, though, was that nobody was happy about the idea of Ai Fa and Rimee Ruu having anything to do with one another.

“Ah...” the Fou woman let slip in a quiet voice.

Rimee Ruu followed her line of sight, and saw Ai Fa standing there. She was with some unfamiliar foreigner, crossing the road. They were shouldering a grigee pole, which had a large giba dangling from it. While feeling impressed by the way that Ai Fa had hunted down a giba this early in the morning, Rimee Ruu started to carefully examine the foreigner.

A foreigner... Yeah, that was definitely what he was.

His hair was black, and so were his eyes. His skin was like that of the western people, an ivory-white with just a hint of brown to it. And he was still young, probably around Ai Fa’s age.

He was dressed kind of strangely, too. His torso and lower body were covered in pure white, and the only skin he was showing were his face and hands, plus he had some sort of white cloth wrapped around his head.

He... Looks pretty weak, somehow.

Though they were both carrying the giba, only the foreigner was breathing heavily and had unsteady footing. If it went on much longer, he would probably collapse.

And yet, for some reason, this foreigner looked like he was really enjoying himself. And oddly, much as his face was every bit as pale as the folks from the city, there was a strong, brilliant light shining in his black eyes. That one point wasn’t all that much like the city folk. Though with that said, he didn’t resemble the people of the forest’s edge at all either. There was a sort of unusual air about this foreigner, who didn’t seem to resemble anyone at all.

Well, he doesn’t seem like a particularly bad person...

Still, city folk were ultimately still city folk. The people of the forest’s edge and the folks who lived in the city of stone just plain didn’t get along.

Rimee Ruu had absolutely no clue as to why a person like that was hanging out with Ai Fa.

Before long, the foreigner and Ai Fa disappeared from sight, never even noticing Rimee Ruu or the woman.

“You saw him, didn’t you? We’ve never had a foreigner lurking around the forest’s edge like that before. This may be some sort of ill omen...”

“That’s all the more reason that I need to help Ai Fa out!”

Rimee Ruu crossed her arms and started to think. But no matter how much she thought, she couldn’t come up with an answer. There was a limit to what an eight year old child could do, and this may not exactly be the sort of issue where it was alright for her to go getting involved or speaking up. Considering the circumstances, it was important that she clear up what exactly the taboo involving foreigners was about.

She’d gone and run all this way and not even gotten to say a single word to Ai Fa, but there was no helping that.

After saying goodbye to the excessively worried-looking Fou woman, Rimee Ruu went back down the path she had taken there.

“Hmm? Where did you go off to, Rimee?” her youngest brother, Ludo, asked her when she made it back to the plaza in the center of the Ruu houses. The men didn’t have any work to do till the sun hit its peak, and Ludo had always been an early riser.

Since Rimee had run all the way back from the Fa house, she held onto her elder brother’s arm as she caught her breath.

“Um, apparently there’s a foreigner staying at the Fa house! What should I do?”

“Huh...? What’s that about?”

It wasn’t the sort of thing that was easily explained, so Rimee Ruu decided to tell Ludo Ruu everything that she had seen and heard throughout the morning.

“I don’t really get it. What’s that Ai Fa woman doing getting close to a foreigner? And hey, you still haven’t cut ties with her?”

“Of course not! We’re friends for life!”

“Oh, I see. Well, whatever. At any rate, if you want to do anything about that foreigner, you’re going to have to talk to dad first. The taboo against interfering with folks from the city of stone is especially strict, after all.”

“Is that how Ai Fa ended up doing the bidding of such a weak looking guy, I wonder?” Rimee asked, a desperate look on her face, only to get a, “Don’t be stupid,” back from her brother as he mussed up his yellowish hair. “That woman didn’t back down to our dad or those folks from the Suun clan, so there’s no way she’d let some guy from the city just push her around, right? Actually, it’s probably likelier that she captured that guy and is making him help her out with her work. But honestly, I’ve got no clue what’s going on...”

“That’s true. Just what is Ai Fa doing together with someone from the city...? I’ve been thinking really hard about it, but I still have no idea.”

“Hmph. Still, maybe she doesn’t have anyone left to rely on but someone from the city. She made enemies of the Suun and Ruu, and the other families are so frightened of getting involved that they won’t even come near her.”

“The Ruu clan isn’t Ai Fa’s enemy!” Rimee Ruu angrily yelled out, but her teasing older brother didn’t pull away his shoulder that she was holding onto.

“Even if we’re not enemies, she turned down the offer to marry into the family, so there’s nothing that can be done about it now. No matter how much you may kick and scream, we can’t go saving someone who isn’t even part of our family.”

“Whatever! Little Ludo, you jerk!”

Rimee Ruu stamped her feet on the ground, and then took off running for the house.

“You’re the little one!” she heard her brother yell out from behind, and then she pulled open the door.

Her father wasn’t there, so he must have still been sleeping. In the reception room, her eldest brother Jiza Ruu and his wife Sati Lea Ruu were quietly talking, their son Kota Ruu in between them.

“Oh, my. What is it, Rimee?” Sati Lea Ruu asked with a gentle smile, swaying the cradle woven from grass all the while.

Rimee Ruu was clearly irritated even as she removed her footwear and came into the house, then plopped down in front of them.

“Listen to this! There’s apparently a foreigner staying at the Fa house! What should I do about it?”

Her brother Jiza Ruu was even scarier than their father, Donda Ruu. But he felt stronger than anyone else about upholding the laws of the forest’s edge, so he would surely be the perfect person to say what should be done in this situation. And yet, the words he spoke after hearing Rimee’s full explanation weren’t something she could simply accept.

“It’s for the best that you avoid approaching anyone from the city whenever possible. Until this foreigner leaves, you shouldn’t go anywhere near the Fa house, Rimee.”

“But why? If that foreigner turns out to be a bad person, Ai Fa could be in danger!”

“As long as the people of the city and the forest’s edge each respect their own laws, nothing dangerous should happen. And that head of the Fa clan calls herself a hunter, so no man from town should be able to get the better of her, right?”

“But...”

“The head of the Fa clan brought a townsperson into this settlement by her own discretion. As long as no problems occur as a result, no one can judge her for that. But if you interfere and throw off the equilibrium of things, bringing forth some sort of incident, then the head of the Fa clan will be the one forced to answer for it,” Jiza Ruu quietly explained, his expression remaining perfectly tranquil. “And so, it’s best that you don’t get involved, Rimee.”

Rimee couldn’t accept that in the least. And yet, when Donda Ruu appeared later on, all he would say was, “Don’t go getting involved with foreigners.” He looked so displeased that she was lucky he didn’t come out and say, “Cut all ties with the Fa clan,” so Rimee Ruu couldn’t exactly push the issue further.

Why isn’t anyone worried about Ai Fa?

That was what made Rimee Ruu saddest of all.

Two years ago, Ai Fa received a request to marry into the Ruu clan. Up until then, she hadn’t interacted with anyone from the clan but Rimee Ruu and the

elder, Jiba Ruu, but when Donda Ruu heard how she had thoroughly beaten up the heir to the Suun clan, he found that amusing and tried to set up his second son, Darmu Ruu, with her. It was a pretty ridiculous idea, but at least on the surface, nobody opposed it. The worst that happened was that Jiza Ruu made a bit of a frown.

She had everyone's pity for her circumstances, seeing how she had lost all of her family at the age of 15, and then earned the animosity of the Suun clan, who led their people. On top of that, she was such a strong-willed woman that she would surely be a good fit for the Ruu clan. And so, pretty much nobody objected to the union.

Rimee Ruu felt a little awkward at the idea of having her friend since she was very little suddenly become family, and it just didn't sit right with her. But ultimately she accepted that it wasn't so bad of an idea for everyone, especially seeing how Jiba Ruu's legs had grown so weak that it had gotten hard for her to go visit Ai Fa.

But in the end, Ai Fa turned the offer down. She said that she would become the head of the Fa clan, and live as a hunter. When Rimee Ruu heard that, she was perfectly satisfied with the answer. After all, when her father Gil Fa was still alive, he had taken Ai Fa out into the forest to help him hunt. And Ai Fa always looked like she was really enjoying herself when he did. That had probably been why it just hadn't clicked for Rimee Ruu that Ai Fa would never hunt again and instead just become someone's wife.

At the time, Rimee Ruu was just six so she hadn't thought it through quite that logically, but when she heard that Ai Fa had turned down the proposal, she definitely felt much more relieved than disappointed.

Even if they weren't related by blood, Ai Fa was still very important to Rimee Ruu. And if they could keep the same sort of relationship they had up until now, then that was just fine.

But ultimately, Ai Fa ended up changing after all.

She already had bad blood with the Suun clan, and she started saying that she shouldn't have any ties to the Ruu clan either, even starting to distance herself from Rimee Ruu. On top of that, Rimee Ruu's family seemed to have lost all

interest in Ai Fa, too. At first they were angry and disappointed at the refusal, but before long nobody even bothered to bring up her name.

Even if she didn't become family, nothing about Ai Fa's circumstances should have changed. But now nobody pitied Ai Fa, even though she had no one to rely on, she had made enemies of the clan that led their people, and was left to live all on her own.

Ai Fa's only friends were just her and Jiba Ruu. And Jiba Ruu couldn't even really do much walking nowadays. In that case, she was the only one left who could be by Ai Fa's side.

It was that thought that led to Rimee Ruu heading to the Fa house over and over, even though Ai Fa treated her coldly. That had continued on for two years, but now that foreigner had appeared. Just who was he, anyway?

Both her father and brother had told her to stay away, but she just couldn't leave it be. And so, Rimee Ruu made sure to visit the Fa house nearly every day after first spying that foreigner.

Even if she got close, it should still be fine as long as they didn't notice. Plus, they only ever told her not to approach foreigners. That meant it should still be fine to wait until they were separated and then grab Ai Fa and have her explain.

Unfortunately, she just didn't seem to be able to find a chance. They seemed to be practically stuck together both day and night. The only real opportunity was when Ai Fa headed out to hunt when the sun hit its peak, but Rimee Ruu had work back home at that time.

As she idly wasted away time in that manner, five days had already passed before she even knew it.

I ended up being late today, too...

The path she was running intently down was already getting dim and gloomy. Today she helped out peeling pelts, so she was running especially late.

At this rate she definitely wouldn't make it back to her house in time for dinner and her dad would end up roaring at her, but Rimee Ruu had reached a mental state where she just couldn't sleep peacefully if she hadn't checked that day and made sure that Ai Fa was still alright.

Just what does Ai Fa intend to do with that foreigner?

As she observed them closely, she couldn't sense even a hint of anything dangerous going on. Every once in a while they would quarrel, but neither of them seemed to ever get seriously angry. Even so, she couldn't see the reason behind Ai Fa letting some foreigner stay in her house.

Did that foreigner want Ai Fa as his bride, perhaps? Or was he just letting himself in uninvited?

But still, if Ai Fa didn't feel that way about him, surely she never would have let him stay there, and if she was going to respond to his feelings, something was bound to happen. But at least for now, Ai Fa hadn't cut her long hair that was proof she was unwed, nor had she started wearing a one-piece outfit.

I'd hate it if Ai Fa ended up leaving the forest's edge...

That was the greatest source of worry for Rimee Ruu.

At that moment, Ai Fa had cut all ties with the people of the forest's edge. Rimee Ruu and Jiba Ruu were the only ones left who would call her a friend, and even then, she was trying to separate herself from them, too.

Was it really possible to keep on living all on your own? Rimee Ruu couldn't even imagine it.

And so, it wouldn't be strange at all if Ai Fa had grown sick of the forest's edge and was thinking of moving to some far off land.

I mean, I want Ai Fa to be happy, but...

But, she would also just hate it if she could never see Ai Fa ever again. If they were separated for life, that would be unbearable.

That may have been why Rimee Ruu had ended up visiting the Fa house in this manner, day after day.

Just like Ludo Ruu and Jiza Ruu had said, it was hard to imagine that pale townsperson getting the better of Ai Fa. But wasn't it possible that she would choose to leave the forest's edge and go off on a journey with him? Perhaps it was because she couldn't shake that feeling of unease that she felt the need to constantly confirm that Ai Fa was still there.

By the time Rimee Ruu finally reached the Fa house, the sun was approaching the western forest. The second that she saw the light from candles through the latticed windows, she breathed a sigh of relief.

Thank goodness... She's still there.

Now she just needed to make sure Ai Fa looked alright, and then she could head straight on home for the day. As that thought ran through her mind, she creeped up to the window as quietly as possible.

Suddenly, Rimee Ruu felt the urge to shout out, "Ah...!"

Ai Fa and the foreigner were eating dinner. And that foreigner... He was wearing the clothing of the people of the forest's edge. He still had a pure white cloth around his head and chest, but the vest he had on top of that was clearly the sort her people wore. And on top of that, it was definitely the clothing that Gil Fa wore when he was alive.

Then this foreigner really is marrying into her clan? He's going to be Ai Fa's husband?

Suddenly a whole new sort of unease and doubt welled up inside of her. Which is to say, she couldn't help but wonder if this foreigner was qualified to be Ai Fa's husband.

Rimee Ruu got as high up on her tippy toes as she could manage, and peered at the two of them through the lattice. She was an expert when it came to hiding her presence, so surely even someone as sharp as Ai Fa wouldn't notice.

It seemed that the two of them were having a bit of an argument today, too.

"Huuuuh? Why? Are you still angry about what happened around noontime?" the foreigner asked, clearly lacking any restraint.

Outside of its pale color, the profile of his face didn't seem to have anything special about it. City folk had womanly faces to start with, so he probably looked pretty average. He really didn't stand out at all. Well, outside of the light shining strongly in his black eyes, that was. He really did have mysterious eyes. Despite that strong light, they also looked uneasy, somehow. They looked kind like a woman's eyes, but also strong like a man's, which made them pretty hard to pin down.

The one thing Rimee Ruu could say, though... Was that she didn't find them unpleasant.

"Noontime? Ah. You mean when you lost control of yourself and acted insolently. I had already completely forgotten about that," Ai Fa replied in a low voice.

As Rimee Ruu wondered with a tilt of her head just how the foreigner had "acted insolently," the expression on the man's face took another sudden shift. He went from looking positively panicked to a bit suspicious.

"You forgot... Then why won't you tell me your thoughts?"

"Stop asking! If I don't want to tell you, then that's all there is to it!" Ai Fa suddenly shouted out, causing Rimee Ruu to shrink back. The foreigner looked surprised, too.

This foreigner's expression sure did shift around a lot, which made it easy to read his emotions. The bigger surprise, though, was how open Ai Fa was showing how she felt. Why was her face going so red, and why was she looking down a bit, and what was with the way that she was hiding her face behind that wooden bowl? That may have blocked the foreigner's view from where he was sitting, but since Rimee Ruu was observing from the side, she could see Ai Fa's face clearly. And right now, Ai Fa was looking seriously embarrassed.

"Just drop it! Don't look at me!"

Ai Fa wasn't the sort to let others see how she was feeling very often. Whether she was happy or sad, the most there would ever be was a slight shift in her eyes or mouth, which made it pretty hard to tell how she was feeling inside. And that trend had only grown stronger ever since Gil Fa had passed away.

And yet, here Ai Fa was openly showing how she felt, which seriously surprised Rimee Ruu.

Meanwhile, the foreigner gave a sigh, sounding a bit disappointed somehow, and then seemed to get lost in his own thoughts.

That must have been why he hadn't noticed that Ai Fa had lowered the bowl and started focusing intently on his face. And now, she seemed to have broken

out in an ever-so-slight smile.

With her cheeks still red, Ai Fa was staring straight at the foreigner's face, looking terribly satisfied, and also extremely happy. The gentle, kind light in those blue eyes of Ai Fa's that she loved so much reminded Rimee Ruu of when Gil Fa was still alive.

Ai Fa...

Ai Fa had never made a face like that in these past two years. Ai Fa's expression had frozen stiff into something icy cold, as if a part of her heart had died alongside her father.

Then it must be him, right?

Where he was born didn't matter. As long as he brought peace to Ai Fa's suffering heart, Rimee Ruu didn't care if he was a foreigner or whatever.

As that thought passed through her head, she looked at the foreigner and saw that he was looking down a bit and seemed to be smiling, too. He had appeared to be disappointed just before, but now she could see the same joy and satisfaction in his black eyes that she had observed in Ai Fa's as he looked at the strange meat in front of him.

He must have felt the same way as Ai Fa. After all, families tended to be that way.

Ai Fa had lost Gil Fa, and she had refused the offer to marry into the Ruu clan. But sure enough, it seemed like she still needed family after all. It was just too sad for her to keep on living all on her own.

Rimee Ruu wiped away the tears that had steadily built up with the back of her hand, and then called out in an intentionally cheerful voice, "Hey, what is that that you're eating?"

Afterword

You have my deepest thanks for picking up this book, “Cooking With Wild Game.” I’m the author, EDA. I would definitely feel grateful if you remember me.

This work was originally serialized on the novel publishing site “Shousetsuka ni Narou (Become a Novelist)” in August of 2014. As I write this afterword in January of 2015, the ending for the folks of the forest’s edge remains far off in the distance, and the series is still in progress.

It’s thanks to everyone who supported me as the book was being serialized that I now have the honor of getting it published like this. I truly am grateful, from the depths of my heart.

I tried my hardest to make something that would be enjoyable both to the people who have supported me up until now, as well as the people picking this book up for the first time, but how do you think it turned out? I’d certainly be glad if it meets your tastes.

The protagonist is thrown into a parallel world, and forms bonds with others by using his cooking skills! I started writing this story thanks to the inspiration of that single idea. From there, though, things sure have developed in an interesting way, sometimes going just as originally planned and other times diverging greatly, and with unexpected characters playing big parts while characters who were supposed to be important fade into the shadows.

It’s precisely those uncertain elements that give a story its dynamism, though! Or at least, that’s what I tell myself as I struggle onwards, day by day. I’m half anxiously watching over Asuta, Ai Fa and the other characters, wondering what their fates will be myself, and I think that’s what makes it so much fun. And nothing could make me happier than if you readers have shared in that joy.

Just let me finish by giving thanks to my editor at Hobby Japan, Kochimo for your wonderful illustrations, everyone else involved with the production of this book, and of course all of you who purchased it. And with that, I put down my pen.

Well then, I hope to see you all again with the next volume!

January 2015,

EDA



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Cooking with Wild Game: Volume 1

by EDA

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