COOKING WITH WILD GAME

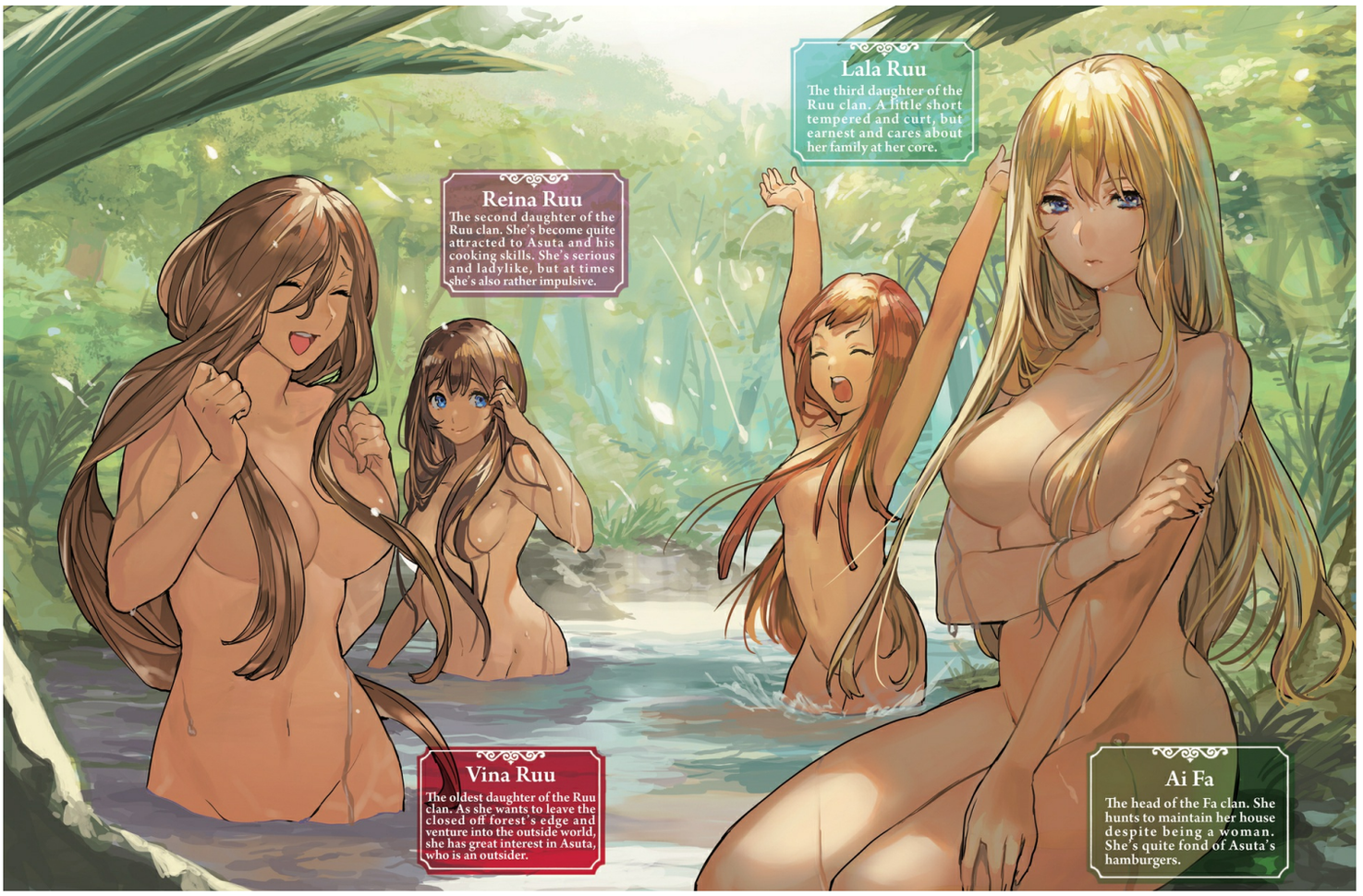
VOLUME 2

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"Hey, kid, are you prepared to treat people from another house to that food you're so proud of?"
A smile broke out on Donda Ruu's stone-like face, calling to mind a carnivore that had found its prey
COOKING WITH WILD GAME
VOLUME 2


Lala Ruu
The third daughter of the Ruu clan. A little short tempered and curt, but earnest and cares about her family at her core.
Reina Ruu
The second daughter of the Ruu clan. She's become quite attracted to Asuta and his cooking skills. She's serious and ladylike, but at times she's also rather impulsive.
Vina Ruu
The oldest daughter of the Ruu clan. As she wants to leave the closed off forest's edge and venture into the outside world, she has great interest in Asuta, who is an outsider.
Ai Fa
The head of the Fa clan. She hunts to maintain her house despite being a woman. She's quite fond of Asuta's hamburgers.

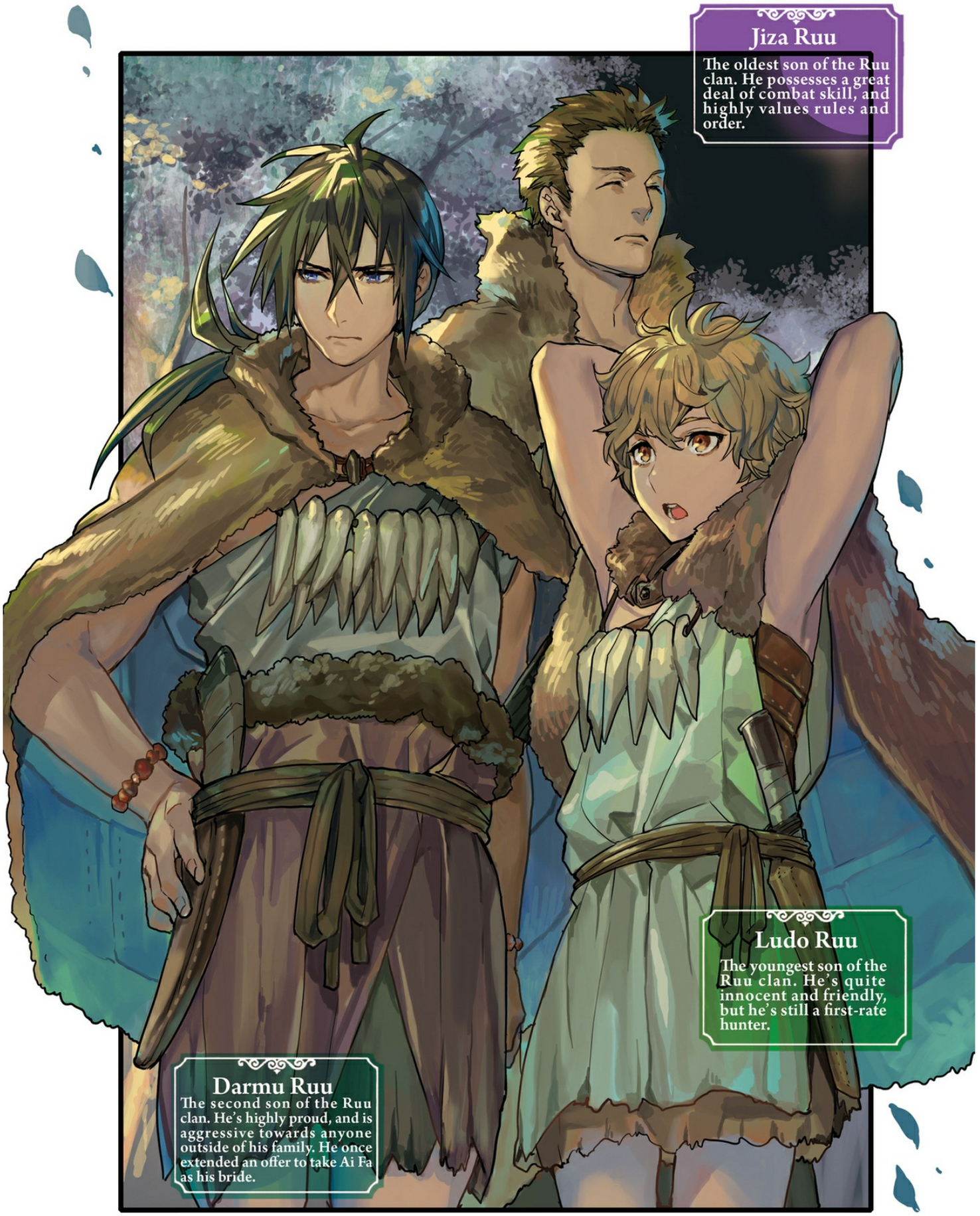

Jiza Ruu
The oldest son of the Ruu clan. He possesses a great deal of combat skill, and highly values rules and order.
Ludo Ruu
The youngest son of the Ruu clan. He's quite innocent and friendly, but he's still a first-rate hunter.
Darmu Ruu
The second son of the Ruu clan. He's highly proud, and is aggressive towards anyone outside of his family. He once extended an offer to take Ai Fa as his bride.

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Prologue

One night, I dreamed for the first time in a while. Even though I was a pretty deep sleeper, I generally forgot everything from my dreams when I woke up. So when I awoke the next morning, I forgot what happened in this one, too.

It was after everything had been settled that I suddenly thought to myself, *Oh yeah, I get the feeling it was something like that.*

In my dream, I was still a small child, having only just entered elementary school. My old man was drinking beer while cheering on his favorite baseball team on TV, and my mom was standing in the kitchen chopping up onions or something.

Our family ran a popular eatery, so it must have been our day off for the week. Otherwise, the whole family never would have been gathered together for supper like this.

It was the sort of scene you'd expect to see in some soap opera out of the Showa era.

I didn't have much interest in baseball, so I took the opportunity to talk to my old man during the commercials.

"Hey, why is it that Mom cooks dinner at home when you're such a good chef, Dad?"

"What're you, stupid?!" my old man asked, looking clearly flustered as he drew in close. "What are you saying, all of the sudden? What would happen if your mother heard that?"

"That's why I said it all quietly. So hey, why is it?"

"Now listen here... Do you not like Mom's cooking, Asuta?"

"No. I love it," six-year-old me said, shaking his head back and forth. I know I'm talking about myself here, but still, what an adorable kid... "But I love your cooking even more, Dad. Yours is the tastiest."

I would absolutely never say something like that nowadays. And I suppose I

didn’t have anyone to say it to anymore, either...

“Well, yeah, I’m a pro chef, so making tasty food is my job, but...” my old man said, with a troubled, complex expression. He must have been a little over 30 at the time... He probably felt ready to hit me depending on how I had responded, but naturally he never would have struck a six-year-old child. Serves you right, old man! “Anyway, you eat meals I make each and every day, right? Don’t you at least want to have your mom’s cooking once a week?”

“I didn’t say I didn’t want to eat it. I just thought it was strange is all.”

The game had long since resumed on the TV. However, my old man remained pointed my way, and gave a “Hmm...” with his arms crossed. “Still, I’ve got to say that you’re thinking of it all wrong. It’s your mom’s job to make the cooking at home.”

“Why?”

“Why...? That’s because I’m a chef,” my old man said, looking super serious. “It’s a chef’s job to make food for customers. But it’s a mom’s job to make food for her family at home, not a chef’s.”

“Hmm...?”

There was no way I could have a proper understanding of what those words meant at just six years old. But they must have left a definite impact on me, for them to be coming up in a dream like this.

A year later my mom passed away, and I cried and cried, wishing that I had gotten to eat more of her cooking.

Chapter 1: Moonlit Intermedio

1

The elder of the forest's edge, Jiba Ruu, said that she had remembered the joy of living, and both Ai Fa and I had been granted blessings. I truly was overjoyed by that. Heck, calling it the perfect outcome wouldn't even be enough to cover it. It was a powerful feeling to become involved with the life of someone so precious to Ai Fa in this manner, so much so that I could feel my heart tremble with emotion.

And yet, just a few hours later, I was left worrying all alone in a vacant house.

Ai Fa wasn't there, and neither was Rimee Ruu.

I was sitting there squirming in the middle of the silent room, awash in anger and humiliation.

Damn it! What the heck is the deal with that?!

I wasn't especially being confined or anything like that. I was just left to hold down the fort as Ai Fa and Rimee Ruu were with Jiba Ruu in the elder's bedroom, in the midst of rekindling their old friendship.

This house, one of the homes belonging to the Ruu, apparently had been owned by Donda Ruu's little brother or nephew or something. But apparently that relative had lost family and was having a hard time getting by as of last year, so he had moved to a different house and left this one empty.

And so, since the Fa house was so far away, we gratefully took the Ruu up on their offer to let us stay here for the night. But that ended up leaving me sitting there stewing in my displeasure. With that said, I didn't even know who I should be pointing this frustration at to begin with.

If I had to say, though, I'd probably choose myself. And so, I just sat there floundering and writhing, my chest full of emotions with no place to vent them.

◇

A few hours prior, we were still in the main Ruu household's banquet hall.

“You’re sleeping here tonight, yes, Ai Fa...?” Granny Jiba said as she slowly continued to eat her dinner. “It’s completely dark out, after all. It’s dangerous outside at night, so stay with us in our open house.”

“No, we couldn’t. It should be perfectly safe as long as I prepare a fire, so if you could just loan me a candle, that would be plenty.”

“Oh, my... It’s true that you certainly appear to have grown into quite the splendid hunter, but please take a rest here, for this old woman’s sake too.”

“But...”

“You have your responsibility as head of your clan, so you can’t come out here to the Ruu home so often, can you? And this old woman lacks the strength to walk all the way to the Fa home... So with that being the case, can’t you at least spend tonight keeping this old lady company? We were finally able to meet for the first time in several years, after all...”

Even Ai Fa couldn’t flatly refuse a request like that. That didn’t seem to be a problem in the least, though. I mean, I figured that Ai Fa should use this chance to deepen her bonds with Granny Jiba and Rimee Ruu, since Donda Ruu didn’t seem to have even the slightest intention of repeating the offer to have her marry into the family.

So that wasn’t where issue arose. No, that came next.

Apparently, the custom was that no one could leave their seat until everyone finished eating, so Rimee Ruu took over helping out Granny Jiba, while Ai Fa and I returned to our dinners. And all the while, the clan head Donda Ruu kept heaping abuse on my cooking.

“This isn’t proper food for a hunter.” “How dare you make me eat the same thing as a mundt?!” “I can feel my life force being dirtied,” and other such disparaging remarks came raining down upon me. But I figured this rowdy mountain of a man must have had some sort of reason for insulting my cooking, be it his distrust towards outsiders or his position as head of his clan or whatever, so I didn’t let it get to me. And besides, Granny Jiba had gone and said all that she did, so I was feeling completely content.

What caused that to crack, though, came right before Ai Fa and I finished

eating.

“Won’t you please cut it out?! Why do you have to say such mean things about Asuta’s cooking?! Don’t you see how happy it made Granny Jiba?!” Reina Ruu shouted, having finished her dinner just a step ahead of us. Donda Ruu’s burning blue eyes shot an annoyed glare at his adorable second daughter.

“What’s wrong about calling something bad when it is? Our elder there just said so, didn’t she? It’s up to folks to decide what they think is right, I mean. And the only ones who would be grateful to be able to eat this mundt crap food would be old folks who’ve lost their teeth.”

Reina Ruu sat there in silence for a while, looking frustrated. Then, she suddenly stood up.

She removed the fang and tusk necklace from around her neck, and then slowly approached me and Ai Fa.

“Hey...” said Donda Ruu, a restless look in his eyes, but Reina Ruu paid him no heed as she took a knee and offered a piece of her necklace to each of us.

“I, Reina Ruu of the Ruu clan, offer this heartfelt blessing to Ai Fa and Asuta of the Fa clan for saving Jiba Ruu’s soul, as well as bringing peace of mind to the Ruu clan.”

“Huh? Hey, is it really alright to be doing that, Reina Ruu...?” I went to whisper into her ear. But then, Ai Fa gave me a quick push on the shoulder before I got close enough.

“Just shut up and accept it. To the people of the forest’s edge, offering a giba tusk or horn is a sacred act. Turning it down is akin to trampling upon the giver’s dignity and pride.” Then, Ai Fa said, “I gladly accept this blessing, Reina Ruu,” and took the white tusk.

Figuring there was no helping it, I followed along and said, “Thanks.”

“Reina... Are you trying to disgrace the Ruu family name?” Donda Ruu murmured, his low voice so grave that it sounded like an omen of some great coming earthquake. “Do you really think you’ll get away with giving some fake blessing in order to spite me?”

Though Reina Ruu was turning pale with fright, she stared firmly right back at her father.

“It’s not fake! Even putting aside the matter of Granny Jiba, I earnestly think from the depths of my heart that Asuta’s cooking is amazing. I never knew that giba meat could be this delicious. To eat is to live. So what I’m saying is, eating made me feel the joy of living so strongly just now, the same as Granny Jiba!”

“You... Have you gone mad?” Donda Ruu muttered in a low voice. I was taken aback by the puzzlement I could hear in his voice. But before I could figure all that out, Rimee Ruu stood up suddenly and yelled out, “Me too!” She turned back and looked at Granny Jiba, who gave a nod and said, “It’s alright.” And then, the little girl left her grandmother and came running over to our side. Naturally, she had broken out in a wide, happy smile.

“Asuta! Ai Fa! Thanks so much for everything today! It was really, really tasty, so I’m going to give you a blessing, too!”

With that, a third blessing, something that didn’t seem to come so lightly, was plopped into Ai Fa’s and my hands.

“Yes... That was certainly a wonderful dinner, truly worthy of a blessing,” the eldest daughter Vina Ruu said in a needlessly coquettish voice as she slowly stood. “I didn’t even know a ‘splendid’ meal could exist here at the forest’s edge in the first place. This really was enough of an experience that it can’t just go without a blessing.”

“That’s for sure. It’s just as you say, Vina,” Granny Tito Min added, standing up too.

“I can’t believe this! What in the world are you people doing?!” Donda Ruu yelled out again. Rather than anger, though, his passionate voice was full of astonishment. “Has my whole family gone lunatic? Was there madness-inducing apas venom in that crap food after all? But then we would surely all be crazy, right?!”

I stared at Donda Ruu, my gaze fixed as I gripped the five horns and tusks I had received tightly. He looked to be seriously bewildered, like he was actually doubting his family’s sanity.

“Could it be that the rest of you aren’t speaking up because you’re scared of me yelling at you? If so, you don’t need to hold back! Just do as you please, already!”

With that, the oldest son Jiza’s wife, Sati Lea Ruu, stood up, looking incredibly timid. She appeared to be about the same age as Vina Ruu, and her bright brown hair was cut neatly at her shoulders. She had a real neat and clean air about her.

Before she fully stood, she looked back at her husband, who gave a cool, composed smile in return. Looking rather relieved, she finished standing and then headed over towards us.

“I, Sati Lea Ruu of the Ruu clan, offer the Fa clan head Ai Fa and clan member Asuta my blessing. Thank you for the strange, wonderful meal.”

After she returned to her seat, the well-built woman sitting next to her rose up. Her reddish hair had just a bit of white mixed into it, and her eyes were a deep brown. There was some definite muscle on her exposed arms and shoulders, and she looked to be quite the gutsy middle-aged woman.

She was Mia Lea Ruu, Rimee Ruu and her siblings’ mother, and Donda Ruu’s wife.

“I don’t quite understand. When something’s delicious, it just is, right? It was so powerful that I almost feel weak in the knees.”

After casting a sideways glance at her husband, who was sitting still as a stone statue, she walked our way in firm, confident strides. Then, with a cheerful smile, she handed us a fang and tusk.

“It was delicious. And I’m really grateful for what you did for Granny Jiba, too. Hmph, I don’t know what our clan head’s being so ornery about.”

That unwavering smile really made her look like an embodiment of the phrase, “moms are strong.” I couldn’t help but feel earnestly impressed at the fact that this woman had birthed seven of the people here.

At any rate, with this we had received a seventh blessing.

“...Dad, do you really mean what you said before? You won’t go and whack

me for this later, right?” the still youthful voice of the youngest son, Ludo Ruu, asked as he rose.

He awkwardly trod on over towards us, rustling up his yellowish-brown hair all the while, and then roughly plopped down on the ground.

“Hey, what’s with you? I heard there’s some weird group called magicians in the eastern kingdom. You didn’t use magic to cook giba meat so it ended up like that, did you?”

“It wasn’t magic. It was pure technique using a kitchen knife... a blade, and fire,” I responded, since Ai Fa wasn’t saying anything, and it was obviously a question for me, anyway.

“Hmph,” he snorted, sounding unamused, and then his pale eyes turned and looked at Ai Fa.

“You really have turned into a good woman, Ai Fa of the Fa clan. What a waste... If you would just act a bit more girly, I wouldn’t mind taking you as a wife in my brother’s place.”

Ai Fa didn’t say a word.

“Anyway, it’s no exaggeration to call that meal absolutely delicious. To be honest, it was so good that it makes me want to cry thinking about going back to the same old poitan soup from tomorrow on. If you aren’t Ai Fa’s husband, then you should marry one of the girls from our family.”

“N-no, I mean, the other person has the right to choose, too...”

“Hmph. You could have any one of them you wanted, except for that runt Rimee,” he said, muttering the last part. Then, he removed his necklace made from the spoils of battle, which wouldn’t lose out to Ai Fa’s in the least.

“It was unimaginably delicious, so I’m giving you my blessing. This is the first time I’ve given one, so you better appreciate it.”



After the cheeky youngest son of the family returned to his seat, a strange silence hung in the air.

“So, anyone else...?” Donda Ruu asked while stroking his beard and looking around. “So only three of you share my opinion that it’s not food fit for humans, huh?”

“I wouldn’t go all that far. Could you please stop using yourself as the standard for everything?” the third daughter, Lala Ruu, said with displeasure. Her red hair was tied up atop her head, and she was every bit as cheeky as Ludo. Those two were probably the only ones amongst the greatly differing seven siblings who were at all alike in terms of facial features and overall impression. She looked to be even younger than Ludo Ruu, and must have been 12 or 13 at the most.

“I thought the baked poitan and giba soup were seriously amazing. But the giba meat is crucial, and it was all gooey and gross, so I just didn’t think it was worth giving a blessing. Honestly, though, I could have given a blessing just for the matter with Granny Jiba. But everyone seemed to seriously think it was tasty, so I held back.”

“I see... What about you, Darmu?”

The shrewd, wolf-looking second son just replied, “I’ve got nothing to say.”

“Hmph. And you, Jiza?”

“I don’t think there’s any need to fixate on the matter so much, Clan Head Donda. No matter what form or taste they may come in, giba is still giba, and poitan is still poitan. Regardless of whatever clever plans may be used in preparing it, it’s all the same once it’s resting inside your stomach.”

“There’s no need to go saying something like that now!” the chief roared, his eyes like burning flames. His eldest son, meanwhile, just looked back at him with those thin eyes, and gave a composed smile.

“So it’s a question of taste, is it? It’s just as Lala said. I was surprised to see that poitan could be prepared in this manner, and I could strongly sense the life force of the giba from the way that its filthy stench was absent from the soup. However... that meat drenched in red nectar was so soft that it didn’t even feel

like I was eating giba. I fear that if I ate such a dish every day, my teeth would lose all strength and fall out one after another."

"Yes... that's it! That's why I felt it wasn't a suitable meal for a hunter of the forest's edge!" Donda Ruu yelled out, the life rushing back into his face now that he had apparently found his answer. "These teeth of mine are meant for tearing into tough giba meat! Just like these arms are meant for finishing off giba and these legs are for running through the forest, they're valuable tools for living here at forest's edge! And tools grow rusty if you don't use them. What you fed me was an improper meal, one that rusted away my life force!"

"That's..." I started to object, but Ai Fa gently grabbed my arm. I could see in her calm blue eyes that she was telling me to stop.

"Of course, that's because I'm a hunter and a man of the forest's edge! And so... This is a perfectly proper meal for a toothless old woman," Donda Ruu carried on with an arrogant smile, looking at the old woman in question. "My grandmother, our elder Jiba... what you said was absolutely right. If it helped bring your soul back to life, then I'll graciously swallow my words. That's not mundt food. It is medicine, meant for saving our honored elder who has lived longer than any of the people of the forest's edge, and strove to work for our sake all this time! It's a treasure!"

"Hmph... You're being unusually earnest, aren't you, Clan Head Donda...?"

"I'm always earnest! I acknowledge things that are right, and call out things that are bad. As if I could serve as clan head without the resolve to do that much." Then, that fierce gaze pointed towards Ai Fa and myself. "Ai Fa of the Fa clan! And your clan member, Asuta! You saved the Ruu clan's beloved elder, Jiba Ruu! As head of the Ruu clan, I apologize for my impoliteness up until now, and offer thanks to you once again!"

Ai Fa gave a silent nod.

As I was awash in the clear praise, I stared straight at Donda Ruu. The beast of a man was now wearing a pleasant smile on his face. It was a truly refreshed expression that he wore, as if years and years of doubts had finally been cleared away.

"To me, the food you cooked was poison. But for our elder, it was medicine.

My soul won’t rust from one night of poison, so I’ll overlook the crime of making me eat it. And the fangs and tusks you received were the proper and just blessings for your deeds. Go ahead and convert them to your own flesh and blood, without feeling indebted to anyone!”

2

And so, that brings us back to the present. Ai Fa left, telling me to go to sleep first before heading off to Granny Jiba’s bedroom. But I just couldn’t drift off. I just kept on floundering and flailing, tossing and turning about the large, empty house.

What the hell was with calling it poison?! Damn that old giba fart, going and looking all pleased with himself!

In all likelihood, Donda Ruu had grown anxious seeing his family give us blessings one after another. He was wondering if they were in their right minds, or perhaps even if they had gone completely mad. But when he heard his eldest son Jiza’s words, he finally understood. As Granny Jiba so aptly put it, it’s up to each person to decide what they find delicious. And so, he could feel relieved with the fact that no one had gone crazy.

But at the same time, that meant that he seriously thought the giburgers I gave my all to make tasted bad.

People’s tastes do vary, after all! I’m sure there must be folks out there who just don’t like hamburgers. And to start with, I prepared it specially for Granny Jiba, who has weak gums!

I really did think that, too. But in the end, it was my decision that led to hamburgers being the dish for that dinner. Trusting in the praise I’d received from Ai Fa and Rimee Ruu, I went ahead and presented them without even a hint of doubt, as if it was only natural despite the dish being utterly alien to the people of the forest’s edge. I mean, it was literally cooking from a whole other world, after all.

If I had carefully examined the circumstances, I would have been able to present another meat dish alongside the hamburgers. But I hadn’t been able to

read the situation that thoroughly, and so I was the one at fault here.

But still, even so...!

Was my cooking really all that awful? Enough so to be inferior to their usual dish, the giba stew with that meat that hadn't been bloodlet, in that muddy poitan gruel?

That was surely the root of the sense of defeat I was feeling. Was I being conceited, thinking this way? Was I wrong to feel defeated over something like that?

As I ground my teeth I touched the necklace Rimee Ruu had made, which was dangling in front of my chest. It was made by chaining together eight tusks and horns, and it jangled pleasantly when it moved.

It was the very first payment I had received in this other world. Eight people out of the group of twelve acknowledged my cooking as delicious, and I felt it was alright to be proud of that. I couldn't say I felt firmly on the matter, but I honestly didn't want to exchange them for poitan and aria. It certainly may have been the right thing to do, trading them for food that would become my flesh and blood, but I figured it would still be a while till I could make up my mind to do so.

This was proof that my very existence had been acknowledged. That I was judged as having value.

That made me happy, and proud. It felt like it was alright for me to keep on living, even here in this other world.

But at the same time, my work had also been negated.

It was frustrating, and I felt annoyed. It was as if my very existence had been *denied*. It wasn't the sort of feeling that could be brushed aside by the simple argument that people's tastes vary.

And as things stand, I still haven't done enough for Granny Jiba...

I had succeeded in teaching the women how to mince meat. Thanks to that, they'd be able to keep on making meals that would be easy for the weak-toothed Granny Jiba to eat. But if I couldn't impart the technique of

bloodletting, then the taste would still be seriously affected. And since it was meaningless if it wasn't done right after the finishing blow, I needed to teach it to the men rather than the women.

With the way things turned out, I'm sure Donda Ruu wouldn't even consider studying the technique. I'd screwed up on that matter, too. I'd blundered, and failed...

I just hadn't thought things through enough.

But what should I do, then?

It was around when I was thinking that that I heard a *tap, tap, tap* on the door.

"Yes, who is it?"

I figured maybe it was Ai Fa, but would she really knock?

And now that I think of it, this was actually the first I heard of the custom of knocking even existing in this world.

And wait, there's no way it's Ai Fa, right?

"It's not barred, right? You can open it," I called out, and then went ahead and stood up.

As I wondered who it was, Reina Ruu's innocent smiling face suddenly came to mind. That beautiful black-haired second daughter of the Ruu clan shot me adoring looks both when we were cooking and afterwards. Since I hadn't deepened my bonds with anyone else around here, it was hard to imagine anyone but her coming out of their way to visit me.

But I couldn't help but feel more than a little awkward at the thought of being alone at night with a girl with such an adorable face, wonderful figure, and nothing but that bewitching outfit on. Anyway, as I thought that I opened the door, and...

"H-huh? Oh, it was you?"

It was someone far more dangerous than Reina Ruu, in a certain meaning. Perhaps someone *too* dangerous.

“Thank you for opening up. I’m reeeeally glad, Asuta...” that sensual voice alone was enough to tell me who it was.

I had opened the door just a bit, only for that body that was so perfect it was almost unfair to smoothly slide on in.

“W-What’s up, Vina Ruu?” I almost added “-san” there, but I stopped myself. They didn’t seem to have a custom of using that sort of honorific here in this world, after all.

“I wanted to see you, Asuta. There’s a little something I want to talk to you about...”

“What’s that?”

As I stood there hesitating, she shot me a flirtatious glance and started taking off her leather footwear, which looked simpler than what the men wore. I still hadn’t given her permission, but she seemed to be quite clearly intending to come on in.

“I’m glad that Reina didn’t beat me to the punch. I was so worried about what I would do if you were in the middle of something...”

“R-Reina Ruu doesn’t have any reason to come visit me, right? I mean, all we did was cook together once.”

And I know you even less, I added in my head, only for Vina to give a sexy, “Tehehe,” laugh. “That girl seems to have completely fallen for you. Did you really not notice? You certainly are dense, Asuta...”

“No, that’s, you see...”

“Don’t worry. I didn’t come here to take you as a husband. Anyway, can we have a seat and talk...?”

With that, she smoothly slid that right arm of hers—which had the perfect amount of muscle and fat to truly drive you wild, neither being too bulky nor slim—around my left arm.

An alarm was blaring, “Warning, warning!” in my brain.

At any rate, this girl was just way too sensual all around. She was like a bundle of pheromones, alluring in every way without any need for excess jewelry on

her limbs, and with truly womanly curves all over her body, so much so that I felt like the only way to keep myself rational would be to shut my eyes tight.

Her eyes were narrowed and looked a bit drowsy, like she had just woken up, and her pink lips looked terribly luscious, too. Her face was smooth and oval-shaped, her neck was slim, the lines of her collarbone were clearly visible, and her long chestnut colored hair draped over her round right shoulder... Now that we were so incredibly close, I had absolutely no intention of letting my gaze wander any lower. If I did, I felt like I'd be done for in one way or another.

"Shall we sit...?" she asked a second time, and then she pulled me along over to the other side of the room.

The people of the forest's edge all did some pretty intense work day in and out, so naturally she was pretty strong. Plus if I tried to resist and wasn't careful, my constrained left arm could end up unintentionally rubbing up against somewhere especially dangerous, so I had no choice but to obediently follow along.

She kept on walking until we were near a window with a lit candle, and then she smoothly pulled me on down. And for the reason I mentioned before, I had to go ahead and sit down along with her. I could see that my concerns were being paid no heed whatsoever, ultimately.

As I sat down with my back to the wall, Vina leaned her whole body over onto me as if she just couldn't wait any longer.

"Um, you see, hey, hold on!" I yelled out loudly, not even knowing what I was saying. With that, her fingertip—so perfect it looked almost sculpted—ran along my lips.

"Be quiet... I want to discuss something I kind of don't want my family to overhear..."

As she said that, a bit of her breath crept into my ear. By this point, my whole body had broken out in goosebumps. Naturally, that wasn't because I was finding this unpleasant, but rather the exact opposite reason.

But no matter how I may have felt, I was being one-sidedly forced into it rather than feeling that way of my own volition, which aroused something like

fear in me. Alone with an older woman that was just a bundle of pheromones and sex appeal in dim lighting, as she clung to me and breathed into my ear... At least as long as my reason held out, this was an experience of pure terror.

Ah, did she smoke meat this afternoon or something? That silly thought popped up in the corner of my mind, as a bit of a means of avoiding reality.

It really wasn't anything. It was just that the refreshing aroma of lilo and the potent, slightly sweet scent of fresh pico leaves were clinging to Vina Ruu's hair and limbs, and were now filling my nose.

It's a real nice smell... But it sort of seems like it's missing a bit of something... I thought, only for burning eyes like those of a wildcat to flash to mind. My logic and sanity were on the verge of collapse, but with that they suddenly snapped back, along with a powerful nervousness. I had no idea when Ai Fa would return, so I couldn't keep lazing around forever.

"Um, what was it that you wanted to discuss? You said you didn't want your family to overhear, so it must not be too light of a topic, right?"

"Yeah... I came to discuss something that isn't light at all..."

Her left arm, which was on the opposite side from my body, dropped something on the floor with a *clunk.* It was a fruit wine container. Apparently that had been part of the blended aroma I had sensed coming off of Vina Ruu.

"Sorry, I may be a little drunk... I mean, I care about my family, too... I couldn't work up the bravery without the help of a bit of alcohol..."

"W-What in the world are you talking about? I don't want to get wrapped up in any trouble..."

Right now, it seemed like just being thought of as some unreliable guy would be better than getting involved with whatever this was. But Vina Ruu just shook her head back and forth, and laid it down on my shoulder.

"Asuta... just what are you...?"

"...What?"

"We head out to the Genos post town frequently enough, so it's not like we never see foreigners... But the food you made is so unusual. I really was filled

with such joy that it was like I'd been reborn..."

Oh, so she wanted to talk about cooking? Well, I was plenty willing to do so, but I wish she would keep to a more agreeable distance... The dangerous pressure pushing down on my left arm was causing my freshly recovered reason to let out a scream.

"You said you didn't know not just of this western kingdom, but of the whole Amusehorn continent, didn't you? And you were born in some far off other country, right? But just where is that, I wonder...?"

"I-I don't know. My country was an island nation, so I'm sure it must be beyond the ocean, at least. But considering I had never even heard of this continent before, I don't even know how to start finding my way home!"

"An island nation... An island nation, huh...? How wonderful..."

Vina Ruu's warm fingertips gently touched my chest, and I felt chills run down my spine once again.

"Asuta... Will you take me back with you to that mysterious country of yours...?" Vina Ruu asked, her whole body wrapped around me like a giant madarama snake.



“Hold on, Vina Ruu-san...!”

Ah, I was in such a panic that I added the honorific without even thinking. All the while, I could feel smooth skin wrapping all around my body. It was the incredibly soft yet springy body of a young girl, and she clearly had some real firm strength deep inside.

“Please, don’t marry into the Ruu clan... Reina is a cute girl, but I’m not such a bad woman myself, right...?”

No, you’re really bad! Just in a completely different meaning than what you’re thinking!

She pushed me down onto the fur rug, and started feeling around my whole body. And she wasn’t just using her fingers, but every part of her body. Right now, I could feel such soft yet rough sensations running all over me.

I felt a chill run down my spine, as well as something akin to pure terror. And underneath all that, there was also the complete opposite emotion...

My heart was pounding so fast that it hurt, and it was getting harder and harder to breathe.

My brain cells were being paralyzed by a sweet scent other than that of herbs.

It was like I was swimming in a sea of gasoline while holding a burning lighter. If that flame were to start spreading even a bit, I would probably lose myself.

“I’m a woman of the Ruu clan, so I’ve had meetings set up with all sorts of men up till now... But in the end, I turned them all down. If I marry into someone else’s family, or they marry into mine, I’ll never be able to leave this forest’s edge...” I could feel her warm breath and the words accompanying it flowing down my throat. “I don’t want to die here... It seems like Granny Jiba started thinking the opposite way after eating it, but when I had your cooking, it opened me up to a whole other world. I want to go there... I felt like I wanted to go with you to your world.”

Suddenly, the heat and sensations moved away from me. Vina Ruu had gotten herself up.

That was just her preparing for the finale, though.

“Can’t I be yours, and you be mine...?”

With the orange light of the candle illuminating her, Vina Ruu placed her hand on the cloth wrapped around her chest.

I scraped together the remaining particles left of my quickly vanishing good sense, and grabbed her hand from below.

“You can’t! It’s a taboo to see an unwed woman’s naked body, right? That’s... you just can’t.”

Her pale reddish brown eyes stared down at me. As the light of the fire reflected and wavered in them... It sort of made it look like she was crying.

I couldn’t tell how things actually were, though. But Vina Ruu didn’t try to shake off my grasp, and her lips didn’t move at all. She just kept silently looking at me.

Finally, she smoothly stood up and got off of me.

“Was I just not charming enough, I wonder...?”

She seated herself with her legs out to the side, half of her back showing to me and her gaze down at the floor.

I got myself up slowly and replied, “It wasn’t an issue of charm, I think. I don’t even have the slightest clue as to how or why I got sent to this totally unfamiliar place. Or heck, maybe I’m just a huge idiot who thinks that’s what happened. If I were to make a promise I didn’t even know I could fulfill, and get close to someone in spite of all that... Well, I just can’t do it.”

“Is that why you haven’t tried to marry that Ai Fa girl, either...?”

I’d finally gotten my heart calmed down, but now it was pounding with strange emotions all over again. What a bad night for my poor heart it had been...

“I wonder... I’m not quite sure myself. I do think of her as someone really precious to me, though.”

“You sure are honest... It’s like you’re telling me to just drop dead...”

“T-That’s not my intention at all.”

“Is that so...? When a woman of the forest’s edge becomes twenty and still isn’t married, then she must have a real awful personality, and is nothing but a drain on her family, right...?” With that, she started bitterly tearing at the fur of the rug with her fingers. “I’ve protected my chastity even though it meant being looked at like that, and now I’ve had it thrown cruelly back in my face... Ugh, I really do want to die...”

“U-Um, Vina Ruu...?”

“Now that it’s come to this, if you end up marrying Reina, I really may end up having to kill the both of you, too...” she said, uttering those horrifying words so easily. Then she grabbed hold of the fruit wine and stood up shakily. “But what would I do if you married Ai Fa...? That girl would end up killing me instead, probably... I guess my best choice would be to seduce you so we could die together...”

“No, that’s...”

“It’s an old custom that if you knock on a house’s door three times and the other person answers, you’ll enter into an agreement.”

Seeming to almost slide along the floor, Vina Ruu made her way back to the house’s entrance.

“When you agree you let the person in, and when you refuse you drive them away. That’s the custom of the forest’s edge...”

She put on her shoes, laid a hand on the door, then while half pulling herself outside, she looked back at me.

“You let me inside. So I still haven’t given up... Pleasant dreams, Asuta. Don’t forget your promise, alright...?”

With that the door clattered shut, and then it was silent once again. I had finally escaped.

“Man, what’s with that big sister! I still haven’t grasped what her character actually is! Seriously, give me a break...”

I’d had my fill of giba meat, but now it felt like all those calories had been stolen away.

I plopped down on the carpet, then shook my still pink face back and forth to regain my composure.

This is no time to be getting lost in sensual fantasies! Right now, my pride as a chef has been utterly thrashed...! I thought, yanking myself back into serious mode, but then, there was a loud *bang* on the wall.

What is it now?!

Remembering my lesson from just before, I only thought that rather than responding. Still, it was the wall rather than the door this time. And the opposite one from where I was at that, by the window without a candle.

If knocking on the door three times meant forming an agreement, what did banging on the wall indicate? Bring me food, maybe? Or a request that you stop making out?

No, but at any rate, someone had gone and hit the wall of a stand-alone building. And the separate kitchen was supposed to be out back, and it must have been someone standing outside hitting the wall with their hand or foot. But what was the meaning behind that?

It was dark outside the window, and I couldn't see anyone at all.

Well, whatever! If you need me for something, then use your voice!

With that, I sprawled back out on the floor. After that, there weren't any more knocks on the door or wall, just the silence of night.

But then... I could vaguely hear someone having a conversation. So there really was someone out back, huh? I couldn't make out what they were saying, but they seemed to be having some sort of argument.

One was a man, and the other was a woman.

Could it be that someone saw Vina Ruu leave here and was now interrogating her? In that case, it was even worse of an idea for me to get involved. I closed my eyes, figuring I'd better go to sleep. The candle was still lit, but I figured Ai Fa would probably put it out when she got back.

Now that I think of it, Ai Fa sure is late...

It was pretty clearly well into the dead of the night, at least by the standards

of the people of the forest's edge. As I thought to myself that she shouldn't push a weak old woman like Granny Jiba so hard, or that maybe Granny Jiba was the one not letting her go, I let myself start to drift off...

And then, I suddenly shot up. I should've realized it sooner, but that voice sounded like Ai Fa's.

I couldn't imagine anybody would be out for a walk this late, so someone must have been waiting for Ai Fa to return from the main Ruu house. And now that I'd had that thought, I couldn't just drift off into slumber without checking. I mean, after all, the voices outside were clearly those of a man and woman arguing.

I'll just take a quick peek, and if it's not Ai Fa, then I'll just treat it as having nothing to do with me.

Having made up my mind, I headed for the door. I opened it so as not to make a noise, and then crept outside, relying solely on the moonlight.

I had heard the voices from the left side of the house. That was the same side that the main Ruu house was on.

Stealthily, sneakily, quietly creeping along, I circled around to that side of the house. Then, I slowly snuck a peek, and... Sure enough, it was Ai Fa. She had her back to the wall and her arms crossed, and she was glaring straight at the person in front of her.

And that person in question was the second son of the main family, Darmu Ruu. He was a man with a face like that of a young wolf, and eyes that were just like his father's. He had his one hand on the wall and was staring down at Ai Fa from above. Guess he was the one who banged on the wall.

Ai Fa was around 170 centimeters tall, so he must have been around 180, as he was about half a head taller. Even so, Ai Fa didn't look intimidated in the least, as she glared coldly right back at him. But the man was sneering. Yeah, that was no smile, but a sneer. I'd only ever seen him looking cold and expressionless, but now he was sneering as if he was looking down on Ai Fa.

"A woman like you playing at being a hunter is nothing but a farce, Ai Fa." I could just barely make out what he was saying. "Everyone's laughing at you,

you know? They say that a girl was possessed by the ghost of her father, and put on giba fur and started pretending to be a hunter... Hey, why did you try so hard to distance yourself from the Ruu clan?”

Ai Fa remained silent.

“You may have just happened to do alright for yourself these past two years, but you can’t keep living like that forever. But if you give up now and yield yourself to me, your future will be safe and secure. Do you intend to become an old woman without taking on a partner...?”

If he gets even a centimeter closer to Ai Fa’s face, I’ll call out. By deciding that, I was somehow able to hold back the powerful emotions writhing around in the depths of my stomach.

It was obvious that someone as weak as me joining in would be nothing but a hindrance for Ai Fa. So you better not get any closer, you piece of crap...

“Or could it be... On that night, you weren’t actually able to shake off the eldest son of the Suun? And so you ended up feeling attached to that dunce, and refuse to marry anyone else...”

“No matter how you look at it, that’s just a straight up delusion taken too far!” I yelled out without even realizing it. Darmu Ruu hadn’t moved so much as a millimeter, but I couldn’t just stay silent after that.

“Asuta, what are you doing?” Ai Fa asked, shooting me an incredibly chilly glare. “Leave this place, you fool. I told you not to wait up for me and go to sleep, didn’t I?”

Well, that’s about what I expected from Ai Fa. As for the guy... He glanced at me like I was some pebble on the side of the road, and then he turned back towards Ai Fa. “If that’s the case, then just come out and say so, Ai Fa. I can’t say that I have any intention of taking pity on that dullard and just letting him leave. But if you were to...”

“Why would Ai Fa go with some nobody like you?! What, is something wrong with your eyes?! Or are you trying to provoke Ai Fa, maybe? If you don’t make it clear whether you’re trying to have a lovers’ quarrel or pick a fight, she won’t know how to respond!”

“Don’t try to talk like you’re a human, mundt. If all you have any skill for is manning the stove, then shut up and stick to that,” he uttered as if it was a chore, not even looking at me.

I took three steps closer.

“Do you mean me when you say ‘mundt’? I can’t exactly get angry about being compared to an animal I’ve never even seen, you know. But whatever, just hurry up and leave already. Can’t you tell that Ai Fa thinks you’re a pain, even after getting so close to her?”

Darmu Ruu’s lips twisted into a cruel grin, and he got even closer to Ai Fa’s face. They were close enough that the tips of their noses could touch.

My violent emotions formed into words and came flying out of my mouth.

“Hey! Then let me say something! If all you have any skill for is hunting giba, then shut up and stick to that! Don’t go around quarreling with full-grown women!”

The expression wiped clean from Darmu Ruu’s face. His hand slowly pulled away from the wall, and he straightened his leaning body upright. And then, his fingers grasped his knife.

“Mundt, are you mocking a hunter of the forest’s edge?”

“Of course not! But were you trying to mock me when you told me to man the stove? Yeah, that’s just what I’ll do, because that’s my job! And until you’re an expert at that too, don’t go around quarreling with women!”

“You bastard...”

“Right now, I’m in charge of manning Ai Fa’s stove. But until just six days ago, she handled that, too! She hunted giba and manned the stove all by herself! And she did a perfect job of taking care of the work of both a man and a woman. Can you do that?!” I slammed my fist against the perfectly innocent wall of the house. “If you can’t, then don’t go saying such ridiculous crap to Ai Fa!”

“Mundt, you... Are you trying to pick a fight with the Ruu clan, you bastard...?”

He looked more astounded than angry.

“Hey, I don’t have any issue with the people of the forest’s edge or the Ruu clan. I’m just talking to you, Darmu Ruu. I’m telling you to stop being so rude to my benefactor, Ai Fa.”

“...That’s enough. Just be silent already, Asuta,” Ai Fa muttered with a sigh as she stopped leaning against the wall. She uncrossed her arms, and walked right past Darmu Ruu, who was still gripping his knife.

“Hold on, Ai Fa! This discussion isn’t over...!”

“I’ve heard enough. No matter what you say, my reply won’t change,” Ai Fa said as she lined up next to me, and then gave a slow bow with her usual blank expression. “I’m honored by your repeated requests, but I have decided to live my life as a hunter. I cannot marry into the Ruu clan.”

“You...!”

“Also, it’s only logical that such requests come about through the heads of the clans. I’m the head of the Fa house, but I believe Donda Ruu should still be the head of your Ruu clan. Please have him accompany you in all further such requests. Excuse me...”

With that, Ai Fa grabbed my arm and started half dragging me away.

Darmu Ruu stood in the same posture, staring at the now empty space as his shoulders quaked.

“H-Hey, is it really alright to just leave things like that?”

Ai Fa silently walked along the wall, turned the corner, pushed me through the still open door, then slid inside herself, closed the door, put the large bolt in place, and then finally yelled out with all her might, “You big idiot! What were you doing, cornering that small fry?! What if he kept going and cut you down?! As a guest, I don’t have a blade on me!”

“No, you see, he was just being so unreasonable...”

“Just ignore rubbish like that! I mean, there’s no way he has the backbone to just do as he pleases without the clan head’s permission! But to pointlessly fan his anger...!”

With that, she pushed me up against the door and firmly grabbed me by the collar. Her angry face was just as close to mine as Darmu Ruu's had been to hers before. In no time at all, Ai Fa's wonderful scent with the sweetness of fruit, the refreshing nature of herbs, and the deliciousness of meat all filled my nose. And with that, my heart started beating faster for no reason at all.

Apparently I still hadn't fully recovered from the blow I took from Vina Ruu. If I didn't gather up all the reason I had left, this could be dangerous.

Ai Fa fixed a powerful gaze right on me, knowing nothing of how shaken I was.

"...When you said, 'If all you have any skill for is hunting giba, then shut up and stick to that,' I wanted to hit you too, Asuta."

"B-But you listened all the way to the end, right? I was just trying to say that all jobs were on the same level, not above or below each other."

"If that wasn't the case, I really would have hit you," Ai Fa said, then suddenly pulled back and moved her grasp from my collar to my right wrist. My heart started beating even faster when I felt her firm grip.

My fist was just a bit red from having hit the wall.

"...This hand of yours is meant for manning the stove, isn't it?" Now, she gently placed the palm of her other hand over my reddened fist. "What would happen if you injured it and weren't able to use it any more? You have to watch your temper... After all, this is the hand that saved Granny Jiba," Ai Fa continued on, the anger vanishing from her voice. She looked at me with slightly upturned eyes, both her hands still around mine. "Asuta. It may be only temporary, but you're a member of my household."

"Hmm? Yeah, of course. I'm your freeloader who mans the Fa household stove."

The fingers on my right hand felt warm. It was as if the warmth of Ai Fa's body was flowing into me through her hands. And somehow, that strange sensation felt really nice. A chill ran down my spine when Vina Ruu leaned over on me, but now Ai Fa's warmth was bringing me calm.

Ai Fa held my hand, looked into my eyes, and muttered, "That's why I didn't give you a blessing. Such things aren't thoughtlessly exchanged between

members of the same house... But even so, you saved Jiba Ruu's soul. And you saved me and Rimee Ruu, too."

"Yeah. I'm just glad I was able to be of help."

"I'm grateful to you. I can't show it to you in any tangible manner... but I want you to at least believe in how I feel."

We were in the dark, far from the light of the candle, so I couldn't quite make out Ai Fa's expression clearly. But her shining blue eyes and quiet words were the kindest and gentlest I've seen them, despite possessing a strength that really was just like her. And that kindness, gentleness, and strength washed over me like a wave, flowing into me alongside the warmth of her body and filling my heart.

"I believe you. And hearing you say that makes me happier than anything."

Those words just came flowing forth naturally.

Ai Fa gripped my hand tight one more time, and then released.

"Don't injure the hands that saved the elder of the forest's edge over such a foolish man. You really aren't a full-fledged adult just yet, at least in that manner..."

"Of course. I'm a real legitimate half a man. That's why I have to keep on striving my hardest."

I laughed, but thinking back on how I saw Darmu Ruu's face go pale at the end there, I was honestly a bit worried.

"Hey, did I go and do something I shouldn't have after all? Like, did I just do nothing but get him pointlessly mad at me?"

"...It certainly was pointless and unnecessary, but what you said wasn't wrong. That was why he simply went pale, having nothing to say back."

Ai Fa's eyes had been pointed downwards a bit, but now she was looking at me from beyond her long eyelashes.

"Well... Despite how long you prattled on foolishly, I actually felt just a bit relieved."

“I see. Then I guess it wasn’t pointless after all.”

Ai Fa returned to her usual self with a, “hmph,” then started removing her footwear. As she did so, she asked, “By the way, what did the eldest daughter of the Ruu family come here for?”

“What...?” I responded, tilting my head a bit. Meanwhile, my back was drenched in cold sweat.

“When I was coming back, I just happened to see that woman leaving this house. When I went to call out to her, I was pulled out of view by that second son, so I don’t believe she noticed me.”

Still bent over, she now started working on the footwear on her other foot.

“I see,” I replied, which was all I could muster as I looked down at her beautiful dangling blonde hair. “No, you see, I don’t really have a clue as to what she wanted, either. She seemed like she was drunk.”

“Ah, she did appear to be holding a container of fruit wine.”

Having finally finished taking off both pieces of footwear, Ai Fa steadily stood up. Then, she slapped a hand down on my shoulder.

“Then just what was that promise she mentioned at the end?”

The face of a pitiful young man frozen in fright was reflected in Ai Fa’s beautiful eyes.

...I hope I can end this with an, “and they all lived happily ever after.”

Chapter 2: Where is my Guidepost?

1

It was the following morning.

When I woke up, Ai Fa was nowhere to be seen.

I was in a spare Ruu house, which was twice as big and splendid as the Fa home. We were supposed to be sleeping in a huddle like always atop the fur rug in the hall, but no matter where I looked, I couldn't find Ai Fa.

"Huh? Where did Ai Fa go...?"

I sat up in a hurry and knocked on the door to the separate room in the back. I checked inside afterwards just to be sure, but she wasn't there, either. The whole place was empty.

But just where had Ai Fa went...?

I could feel the anxiety welling up inside of me.

It couldn't be that second son hitting on her again, right?

Now that I'd had that thought, I couldn't just keep waiting around here.

I grabbed the white towel that had come off when I was sleeping and hurried to the door.

The bolt wasn't latched.

...In other words, it's safe to assume that she went outside of her own volition.

Outside, it was around the time when the sun made it over the mountain range. Normally I would have been up a good while ago and have at least finished all the washing I needed to do. But because I was being treated as a guest today, I was free of such responsibilities. That's what made it all the more confusing as to why Ai Fa would go and leave the house.

I stepped out into the central plaza surrounded by seven houses and looked all around. There was a large woman holding an iron pot. An old lady drying out

pico leaves on top of a cloth that was spread out wide. And there were small children trying not to get in the way.

I spied a number of families starting their mornings, but there wasn't anyone around the main Ruu house in the innermost position, nor was there any sign of Ai Fa.

But still, it certainly didn't seem as if Ai Fa had been dragged away by force. Heck, it was such a calm and gentle sight that I felt like an idiot for jumping to such a violent conclusion.

But what happened, then? She couldn't have left me behind and headed back first, right?

I was left pretty flustered and was incoherent about the matter with Vina Ruu last night. But I kept on insisting that I just didn't really know what she was saying because she was drunk, so Ai Fa shouldn't have been too angry with me. I mean, she certainly seemed suspicious and there was a chilly feel coming from her, but she didn't seem all that angry, at least. Maybe she had flown into a rage on the inside, though? Did she see through my feelings of guilt from hiding something from her?

Agh, if I was just going to end up worrying about it like this, I should have opened up about everything rather than hiding stuff! Well no, I may have to embellish a bit...

...Wait, hey, I'm way too worked up, right?!

It was like I was a lost child, separated from his parents. But, well, it was true that I was in an even more unsteady position than that here in this world.

I see... Now that I think of it, last night was the first time that we've each done our own thing since I got here.

Naturally, I had been left to hold down the fort plenty of times, so we had indeed acted on our own. But I had promised Ai Fa that I wouldn't act on my own where she couldn't see, so this was my first time leaving the house and wandering around by myself.

Bottom line, even if we had separated, Ai Fa and I could only really communicate with one another. We'd spent five days in a little world all our

own.

It was Rimee Ruu's sudden appearance that had thrown off that equilibrium. And the second we broke out of that world, we had all this craziness, huh?

Vina Ruu flirted with me, and Darmu Ruu hit on Ai Fa. It must be fate or something...

...Wait, this is no time to be thinking about crap like that!

At any rate, I've got to find Ai Fa. For the time being, that means visiting the main Ruu house.

And if Ai Fa happened to say her goodbyes and leave on her own, then I'd have no choice but to chase after her, crying all the while.

"Hey there, guest. What are you standing around all on your own and spaced out for?" a voice called out from behind just before I started walking. When I turned around, I saw a yellowish-brown haired boy shooting me a dubious look.

It was the youngest son of the Ruu house, Ludo Ruu.

"Ah, hey there. And right back at you. What are you doing here?"

I was heading towards the main Ruu home in the innermost part of the plaza when he came up behind me, so that meant he had come from the opposite direction.

"Hmm? I just happened to wake up weirdly early, so I went out for a stroll. I mean, if the women found me, they'd make me help them out with their work," he replied, then gave a big yawn.

I was 170 centimeters on the dot, but he was even smaller and more slender than I was, and had a pretty cute face. Of course he didn't look weak, but rather agile like a young deer. There was also a strong light in his big, round eyes, and he had a brazen look on his face as always.

"The women should take care of their own work. But because I'm the youngest son, they just make me do whatever they please... So, what are you doing, guest? Your name was Asuta, right?"

"Yeah. I couldn't find Ai Fa anywhere when I got up, so I'm out looking for her. You haven't seen her, have you?"

“No clue. Maybe she’s helping the women out with their work? Around now, they’re probably washing stuff... It’s over this way. Follow me.”

With that, he took off walking towards the main Ruu house.

He had a pretty coarse way of talking, but he may have actually been a surprisingly thoughtful kid. I got the feeling that he was easily the most decent person out of that group of ruffians that made up the men of the family, and he was also the only one of them to acknowledge our cooking.

“Man... You guys are leaving today, right? What a drag. I wanted to eat more of that delicious cooking.”

Hearing that made me really happy. My rating of him seriously was on the rise.

“Still, I did at least teach the women of your house some techniques. Even if I’m not around, they should be able to make you some tasty food.”

“The women around here aren’t that skilled! And my old man will never allow them to make that ‘hamburger’ stuff, anyway! Even if they do somehow manage a delicious meal, only Granny Jiba will get to eat it.” He looked at me with a sulky gaze. “Hey, Asuta, you really won’t marry into the family? I don’t care if it’s Reina or Vina, just pick one to go after and gobble up.”

“You say some pretty horrifying things for a little brother... Don’t you care at all about your precious big sisters meeting that fate?”

“They’re going to get married eventually anyway, so it’s all the same to me. Actually, if they married into some other family they’d have to move away, but if a husband marries into our clan, they’ll be part of our family forever. So it’s better that way, right?”

Hmm. He did seem to at least care about his big sisters, but it was a mindset I just couldn’t understand as someone from another world. Could he really respect a brother-in-law who just picks out one of his sisters, goes after them, and gobbles them up?

“I mean, Reina’s already 17, and Vina’s hit 20, y’know? Folks are gossiping a whole lot lately about why the women of the main Ruu house still haven’t gotten married. I mean, it’s a key job for women to hurry up and marry, have

kids, and grow the family."

"Hmm... By the way, how old are you?"

"I'm 15. I finally hit the age where I can take a bride myself... Hey, could you stop just calling me 'you' all the time already? It feels weird, somehow."

"Sorry about that, Ludo Ruu. Ah, is that where they're washing?"

"It's this way."

What an easygoing kid.

Now I'd had a chance to talk properly with all but the third daughter, Lala Ruu, and they certainly were a varied bunch of siblings.

The eldest son, Jiza Ruu, who gave off some sort of unknowable pressure.

The second son, Darmu Ruu, who had a dangerous glare like a wild wolf.

The youngest son, Ludo Ruu, who was blunt but friendly.

The eldest daughter, Vina Ruu, who overflowed with way too much sex appeal.

The second daughter, Reina Ruu, who was earnest, innocent, and serious.

The only girl to dislike my giburgers, Lala Ruu.

The absolutely adorable Rimee Ruu.

They seriously were a diverse group. It really was amusing how a single couple could produce such varied children.

"So, I can't talk you into marrying into the family? I mean, I think I could definitely talk Reina into it..." We walked along the left side of the Ruu house, down a path with a good number of bushes and shrubs. "Like, what if you just jumped in on her when she was bathing? I mean, you know that the law says if you see an unmarried woman's nude body, either you have your eyes crushed or you marry her, right? And Reina's so weak-willed that she would only ever consider marrying you in that case, I'm sure."

"I don't want to torment Reina Ruu with something like that! And hey, I can't see anything but my eyes getting crushed in that case!"

“But it’d be real easy to just jump her and get her pregnant, right?”

“You’re seriously *way* off base here... Ludo Ruu, you really should consider your sisters’ happiness more seriously.”

“But she *would* be happy. I mean, she’d get to eat that delicious food every day!”

He was being pretty sleazy, but I was finding it hard to hate him when he was saying stuff like that... But wait, was I being way too superficial here?

But still, honestly, Donda Ruu’s harsh words from last night were seriously eating away at me, so hearing something like that was really soothing.

“Hmm... Then I guess the only option left is to convince that stubborn old man of mine.”

“No, I’m telling you, I don’t even want to marry into the family in the first place...”

“That’s not what I meant. I meant we’ve got to convince him the food is delicious.”

I ended up staring at his face without thinking. Ludo Ruu didn’t seem to notice, and started walking like he was stretching out his legs as he went, with his hands together behind his head.

“I thought that giba meat was crazy tasty, but my old man was complaining, saying stuff like it was too sweet and soft. But in that case, if you made something that wasn’t sweet or soft, he’d have nothing to complain about, right? And if he recognizes your skill, then he can’t complain about our women copying your techniques while cooking... That seems like the *most* impossible way of doing things, though.”

Even if it was the hardest destination to reach, it was the one I wanted to go for. Now if only I could find a route to get there...

“But Donda Ruu won’t let me man the stove again, right?”

“Hmm? Nah, that’s not true. If you said, ‘I’ll make something delicious this time around, so let me do it!’ I’m sure he’d take you up on that. I mean, he’s not the sort to just stay silent after hearing something like that.”

“Is that so...?”

“Hey, cut it out! If you do that and screw up, he’ll hack the fingers off both of your hands or something! And then I’d never be able to eat your delicious cooking ever again! That’d be awful, right...?”

I really was feeling the urge to just give those smooth little cheeks a peck or something. But I figured it’d be a real issue if that awakened either me or this kid to a whole new world, so I decided not to.

I see... If he really will bite onto it, then I’ve got a chance for a revenge match with a different dish...! I thought, my fighting spirit getting secretly fired up.

Ludo Ruu, meanwhile, gave a sigh and then said, “The easiest way really is just to have you marry into the family. I recommend Reina. You’re about the same age, right?”

“Apparently we’re the same age, yeah. But it’s weird to decide who you’re going to marry over something like that. I want my feelings to be sincere when it comes to who I spend my life with.”

I wanted to be honest with my feelings, and faithful to my own heart.

A bored sounding “That so?” is all I got in response from Ludo Ruu, though.

“Ah, you see how there’re what look sort of like sliding doors standing there? The washing area is on the other side. I don’t want to get roped into helping out, so I’m leaving, alright?”

“Got it, thanks. Ah, and I’m a little late saying it, but thanks for this necklace. What you did last night really made me feel glad.”

“What’s that about? You’re thanking me for giving you my blessing? That’s your just reward, y’know,” he said, sticking out his tongue in a cheeky manner and then turning around to leave.

I guess they really are related, huh? I mean, his actions were just as varied and interesting as those of his adorable little sister.

Now then, looking ahead of me, I did indeed see what looked like several sliding doors standing up against the shrubbery. I didn’t know why they were set up in a place like this, but I could hear the sounds of splashing water and

female voices coming from the other side.

Never mind a rematch or whatever. Finding Ai Fa comes first, I thought to myself, and walked towards the doors.

They sure sounded like they were enjoying themselves. That must be Rimee Ruu laughing, right? She sure is energetic for so early in the morning.

“Excuse me, but is Ai Fa here?” I called out, peeking in.

My benefactor herself was standing right in front of me. Yeah, Ai Fa was right there. She was running a towel through her golden hair, right in front of my very eyes. My field of view was utterly filled with her. Her smooth, creamy, chocolate-colored skin made for a beautiful sight.

It was Ai Fa, the first person I met after coming to this other world. And so, I had taken Ai Fa to be the norm for this forest’s edge at the start. I could see now that was completely wrong, though. Ai Fa wasn’t just different from the norm, she was outright irregular by the settlement’s standards.

It seemed that Ai Fa was the one and only woman who swung around a savage blade, hunting giba in the depths of the forest.

That was why I hadn’t seen anyone else like her. I hadn’t seen anyone but Ai Fa with eyes like a wildcat, who behaved decisively like a man, and was so brave, and strong, and full of life and fighting spirit.

And she was clearly different physically, too. Thanks to the rather exposing attire worn by the women of this settlement, especially the unmarried ones, the difference in their lifestyles was readily apparent even at a glance. No other woman had a body as heavily built up as Ai Fa’s.

Naturally even the women went into the forest to gather herbs and kindling, split firewood with hatchets, carried around heavy iron pots and water jugs, and other such strenuous tasks, so none of them were exactly lazing around and getting fat. But even so, they were clearly different.

Running through the forest, swinging a blade made of steel, hunting ferocious giba... Ai Fa’s body had been carefully honed for those tasks, like tempered steel. I mean, her build actually looked pretty slender, and her arms and legs and torso certainly weren’t especially thick. No, she didn’t have a burly build

that reminded you of a man. But even so, she was hiding away tough, strong muscles trained for battle. Her body was taut like a leather whip, with not even the slightest bit of useless fat to it.

It was a slender body honed not through some unnatural diet, but rather by the harsh job of a hunter. And so, she hadn't completely lost the grace and tenderness of a young woman, still having a tight rear and lively-looking legs that made for a wonderful silhouette.

She was absolutely stunning, like a wild leopard. Her body was a work of art, as perfect as a world-class athlete. Yet, Ai Fa was positively amazing in terms of her womanly charms, too.

I had silently admired that beautiful, harmoniously balanced body, which made her perfect as an animal, a human being, and a woman.

And...

Right now, that wonderful body of Ai Fa's was burning itself into my eyes.

There were pale white scars all over, but even now her dark, smooth skin positively sparkled, with no impure foreign matter blocking it from my gaze.

Well, in other words, Ai Fa was buck naked.

She had gotten out of the water and was now standing straight up and frozen atop the rocks, stopped midway through drying her wet hair with a cloth, baring everything straight at me. There were several other naked women behind her, and they let out shrill screams when they noticed me, but I was hardly even aware of them.

If you ask me why, well, my female benefactor's face went pale, she broke out in an embarrassed expression that suited her perfectly, then she socked me with a right hook that she put the full weight of her body into.

2

"You certainly went and did something troublesome..." a voice said with a deep sigh. We were in an empty space a moderate distance from the main Ruu house.

The man was over 180 centimeters tall, and had a large well-tempered body. His eyes were thin and he always looked like he was smiling, which made it hard to judge how he was feeling.

He was the eldest son of the Ruu family, Jiza Ruu.

His younger brother Ludo Ruu was next to him, staring off at the mountains and looking completely unconcerned, while Ai Fa and I stood across from him. It felt like we were being given guidance by a teacher or something, but honestly this was much more serious. It was a secret meeting between the Ruu and Fa clans, and its outcome could very well decide the fate of both families.

“There’s a strong taboo against laying eyes on an unwed woman’s naked body. Were you aware of that?”

“...Yes. Thoroughly.”

“The law states that those who do so must either offer up an eye in atonement, or accept the woman as his bride. But unfortunately, it would be quite difficult for someone of unknown lineage such as yourself to marry a woman of our Ruu clan.”

“...Right. I understand.”

“On top of that, Vina, Reina, Lala, and Rimee were all there. Marrying all four of them would be even less permitted.”

“Yes, I’m well aware.”

“With that said, you don’t exactly have four eyeballs to offer. Now then, what should we do...?”

“U-Um! I know I said this at the start, but...!” I yelled out loudly, despite this being a secret meeting. “I only saw Ai Fa’s naked body!” I was kicked in the leg. “Ai Fa was standing right in front of me, so her nude flesh was the only thing I could see!” Ah, there comes another kick. “I was totally fixated on her nude figure, so I didn’t see even a bit of anything around her! I didn’t see anything but Ai Fa’s naked body!” This time a barrage of kicks came my way, with a *bam, bam, bam!* But it’d be a real shame to have both my eyes and something else dug out of my body, so I was desperate here.

By the way, my left temple was still positively throbbing where Ai Fa's full swing right hook had landed. I didn't seem to be bleeding, but I was honestly getting pretty worried that she may have fractured my skull.

"Hey, don't go falling for a woman from your own clan. You're gonna ruin my whole plan, you know?" Ludo Ruu muttered, not sounding serious in the least. With that, Jiza Ruu slowly turned to face him.

"Ludo Ruu... Do you not understand the seriousness of what you've done?"

His thin eyes silently looked down upon his younger brother.

Ludo Ruu shrunk in fright for a second, only for his brows to suddenly furrow.

"What's the big deal?! That's just some dusty old law, right? There isn't anyone uptight enough to actually enforce it here in the settlement!"

"That may be the case. But now that the leaders of our people, the Suun clan, have fallen to such depravity, our Ruu clan is the only one left to serve as a proper example for the forest's edge. Even if it is an ancient custom, we can't simply make light of it."

There weren't any noticeable shifts in Jiza Ruu's expression. No matter how serious he was being, his face always just looked like he was gently smiling. But in spite of that, his brother who had just been howling away like a puppy grew more and more pale as he heard what Jiza Ruu had to say.

"A-Alright, I get it... I was wrong. I-I screwed up! So please don't get so mad, big brother Jiza!"

"I'll figure out your punishment later," Jiza Ruu said, finishing matters with his pitiful younger brother and turning back towards us.

Suddenly, I felt some invisible pressure pushing down on me. Seriously, what was with the whole aura this guy gave off? It was sort of like what you'd feel being face to face with a martial arts expert.



“Ai Fa of the Fa clan. What are your thoughts on a member of your house breaking this taboo? I’ll make my decision after I hear what you have to say,” Jiza Ruu quietly stated. “There were sliding doors set up around the area to obstruct peoples’ vision. It is the custom that a sliding door signifies an entrance to a home, and you mustn’t step foot inside without the permission of one who lives there. With that in mind, Asuta of the Fa clan has broken two taboos. How would you deal with him?”

“This man named Asuta is a foreigner. I believe that as the head of the Fa clan, I am at fault for accepting him into my house and then allowing him to enter another’s home without properly teaching him the laws of our people,” Ai Fa said emotionlessly, then gave a silent bow. “If atonement must be paid for this crime, then take my eye in his place. I only ask that you not take both of them, as that will leave me unable to live on as a hunter of the forest’s edge. Will you please accept just one eye as apology...?”

“Hey, Ai Fa!” I yelled out, only for my benefactor to hold me back. Meanwhile, Jiza Ruu gave a “Hmm...” and placed a hand on his sturdy chin. “You seem to be operating under something of a false assumption there, Ai Fa of the Fa clan. It would not be possible to continue to make a living hunting giba after losing an eye. The forest is no mere playground for children, after all.”

“...If I die in the forest as a result, then I shall accept that fate.”

“I see,” Jiza Ruu replied with a single nod, then turned to me as I stood there fidgeting in the worst agitation. “Then allow me to ask one more time. Asuta of the Fa clan, did you lay eyes on the nude bodies of the women of our Ruu clan?”

“The only one I saw naked is Ai Fa!”

Naturally, that earned me another kick.

Jiza Ruu said, “I see,” with a sigh. “I shall believe you, Asuta. And if the only one you saw is indeed Ai Fa, then it becomes a matter for the Fa clan alone. It no longer involves our Ruu clan.”

“You’re offering him forgiveness?” Ai Fa asked.

“It’s not forgiveness, it’s trust,” Jiza Ruu replied. “You’re someone worthy of

my trust, Ai Fa. And since you're the head of his house, I shall believe in Asuta's words... You said he didn't step foot beyond the sliding doors, yes?"

"That's right! After all, Ai Fa was standing buck naked right behind them!"

Another kick smacked into me. I was so filled with relief that I just didn't care, though. I mean, if Ai Fa was going to offer up one of her eyes, then I would have preferred to just crush both of mine instead.

"Well then, there has been no harm to the Ruu clan, so this matter is settled. And regardless, if we shed another clan's blood over something like this, then the other clans would all call us crafty, cruel plotters as a result." With that, Jiza Ruu finally turned back to the now obedient-looking Ludo Ruu. "Do you understand, Ludo Ruu? Your actions invited disaster not just for the Fa clan, but for our Ruu clan as well. You're no longer an ignorant child, so you must behave properly as a member of the Ruu clan."

Ludo Ruu looked real pathetic, only able to offer a "...Right," in response.

"U-Um, he's not going to face a really heavy punishment, is he?"

"Hmm? Why are you concerned over such a matter, Asuta of the Fa clan?"

"Why...? I mean, even if it is just him reaping what he sows, it'd still leave a bad taste in my mouth, I guess. And if I had been even a little bit more alert, this whole mess never would have happened."

"Hmm... Well, at any rate, I won't be punishing him. If I did that, then the head of the clan would end up hearing of this." The sun was already high in the sky, but the clan head, Donda Ruu, was still just lazing about. "If my father Donda Ruu becomes aware of this, then regardless of any laws or anything of the sort, he will never forgive you. He's especially doting on his youngest daughter, Rimee Ruu, after all. He won't just request your eyes, but your very heart."

"...Oh, I see..."

"But if that happens, the Ruu clan will be looked down upon as having a tyrannical head who is starved for blood. I ask that you take care so that Donda Ruu and other members of the clan do not hear of this matter."

All I could think was, *Right back at you.*

I mean, the honor of their clan was on the line, but so was my very life.

“Well then, we have come to an agreement. Our clan head still has not woken up, so I shall say your farewells in your place. Let us pray for our mutual good fortune.”

Now that you’re done here just leave, in other words? It sucked a bit not being able to say goodbye to Rimee Ruu and the rest, but there was no helping it considering the circumstances. We just silently bowed our heads, and then headed towards the Ruu house to retrieve our blades.

“Ah, that’s right. I have a message from our clan head, Donda Ruu. He asked it be conveyed precisely, so I’ll simply use his words,” Jiza Ruu called out, still looking like he was smiling. “‘Thanks for the awful tasting meal. Because of that, our elder was saved. You have my gratitude for the greatest medicine, which eats away at a hunter’s soul.’ That’s all.”

3

“Hey, Ai Fa,” I called out, but naturally I got no response.

We were on our way back to the Fa house, having picked up our blades and Ai Fa’s cloak. As we continued along the yellow trodden path through the forest, we passed by other folks from the settlement every now and again. We were still over an hour away from the Fa home, so it was my first time seeing any of the people who lived around here. And as a result, all of them couldn’t help but turn around and stare in shock when they saw me. Apparently a foreigner wearing the clothing of the forest’s edge really did draw attention no matter where you went.

I didn’t care at all about that, though. Right now my attention was on Ai Fa, who was stomping along in long strides and exuding an angry aura.

I had something important to discuss with her, but I couldn’t exactly broach the topic like this.

Still, I’ll never get anywhere by keeping my mouth shut, I thought to myself,

working up the nerve to call out to the back of my enraged benefactor.

“Hey! I was at fault back there! I’m seriously sorry about that. But still, I don’t want the trust between us to get ruined over something like this. Will you listen to me, at least for the sake of all the time we’ve spent together up till now?”

Ai Fa remained silent.

“And I mean, there was no helping it, you know? Ludo Ruu told me you were washing stuff off there. I never imagined the Ruu house would have a stupidly big enough river there to take a bath in it. I only looked in because I figured you were all happily cleaning up after last night’s dinner together.”

Still nothing.

“And it was my first time hearing about that marriage stuff and all that. Um... That was the second time I’ve seen you in such an unthinkable state, so do you need me to take responsibility for that?”

I felt embarrassed even saying that.

Figuring this just wouldn’t do, I went ahead and used the most laid-back voice I could manage and said, “Still, I’d sure be lucky if that meant I got a beauty like you as a wife! I mean, I’m not exactly in a position where I’m worthy of such an honor! But if that isn’t enough to stop you, then I wouldn’t mind taking you as my—”

With that, my fate was sealed.

Ai Fa turned around with just as much explosive force as she had used when she took down that giba in a single blow seven days ago, and came flying at me. She forced me easily to the ground, planted her knees in my chest, unshakably grabbed me by the collar, and then strangled me so fiercely it felt hard to breath.

“U-Um, Ai Fa...”

“Shut up! You... you big idiot!”

Apparently I had seriously gone and stepped right on a landmine.

Ai Fa’s eyes were like burning flames, she was biting her lip so hard it looked like it was about to start bleeding, and her face was bright red.

“Do... do you know how much resolve I needed to decide to live as a giba hunter? For you to ask me so lightly to marry you...” she said, her voice shaking so hard it felt like her heart was going to break, as she kept on grasping me by the collar. When I saw a certain something start to well up in her eyes, I regretted it so completely and utterly that I felt like I could die.

“Sorry! I shouldn’t have teased you! I just wanted to clear away the awkwardness! I didn’t mean any harm!”

I seriously screwed up there. 200%, for sure. As sure as fire is bright and stones are hard.

This was the most guilty I had felt in my 17 years of life, having made a girl cry not because of a serious argument or a difference in opinions, but because I was joking around.

“I’m sorry! I seriously mean it! I feel like I could literally die from guilt, making someone as tough as you cry! For mercy’s sake, please stop your tears!”

“Don’t mess around! Who are you saying’s crying?!” Ai Fa yelled out as something warm dripped down onto my cheek. The glint in her eyes was like hellfire, burning so intensely that it was like those tears would straight up evaporate. But unfortunately, that miracle didn’t occur, and a bombing raid of *drip, drip, drip* kept on shattering my heart.

I really did feel like I was going to die. If she ever started straight up sobbing like Rimee Ruu did last night, I may just end up dying in agony from regret at my own foolishness.

But as a proud huntress, Ai Fa didn’t want me to see her like that, so she soon thrust me away and pulled back, faced the other way, and wiped her tears.

I sat up too, then called out to Ai Fa, who was sitting with her back facing me.

“Um, Ai Fa...?”

“I wasn’t crying.”

“You weren’t! I was just seeing things! My vision must have just gone fuzzy due to the lack of oxygen!”

Ai Fa silently stood up, wiped her face one more time, and started stomping

along again. I gave a deep sigh, and then followed after her.

The one silver lining was that no one happened to pass by during all that.

Right... She's not just cool and composed.

Ai Fa walked onwards in a very deliberate way, seemingly fixated on nothing more than the path ahead. Naturally, there weren't any more tears shining in her eyes, but her cheeks were still slightly red, and her expression seemed to look a bit more childish than usual. Until that boldness that she always wore on her face had returned, I needed to watch my mouth. That was what I decided as I faced back straight ahead.

And then, as if she had been waiting for me to feel that way, Ai Fa's frowning lips finally opened.

"...So, why have you been making a face like you're deep in thought for the last while?"

"Huh? I've been worrying about how I can make up with you, naturally..."

"That's not it. I'm asking whether or not you have something else troubling you. Otherwise, you would never think so hard."

I was seriously surprised. I figured she was just fuming this whole time, but she picked up on something like that.

"Yeah, well, I really do have something I want to discuss with you, but still... It's a bit of a complicated matter, so I'd prefer to wait till you've calmed down a bit more..."

"Don't be ridiculous! I'm always calm!"

I got the feeling that her vocabulary was getting a bit childish, too...

I was still pretty worried about if it would really be alright, but I decided to respect her opinion and broach the subject.

"Um, then I guess we can talk about it. It's pretty ridiculous, so please don't get angry with me. And if you tell me to just drop it, I'll give up on it right away."

"My mood has already been damaged enough for several years in these last few hours, and now you intend to make me listen to some nonsense, too?"

“If it’s just nonsense, then feel free to shoot it down right away... I want to have Donda Ruu eat my cooking one more time.”

Ai Fa’s eyes narrowed a bit, and she shot me a chilly gaze.

I went ahead and sincerely spilled my guts.

“If I don’t satisfy Donda Ruu, then the Ruu clan will never take up bloodletting, and in that case, they and Granny Jiba will have to keep on eating pungent meat from tomorrow onwards, right? And even aside from that, I... I’m frustrated, having him call my cooking disgusting and poison.”

Ai Fa didn’t say anything in response. She just looked at me with a disquieting gaze, her eyes narrowed.

“I know full well that we shouldn’t get any more deeply involved with the Ruu house now that we’ve somehow made it through this mess amicably. After all, it would be safer not to get closer to any members of the clan aside from Granny Jiba and Rimee Ruu. But even so, I’m just incredibly, overwhelmingly frustrated.”

“So that’s what it was, huh...?”

“Hmm?”

“It would be abnormal to not feel frustrated after facing such abuse. There’s no need to be so roundabout in discussing it at this point.”

“Yeah. But it’s true that we shouldn’t get involved with the Ruu clan again so lightly, right? That’s what I was worrying about.”

“There’s no need to concern yourself over that,” Ai Fa casually stated. “Just do as you please.”

“Huh? Then you mean you don’t mind if I just go and challenge that obstinate old man to a fight?”

“If that’s what you want to do, then do it. I won’t stop you.”

“Why are you treating it like someone else’s problem?! If I screw up, it’ll cause problems for you too, right?!”

Was she intending to tell me again that if I don’t want to cause her problems,

I should cut my ties with her? If she did, I was ready to fight her to the bitter end on it, even if I ended up sobbing and wailing in the process.

That wasn't what happened at all, though.

"Donda Ruu no longer appears to have even the slightest intention of having me marry into his house. A 'mere' woman hunting giba doesn't seem to sit well with him, after all. I feel nothing but animosity and scorn from that man now."

"Hmm... But isn't it bad to get involved with someone who has animosity towards you?"

"Why? You simply need to make your enemies yield to you," Ai Fa stated like it was nothing. As she looked at my most likely greatly troubled face, Ai Fa gave a "Hmph," and then continued on, "It's not as if you're hoping to take up a blade and strike Donda Ruu down, is it? You wish to make that man's heart yield through delicious cooking... right?"

"I guess I want to more satisfy him than make him yield? I won't deny that I'm picking a fight, though."

"In that case, do as you please. I'd like it if Granny Jiba could continue to eat delicious food, too..."

That last bit was so quiet that I wouldn't have even heard it if she hadn't been right next to me.

"Before we discuss such matters, though, there's something I need to ask you," Ai Fa said, the disquieting sparkle in her eyes only growing greater. "Do you stand a chance?"

"A chance?" I repeated, thought for two seconds, then replied, "Yeah, I've got a chance."

"You do, huh?"

"Yup. Well, I'll need to do a bit of experimenting first, but we've got plenty of excess meat, so that shouldn't be a problem."

"So you can win?"

"Hmm? No, you know, it'll be down to luck when the time comes..."

“Win. I won’t accept failure,” Ai Fa stated, turning away. “I cannot endure your creations being soiled by such boorish insults any more. Even if you forgive Donda Ruu acting so disrespectfully again... I may fly into a frenzy and do something.”

As my eyes went wide, Ai Fa’s face blushed red once again.

“Do you know how much humiliation I endured hearing that man speak last night? It was enough that I wanted to throw the contents of a heated pot right in his stupid face.”

But Ai Fa’s face last night was expressionless the whole time, wasn’t it? But thinking on it again, even if Ai Fa’s emotions have some serious amplitude to them, when she’s dealing with people who don’t know of her temper, she always seems cool-headed and emotionless. But under that cool, composed exterior, her emotions were still violently raging, huh?

“Still, if something so improper were to occur at another family’s dinner, and the Ruu clan’s at that, then the Fa clan would be done for within the day. So be prepared to take on this challenge with the Fa name on the line.”

“Understood,” I replied with a firm nod.

A heated, antsy feeling started to wriggle about in my chest.

“Thank you, Ai Fa. I didn’t know that you were feeling so frustrated, too.”

“Hmph! Even if it’s only technically, you’re a member of the Fa house! It’s only natural for a clan head to feel angry when one of her people is unjustly treated with contempt!” she angrily stated, and then broke out in a childish pout. “And besides, no matter what anyone says, that food was absolutely delicious.”

What the heck? Was she trying to make me cry with that last line, there? I ended up smiling rather than sobbing, though.

“You always give me that last push I need, Ai Fa. I can seriously feel my fighting spirit igniting.”

“Hmph...”

“Man, I sure am glad that whole stupid commotion didn’t ruin our

relationship, Ai Fa! Looking forward to still working with you!”

“What a ridiculous remark, after having broken the taboo twice already...” she said, wrinkles forming at the top of her nose and making her look like an angry wildcat. She was totally back to her usual self. Seeing that frightening face only made me feel all the more glad.

“No, no, I wasn’t calling your naked body ridiculous or anything, Ai Fa! I really mean that!”

Having gotten carried away like that, I naturally ended up on the receiving end of a rather serious full swing to the back of the head.

4

The next several days were spent intently studying cooking methods for giba meat, all for the purpose of defeating Donda Ruu! Well, that probably makes it sound like I was up grilling day and night without any rest, but naturally that wasn’t the case.

That said, at the forest’s edge you needed to work to eat, and on top of my usual daily work, I needed to push myself even harder to gain enough surplus supplies to experiment.

Honestly, the key first step was securing firewood. Without that, I couldn’t cook anything. Plus, I wanted to use this chance to thoroughly experiment with regulating the temperature of the stove. Well, I mean, it would take years to actually master it for real, as this wasn’t exactly the sort of thing you could take lightly.

The first issue I faced was that the Fa house only had one stove, and I wasn’t able to cook anywhere where I didn’t face such severe restrictions. When I made the giba soup I heated it with a strong flame at first, then added less firewood for the back half. That was about the best I could manage when it came to regulating the flame, after all. However, the Ruu house had a number of stoves. With that, it was possible to more precisely manage the heating process by moving the pot from one to another while cooking. That was what had allowed me to make full sized hamburgers rather than miniburgers for the

dinner at the Ruu house. But this method of maintaining a low flame was proving pretty tricky.

The whole process was completely different than using a frying pan over a gas stove. I mean, the shapes of the kindling were all irregular to start with, so I ultimately had to measure by eye. Plus the metal pots used by the people of the forest's edge were way thicker than frying pans, so they heated up slow and seriously retained heat. That difference was pretty tricky to get a handle on, too.

Last night I had kept things at a level where it at least wouldn't burn, so I didn't end up with a complete failure, but I couldn't help but worry that the flame was too low and let some of the meat juices escape. And I couldn't have an audience with Donda Ruu while I was still bothered by such concerns.

And so, my first barrier to overcome was regulating a low flame.

How much kindling would result in how much flame, and how would that correlate to the overall temperature? I adjusted the amount of firewood, looked at the size of the flames, checked the smoke, and grasped the overall state of the cooked meat. This was a battle of perseverance, and also the start of a long journey with no end in sight.

At any rate, I devoted my efforts to burning kindling and cooking meat.

It was actually getting real pungent inside the house, which was becoming an issue. It really made me jealous of the Ruu house with their outdoor stoves, but there was no point to envying the rich... Anyway, I just sat there staring at my hand like I was the poet Takuboku Ishikawa or something, but there was someone else here who wasn't so easily satisfied. Naturally, that was my benefactor and one and only roommate, Ai Fa.

On the evening of the day that we returned from the Ruu house, Ai Fa came from her hunt in the forest and saw the disastrous sight of the room, filled with the smell of fat and smoke, and yelled, "What in the world have you been up to?!"

I mumbled back that it was all essential research for beating that giba of an old man, and tried my hardest to look charming and win over my benefactor, only to be brushed off with, "What are you, an idiot?" Then, as she twirled her

blonde hair, Ai Fa added, “In that case, we should just make a stove outside.”

That was a serious revelation.

There weren’t any carpenters or architects or interior designers at the forest’s edge. This house and everything inside were handmade by people who had lived here.

“If you don’t have a stove, you’ll starve and die. I at least know how to make one of those.”

But still, Ai Fa had lost her father two years ago, when she was still 15. Could someone from another world like me have really ever expected that she would be so knowledgeable, when she had been cut off from everyone else ever since? Still, I can’t exactly imagine it was the standard amongst the people of the forest’s edge to learn how to make a stove at the age of 15. It was as if Ai Fa’s father had foreseen his own death and hurried to impart all of his knowledge on his daughter. I couldn’t exactly look into that subject further, though, and I didn’t feel like doing so regardless.

Instead, I just praised Ai Fa with a, “You really are amazing,” and felt blessed that he had done so.

◇

And so, the day after we returned from the Ruu house, Ai Fa and I worked on building a stove.

This turned out to be some seriously heavy labor too, not that I had expected anything else. I picked out rocks of an appropriate size and transported them back with a pulling board, then piled them all up, which made for a battle of endurance and tenacity.

We set it up in the rear of the Fa house.

It was convenient that people couldn’t see me throwing kindling into the stove constantly while the sun was high in the sky, at least while passing by the front of the house. Plus, there was a nice tree behind the house already that was the right height to protect our new stove from sudden squalls. I figured eventually I’d use that as a base to create a proper roof around it.

But for now, I just kept on transporting rocks, and then piling them up.

It needed to be a round little truncated cone, like a small mountain, and then there had to be a hole in both the top and front and a hollowed out inside, so naturally just piling them up wouldn't get the job done. What connected the rocks together was "clay" that Ai Fa brought back from the forest.

She gathered up grey clusters of rock that could only be found in a specific area, smashed them to bits, and then dissolved them in water. We carefully kneaded that gooey, sticky substance in the gaps between the rocks, got it more or less into shape, and then tried burning up some kindling. It wasn't airtight enough, so we kneaded in some more clay in the places where it cracked and crumbled.

Once we did that five or six times the smoke stopped leaking out, so Ai Fa mixed a bit of fine sand in with the clay, and then we smeared it thoroughly all over both the inside and outside.

Then we just needed to heat up the flame all the way to harden the clay, finishing it off.

"Phew! I'm dripping with sweat! That ended up taking half a day!"

The sun was approaching the western horizon, and the white smoke of dinner being cooked had long since started rising from all around us.

"...I'm hungry, Asuta," Ai Fa said, seated on the ground yet showing no signs of exhaustion.

"Right. Well, since we went through all this trouble, why don't I cook on this stove tonight? Which do you want, soup or hamburgers?"

"Hamburgers," Ai Fa immediately replied while still seated on the ground, causing me to turn and look at her. "What?" she shot back with a frightening glare.

"No, I was just thinking that you answered really quickly. But you know, we had hamburgers last night too, so now it's been four nights in a row. Is that really alright?"

".....It's alright."

Hey, you don’t need to leave such a pause there...

Well, I made sure the poitan were baking as we worked, so I didn’t really care what we had for the main dish. It would take a bit of time to grind up the meat, but compared to the gratitude I felt towards Ai Fa for spending half a day helping me make this stove, it was a cheap price to pay.

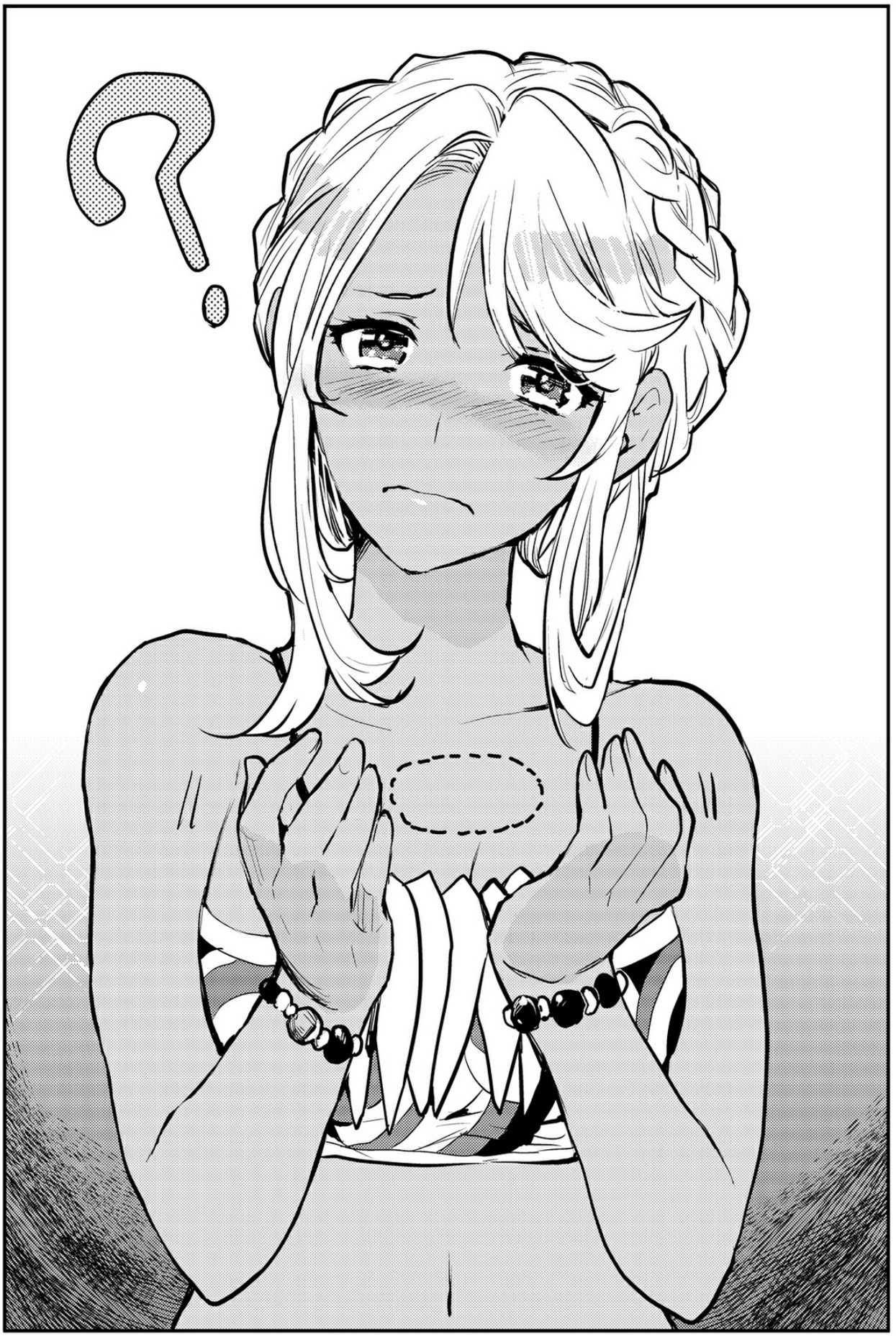
As that thought passed through my mind, Ai Fa called out to me again with an “Asuta.”

“What is it, Ai Fa?”

“The hamburgers we had at the Ruu house the day before yesterday were big.”

“Yeah. Back where I came from, that was the usual size.”

“...Why are the hamburgers you make here small?”



“Oh, I never said? You need to use both strong and weak flames when making them that size. If you just use strong flames then the surface will get burned, and if you only use weak flames then it won’t cook much and the flavor will seep out. That’s why I had to cook them in that cute, small little size.”

“Is that so?”

“Yeah.”

“Asuta.”

“What is it, Ai Fa?”

“...Now the Fa house has two stoves.”

“Yeah. I’m really glad. But it’d be tough to carry a pot between them, with one being on the outside while the other is inside. It might be difficult to use them both for cooking at the same time...”

But if I could get down the skill of maintaining a low flame, then I could tackle that challenge head on. Just as I was thinking what a problem that would be, though, I saw Ai Fa’s eyes positively gleaming in the twilight.

And so, on the next day, we ended up building a *second* outdoor stove. I plopped down on the ground with all my might in front of the twin fixtures.

“Phew! I’m dripping with sweat! It’s just way too rough for me, building stoves two days in a row! My arms are done for! I don’t even know if I’ll be able to make dinner like this...” I whined while collapsed on the ground, only to spy Ai Fa staring at me with a seriously troubled look in her eyes. “No, I’ll make it. I will. I’ll make you nice big hamburgers! Don’t cry, alright...?”

“Who are you saying is gonna cry?!”

“Then it’s no problem... Anyway, now I can finally start experimenting properly from tomorrow on. Thanks, Ai Fa.”

“Hmph.”

“Now that I think of it, I’d like to start sampling some anti-Donda Ruu dishes tomorrow. Guess we better get our fill of hamburgers for the time being tonight, huh?”

“Get our fill...”

“No, I mean, if you want to eat some, I can make them whenever... Hey, don’t cry, okay?”

“Who are you saying is gonna cry?!”

“Hmm... You really do like hamburgers, don’t you? You know, if you eat nothing but hamburgers every day, it might not quite turn out like Jiza Ruu said, but your teeth really may end up losing strength...”

Something about that was catching my attention. Teeth, losing strength...? Regressing...? But what?

“I see...” I muttered, thinking as I massaged the area between my brows. “That’s certainly true, yeah...”

“What is it, Asuta?” Ai Fa asked, drawing her face in closer with a serious expression. Her golden hair was clinging just a bit to her sweaty cheek, and... it was kinda sexy, somehow.

“N-Nothing! I just reconfirmed that I was taking the right approach with this. My goal is a food with more of a chewy texture, yet every bit as tasty as the hamburgers, so look forward to it!” As my mental feelers darted here and there, I said, “Now that I think of it...” and voiced a question I’d had for a while. “Hey, Ai Fa. I really appreciate you taking two days to help me make these stoves, but are you alright on your hunting? You haven’t hunted one down in almost 10 days now, right?”

“It’s no real issue. We got ahold of an unexpected bounty at the Ruu house, after all,” Ai Fa said, wrapping her finger around the necklace dangling in front of her chest. Just like me, she had been given eight tusks and horns. And since she already had a good number before that, she went ahead and stowed the excess inside the inner pockets of her cloak, apparently.

“Getting eight means it’s like hunting two giba, or 20 meals worth of poitan and aria, huh? That was a pretty exceptional reward for just manning the stove once.”

“It was a proper reward, at least for you,” Ai Fa muttered as the flames in the stove sputtered. “And besides, no matter how much I may walk around the

forest, there are simply times where I cannot hunt one down. The forest is endlessly wide, but the areas we can venture into are extremely limited. After all, we can only head far enough to allow us to return home that same day."

"Hmm... That makes sense."

"But if we hunt down the giba around the settlement, then the fruits and small animals they love to eat multiply, and giba hiding further out will move their dwelling nearer to have at them. And then, we can hunt as much as we please."

"I see. Sounds like you've got a proper cycle going there."

But now that she'd picked up a freeloader, Ai Fa's burden had doubled, so I didn't think it was all that simple. Before, to meet the minimum for food she needed to hunt one every 10 days, but now that she had two mouths to feed, it was down to five. I prayed in my heart that period of abundance would arrive before Ai Fa's stores were exhausted.

Then, the next day, Ai Fa came back with a large set of horns and tusks.

"A giba got trapped in the pitfall that you fell in," she said.

The day after that, she came back with another massive set.

"Today's was a big one. My blade almost snapped while facing it."

Fighting a giba was a life or death struggle. Honestly, I felt embarrassed having prayed for that "bumper crop" to come...

And then, the following day... Amazingly, Ai Fa came home carrying a young 50 kilo giba all by herself.

"I let out the blood just like you said. It kept on moving for a long while as it bled out, so I think it likely went well."

As I burned kindling in the outdoor stoves, Ai Fa practically collapsed beside me. Her body was positively coated in sweat and dirt, and she was breathing in a pained, rough manner. That was only natural, though. Even if it was on the small side for a giba, it was still in the 50 kilo range. That couldn't have been all that different from what Ai Fa weighed herself.

"A-Are you alright? You really went and did something crazy there..."

“It’s nothing... Give me water.”

I hurried into the house and scooped up a ladle-full of water. I realized that Ai Fa’s arm was trembling when she tried to take it, so I brought it gently to her mouth instead. Ai Fa gulped it down in one go, gave a big sigh, and collapsed on the ground.

Her well-proportioned chest was violently heaving up and down, making me question where I should even be looking. So instead, I glanced over at the giba by her side. It was the corpse of a giba, with its head and throat stained with blood, and its sad little eyes closed shut. Its body was small, but it was round and looked like it probably had plenty of fat. Its horns were bigger than its tusks, so it was probably a young male giba.

“We still have nearly half the meat left, right? You didn’t need to push yourself so hard...” I said, only for Ai Fa to shoot me a displeased look while remaining sprawled out.

“What are you saying? In five more days, that meat will start to go bad.”

“Yeah. But in that case, you could’ve done the bloodletting in the forest and just brought back the legs...”

“You’re the one who’s always complaining about how it’s a waste to throw away the giba’s torso, aren’t you?” Ai Fa stated, sounding disgruntled. Her eyes were shut, and she was still breathing a bit heavily. “Why are you finding fault with me? Are you saying my work was unnecessary?”

“Not at all! I’m grateful... Thank you, Ai Fa.”

Ai Fa opened her eyes and glanced over at me.

“If you’re grateful, then show it through your actions.”

“H-Huh? How do you want me to show it, then?”

Ai Fa sluggishly sat up, pouted a bit, and looked at me with upturned eyes.

“...I want to eat hamburgers tonight.”

It had only been two days since I asked to start experimenting, but she was already showing withdrawal symptoms, huh?

I gave a big nod.

“Got it! I’ll get on it right after I get this guy prepared! Just make space in your stomach and wait!”

Ai Fa nodded back, wearing a bit of an odd expression on her face. It was really unnatural, like she was desperately holding back a smile.

Figuring there was no way I could stop myself from getting fired up after seeing that, I couldn’t help but look up into the sky and gave a big sigh.

5

And so, before I knew it, 10 days had passed. In other words, more than two weeks had passed now since I first came to this other world.

The first five days it was just me and Ai Fa, but then I met Rimee Ruu that night, and we visited the Ruu house on the 6th day. The next morning we returned home, and then 10 days passed... making this my 16th day, huh?

I felt like I’d been living here for way longer than that, yet at the same time I was also astounded that so much time had already passed.

At any rate, it had been a dense 16 days.

And I mean, this past week I’d spent all my time burning kindling and cooking meat. But the time had finally come. Tomorrow morning we would head to the Ruu house and deliver our declaration of war.

There was no limit to how much I could experiment with regulating the flames, so I had to cut it off somewhere. And that ‘somewhere’ ended up being today.

Ai Fa gave me her approval, having stated, “It’s about as tasty as hamburgers,” after trying the final experiment for tonight’s dinner.

It was a menu prepared with the goal in mind of making a meal fitting for the people of the forest’s edge... for making them happy. And when I saw Ai Fa looking so earnestly overjoyed, I couldn’t help but think this would surely do.

“Thinking practically, if I hadn’t met you, I probably wouldn’t have been able

to do anything and would've died out there in the wild within a few days, huh?" I suddenly asked, having finished cleaning up the utensils and lying out happily atop the rug.

As I listened to the animal fat candle slowly burning away and dimly lighting the room, I saw Ai Fa look a little disgruntled.

"No matter what dilemma you found yourself in and regardless of who picked you up, you'd be fine... Is that what you want me to say?"

"I don't overestimate my own abilities, nor do I look at the world so lightly. I was incredibly lucky that the first person I met in this land where I don't know my left from my right was you, Ai Fa. I want to say I became aware of that within the first day or two."

"Why is it that when night falls, you always start talking about serious topics or getting emotional without any chain of reasoning connecting it to the discussion at hand? It's a real pain, since I'm the one you're always talking to."

Ai Fa combed up her hair underneath the light of the candle's flame. When it was time to sleep, she let her long hair hang down naturally like this.

My eyes narrowed at the beauty of her hair sparkling in the dim light, and I broke out in a relaxed smile.

"Is that so? Well, it's been a good bit of time since I came to this world, but I guess I still haven't shed off my feelings and intuitions from my old life. To me, it's only natural to have quiet heart to hearts when you're hanging out in dim light like this. It just makes it easy to get sentimental."

Now that I said it, each and every day really was sort of like a school trip, huh? Talking bit by bit till you fall asleep, barely able to see the other person's face under the orange light of the flame... I'm sure I just hadn't adapted fully to this world yet, since it still felt like an unreal situation to me.

"If I've been too gloomy and got you down, then I apologize. But when I'm talking to you like this, it's... How should I put it...? It's just really comfortable and nice."

"...I'm telling you it's gross when you say things that are so serious and unlike you."

Ai Fa had been leaning up against the wall in a somewhat slovenly manner, and she slumped down even more to lay down on the rug, then kicked me in the leg.

So as not to waste the candles, Ai Fa only kept one lit after we were done with dinner. And so, we weren't ever too far apart at night, so we wouldn't lose sight of each other.

Ai Fa was there relaxing, not far from me. That thought was very soothing to me.

I couldn't help but feel on edge at first, being alone at night with a young woman like this, but now I felt quite calm about it. And it wasn't just because we had spent so long together that she felt like family, or that her presence felt as natural as the air around me. Naturally that was there, but I hadn't exactly come to see Ai Fa completely as family. If she was family, the beauty of her face, and the incredible smoothness of her skin, and how she occasionally let a bit of her sorrow slip into her expression, or her slightly childish actions... All of that wouldn't make my heart quake or pound the way that it did.

I was from another world... If it wasn't for the sense of inferiority that caused me to feel, I would probably have fallen for her at first sight. No, I may actually be in love with her now... At the very least, aside from my family and my childhood friend, no one else in my 17 years of life had grabbed such a firm hold on my heart and refused to let go. And on top of that, Ai Fa had charmed me so thoroughly in just a matter of days.

Even so, I didn't want to ruin the relationship we had. I didn't even know what tomorrow would bring, and I was gripped by a fear and anxiety that I could be dragged back to those flames in my original world at any time, so I had no intention of taking any actions I may not be able to take responsibility for. And so, even though the feelings in my chest got all stirred up by Ai Fa's charms, I was still able to spend these tranquil nights together with her, feeling totally satisfied and fulfilled with my lot.

You know, the way that bundle of sex appeal known as Vina Ruu came after me may be part of why I was able to clearly recognize those feelings now.

How do the folks of the Ruu clan spend their nights, I wonder?

Aside from Rimee Ruu, I had only spent a single night together with them. They didn't seem like such a bad group, though.

Naturally, I had no intention of forgiving that Darmu Ruu bastard, and the jury was still out on Jiza and Vina Ruu. But aside from them... Well, I still hadn't talked much to most of them, but they certainly didn't give off a bad impression.

The clan head's wife, Mia Lea Ruu, seemed like a real good-natured lady. And the eldest son Jiza's wife Sati Lea Ruu appeared to be a very kind, gentle woman.

The grandmother of the seven siblings who I manned the stove alongside, Granny Tito Min, was an old lady with a commanding presence despite her calm exterior.

The second daughter, Reina Ruu, was still just an earnest, adorable girl.

The youngest son, Ludo Ruu, well, he definitely wasn't easy to deal with, but I really couldn't bring myself to hate him.

I'd hardly been involved with the third daughter, Lala Ruu, and I'd never so much as seen her smile, but she didn't seem to be all that bad.

Rimee Ruu was a really good kid. She was an absolutely adorable little girl, and just seeing her smile was enough to instantly cheer me up. Plus, she was someone important to Ai Fa, so I couldn't help but hope that she would get raised right.

And then there was Granny Jiba... Their precious elder. She was like some mysterious character out of a fairytale, and she had lived the sort of turbulent life I could only imagine. I really was incredibly glad and proud to have been involved with her life in such a positive manner.

Finally, the one leading those folks was the head of the clan, Donda Ruu. To me, he was the guy who shattered my pride as a chef.

My desires to bring joy to the Ruu dinner table and make up for my own thinking coming up short were equally strong, but at the same time, I couldn't deny that I wanted to get the better of that narrow-minded old guy and leave him speechless. But still, I decided that it shouldn't be out of anger or hatred.

If that loudmouthed mountain of a man really were as savage and arrogant as he appeared, I never would have strove to reach a mutual understanding with him. But he was the father of Rimee Ruu, and he was also Jiba Ruu's grandson.

And in the first place, it was wrong for a chef to cook out of anger.

It may be reasonable to cook for the sake of pride or self-esteem. But still, what I wanted wasn't to force him into submission. No, I wanted to satisfy him.

And also, I'd never heard of a chef shoving their way into someone's house and forcing food upon them. I was just a blockhead who couldn't restrain his own frustration. So at the very least, I wanted to aim for harmony rather than discord.

Just what sort of conclusion would be waiting for me? Tomorrow's meeting would be the first step in determining that.

"Hmm...?"

I heard a gentle *thud* so I looked up, and saw that Ai Fa had slumped down from her position sitting against the wall, and was now slovenly splayed out across the floor.

"What, you're asleep? Guess I should put out the light, then."

"I wasn't... actually sleeping."

While thinking to myself there was no need to be so stubborn about it, I broke out in a strained smile, forced my dead-tired body up, and placed the cover over the candle in the window. The world around me was instantly plunged into darkness, but my eyes soon adjusted to the moonlight.

Ai Fa was still lying down by the wall, her position unchanged. Her long blonde hair was spread out across the floor, illuminated by the pale moonlight. Taking care not to step on any of it, I approached and leaned over Ai Fa's head. After brushing the hair off of her soft cheek, I moved a bit away and then laid down.

"...No matter what dilemma you found yourself in and regardless of who picked you up, you'd be fine..." a voice said, so quiet that I could only just barely hear it.

“That’s not true at all,” I responded just about as quietly, and closed my eyes.

That was how the time till our showdown with Donda Ruu passed, at times quiet and calm, and at other times incredibly noisy and restless.

Chapter 3: Agreement and Reunion

1

“...And here I thought I’d never see you two again in my life.”

We were in the main Ruu house.

Donda Ruu had one knee up in the air and was tearing away at black smoked meat, a massive giba skull and pelt hanging imposingly on the wall behind him.

It had been 11 days since we last left the Ruu house, and the sun was currently just short of reaching its peak.

The clan head’s eldest son, Jiza Ruu, was seated by his side.

The only woman we had seen today was his wife, Mia Lea Ruu, who had welcomed us first. They must have been busy skinning pelts or boiling down fat or something.

As Ai Fa and I handed over our blades and were seated, Donda Ruu continued on, “To think that you’d just show up nonchalantly at this time of day... Are you alright with your important work as a hunter, huh, Ai Fa, head of the Fa clan?”

“That won’t be an issue. In this half a month alone I’ve already hunted down four giba, so we have more than enough for our house of two to survive.”

By the way, in this world a month was thirty days. There were twelve months in a year, adding up to 360 days total, but once every three years they added a thirteenth month or something. Honestly, I still didn’t exactly get their calendars.

At any rate, Donda Ruu glared at Ai Fa as she responded, then gave a sigh.

“So, you two came here for some sort of business, right? If it was to see the elder, then go right ahead.”

“I certainly would like to take you up on that later. Before that, though, my clan member Asuta wishes to offer you an apology.”

“An apology...?” Donda Ruu repeated, looking clearly unamused.

I squared up my knees and gave a deep bow.

“My deepest apologies for offering a dish the other day that failed to satisfy you, the head of the Ruu clan. That was purely due to my lack of experience, when you went and entrusted your stove to me. I wish to once again offer my apology for that.”

“Hmph. I have no idea what you’re prattling on about, Fa clan chef,” Donda Ruu responded, his mockery and ill will raining down upon the back of my head. “You all saved the soul of our elder, Jiba Ruu. Thanks to that, I believe I overlooked the crime of feeding me a meal that corroded the soul of a hunter. I’m at a loss as to how I should deal with an apology for something I already overlooked.”

“Right. Therefore, I, Asuta of the Fa clan, would also like to make a request of you, Donda Ruu, head of the Ruu clan,” I said, looking up from my bow and staring straight into Donda Ruu’s muscular face. “Will you allow me to man the Ruu house’s stove one more time?”

“What did you just say...?”

“It’s true that I took charge of your stove in order to bring peace to the heart of your elder, Jiba Ruu. I’m truly glad I was able to succeed in that task, but even if you’ll forgive it, I had no intention of feeding you or the members of your family food that you would find unpleasant.”

A villainous twinkle appeared in Donda Ruu’s eyes. The pressure he was exuding made it feel like I was facing a wild beast or something.

However, I glared back at him as firmly as I could and said, “Please let me man the Ruu family stove one more time. This time, I’ll bring peace and satisfaction to the hearts of your entire family.”

“The whole family, huh...? You already got blessings from eight of our twelve with that giba meat that practically seemed like it was rotten. Even that wasn’t enough to satisfy you?”

Something about the tone of his voice had me taken aback. Before I could figure out why that was, though, Donda Ruu broke out in a sinister grin.

“And besides, kid, when it comes to food, there’s no good or bad taste. My

stomach and soul already get plenty of peace and satisfaction from eating giba meat and the blessings we receive for their horns and tusks. The only time that hasn't been the case was that night you fed me that awful meal."

"Right. In that case... I promise you that I'll grant you even greater peace and satisfaction."

"A promise..." Donda Ruu repeated, his mouth twisting into even more of a sneer. "So you say you'll enter into an agreement with me, the head of the Ruu clan, kid?"

"Yes."

"And you know what sort of fate will be awaiting you if you fail to live up to that agreement, do you?"

"...I leave that all up to you."

With that, Jiza Ruu spoke up for the first time.

"My father and clan head, Donda Ruu... No matter what they may say, the Fa house has nothing of value with which to pay us. If they break the agreement they would have no choice but to offer up their bodies, but if we were to shed our people's blood over something so trivial, it would be like dragging our Ruu clan's name through the mud."

"Hmph. That kid's not a person of the forest's edge. He's just some pale-skinned outsider, right?"

"Even so, he is currently a part of the Fa clan. Even if he was born in a foreign nation, he would undoubtedly be considered part of the family of one of our people."

He most definitely wasn't arguing out of concern for our fates. Rather, as a stickler for the rules and laws of the forest's edge, Jiza Ruu didn't want a member of another house manning their stove in the first place, and he especially didn't wish for the head of the clan to act in a cruel manner.

"Hold on. I'm not exactly violent enough to demand blood over my opinion on a meal, you know. At least as long as he doesn't feed me poison that rots a hunter's soul, that is." A smile broke out on Donda Ruu's stone-like face, calling

to mind a carnivore that found its prey. “It’d be a bore to enter into an agreement with nothing on the line, though... Hey, kid, are you prepared to treat people from another house to that food you’re so proud of?”

“Huh?”

I tilted my head, not understanding what he meant, and that giba incarnate of a man’s hearty shoulders started trembling as if he couldn’t contain his excitement.

“10 days from now, the Rutim clan, which are my clan’s followers, will be holding a wedding. The head of the Rutim clan and his party will be coming here to the Ruu house three nights from now, to introduce themselves. Our clan will be pulling out all the stops and holding an extravagant banquet as a sort of celebration in advance... I’m asking if you’re prepared to man the stove for it.”

“Clan head, that’s too—”

“Silence, Jiza.”

Even that eldest son of the family, with that mysterious pressure he gave off, seemed unable to defy the head of the clan. His already thin eyes grew even thinner as he shot a sideways glance at Donda Ruu.

Seeing that, I asked, “How many people will be there?”

“Oh, it’ll just be three people. The head of the Rutim clan, his eldest son, and the bride.”

“The eldest son of the main family...” Ai Fa muttered.

“Yeah, that’s right,” Donda Ruu replied with a chuckle. “In other words, we’re talking about the heir to the family. His marriage is of the utmost importance to the Rutim. And on top of that, the Rutim is the largest of the Ruu’s followers. They have a great many men, and a deep bond with the Ruu clan. If you were to earn their anger, then they would break off all relations with the Ruu clan, and we’d have to do the same with the Fa.”

“Break off relations...?” I asked, turning around to look at Ai Fa. She was simply listening to Donda Ruu’s words in silence.

“The Ruu clan wouldn’t get involved with the Fa clan ever again. Even if you

came to us begging for help, we wouldn't raise a hand... And it wouldn't just be the Ruu proper, you know. The Ruu branch families, the six clans affiliated with us, and our followers numbering over 100 strong would all cut ties with the Fa clan."

"That's...?" I started to ask, but I saw that Ai Fa wasn't moving so much as a muscle.

"Hey, Fa clan head Ai Fa... You haven't been mistaking the fact that you've been able to keep on living a carefree life after brushing off our offer to marry into the clan as the result of your own skills, have you?" Donda Ruu placed a hand on his knee that was raised, then suddenly stood. "I'm sure those folks from the Suun clan have been holding back from laying a hand on you because you were involved with our main family. You may not have ended up marrying into our clan in the end, but it sure must have looked like there was some sort of connection between the Ruu and Fa clans. Of course it was up to those numbskulls to go around thinking that, and I figured you already knew so I just let it be. I didn't feel the need to get you in my debt, after all. And I figured since it was making those Suun jerks grind their teeth in frustration, I didn't have to be so kind as to clear up the misconception."

"So...?" Ai Fa asked, tilting her head a bit as the light in her blue eyes grew just a tad fiercer.

"'So...?' So if they hear that the Ruu clan has cut off all ties with you, then the Suun are sure to carry on from where they left off two years ago, totally worry free. To them, it'll be as easy as wringing a baby giba's neck to have their way with a single girl without any backing."

"And you're saying such lawlessness will be allowed here at the forest's edge?"

"If you're powerless, then the law doesn't apply. There's a taboo against kidnapping a girl and torturing her to death, but if the leaders of our people break it, then who will bring the hammer down upon them? Would anyone but the Ruu really raise a blade against the Suun clan?"

I was still sitting with my knees side by side, and I clenched my fists tight. I could feel something akin to bloodlust towards the big brute standing beside

the large man in front of me.

“And you don’t have any clansman or followers. The only other member of your house is that outsider. I’m sure the folks around you wouldn’t even notice if the two of you were kidnapped. That’s why that fool was able to break the taboo and sneak into your home on that night two years ago, right? And since he got a painful lesson back then, I’m sure he’ll bring a number of men along with him this time, wouldn’t you say?”

“...I don’t care how many he brings with him. I simply need to strike them all down.”

A fire had finally been lit in Ai Fa’s eyes. Her glare didn’t lose out to Donda Ruu’s in the least as she stared down the mountain of a man.

“So, that’s the agreement offered by the head of the Ruu clan, is it? If Asuta doesn’t satisfy the hearts of the Ruu and Rutim, then the Ruu will cut all ties with the Fa clan... Very well. As the head of the Fa clan, I accept this agreement.”

“Hey, Ai Fa!” I yelled out, only for Ai Fa’s burning blue eyes to turn towards me.

“What? You’re not going to say you lack confidence, are you? I believe I already told you to be prepared to face this challenge with the name of the Fa clan on the line.”

Ai Fa was angry. Honestly, this may have been the most mad I’d ever seen her. And that probably wasn’t because of Donda Ruu’s ridiculous demand. No, she must have been angry at him trampling over her pride, saying she only survived thanks to the pity of the Ruu clan.

Ai Fa...

To be honest, I didn’t want to accept those terms. Even setting aside the matter of the Suun clan, if her ties with the Ruu clan were cut off, then she would have to discard those bonds she had finally reforged with Rimee Ruu and Granny Jiba. And if I had to cast off my pride in order to save Ai Fa, I wouldn’t even hesitate to do so. It would be idiotic to take up a challenge where Ai Fa’s safety and happiness were on the line.

And yet...

Even if I were to run from this, Ai Fa wouldn't be saved. At the very least, her intense, pure soul wouldn't make it through unscathed. In fact, she would probably fly into a rage at me for trying to trample over her pride and honor too.

"Asuta..." she whispered, her eyes like blue flames staring at me. There were deep furrows between her brows, and after she called my name, her lips drew taut... and her shoulders started trembling ever so slightly.

You won't believe in me either...? I won't falter over something like that, but you won't trust in me...? The light like flames in her eyes seemed to be strongly telling me that.

"...Got it," I whispered back, then turned back towards Donda Ruu. "I accept those conditions."

The expression was wiped from Donda Ruu's face entirely. His fingers that were so thick they made it look like he was wearing a glove ran through his unkempt mane-like hair.

"You'll accept them, you say? Do you two really understand what you're saying?"

"I accept those conditions," I repeated, using a firmer tone of voice.

I could clearly see the searing irritation in Donda Ruu's eyes.

"Alright then. I'll enter this agreement with you, *chef*. And when you fail to satisfy me with your cooking, I'll expect you to return what you're wearing so proudly around your neck, there. After all, a fool who breaks his agreements isn't worthy of blessings from the Ruu clan."

"Understood."

I at least maintained my calm on the surface and gave a single nod.

I took a glance to the side to ask if this was really alright, only to find Ai Fa looking down a bit and hiding those burning eyes of hers behind her eyelids. Maybe I was just seeing things, but... I could swear she had broken out into a satisfied looking smile.

2

“Oh my, are you done already?”

As we exited the Ruu banquet hall, two women carrying flat baskets just happened to be passing by: the wives of the clan head and the eldest son, Mia Lea Ruu and Sati Lea Ruu. They were each carrying a mountain of fresh pico leaves in their baskets, which they must have been planning to dry out.

By the way, the tusk and fang necklaces they wore had apparently recovered to the usual set of three at some point.

“You’re making some rather frightening faces, there. Did our clan head go and run his mouth again?”

Mia Lea Ruu was a woman with some weight on her, and looked to be about my old man’s age. But with that said, no matter how wealthy the Ruu clan may have been, they still worked hard each and every day, so she certainly hadn’t grown fat from lazing around. No, she was just big boned. She had firm muscles packed on, and then simply had an appropriate amount of fat on top. I mean, her arms and shoulders were thin and she was shorter than me, but I certainly didn’t feel I could win out in terms of strength.

I’d just seen her, so I instead turned to Sati Lea Ruu and said, “Long time no see,” with a smile.

“Welcome to the Ruu house, Ai Fa and Asuta of the Fa clan. What brings you here today?” the young woman asked. Her hair was a bright brown and she had black eyes. She looked to be around 20 years old. She was so slender that it was hard to imagine that she already had a one year old child, and she had an overall neat and tidy appearance.

“Well, how should I put it...? There’s that celebration for the Rutim wedding in three days, right? Well, looks like I was put in charge of manning the stove for it,” I replied, only for the two women to ask “Really?!” as their eyes positively sparkled.

“I’m amazed you managed to get our bullheaded clan head to agree to that! Well, no matter what he said, I know Donda was dumbfounded by those baked poitan. I’m sure he must want to really lord it over the folks from the Rutim

clan.”

“It sure is exciting, isn’t it, Mia Lea?! Reina and Rimee have been trying their hardest, but their cooking still just can’t measure up to Asuta’s at all. And that soft giba meat... Will you be making that again?”

“You’ll have to look forward to the day of to find out. But I at least promise you that it won’t come up short of what I made last time.”

They both let out excited squeals of the sort you would expect from young maidens.

There was no need to bring up that disgusting agreement with such pure, innocent women. After all, I had no intention of sowing discord amongst the Ruu house.

With that said, though, I had complex feelings about how the two men we just finished meeting with had such cheerful, kind wives. And since women received giba tusks and horns from their parents and husbands in the hope they would live a healthy life, it was rather obvious where the replacement adornments on their necklaces had come from.

The gap between that duel-like atmosphere from before and this bright, idyllic sight in front of me now was enough to make me feel a little dizzy.

“What are you making such a moody face for?” Ai Fa whispered in my ear while jabbing me in the side. And she was also staring right at me from seriously up close and personal. “There’s nothing for you to worry about. You just need to satisfy that stubborn man with your cooking.”

The passionate flames were already gone from her eyes, and in fact she actually looked calmer than usual. I felt like sighing, seeing how she apparently felt this was all fine and dandy.

Still, it meant that Ai Fa believed in me, and trusted that I wouldn’t lose to Donda Ruu. And even if I did, she was totally prepared to drag herself through the mud alongside me. There wasn’t even a hint of doubt or hesitation in her expression.

Damn it! Why do you have to be so strong, Ai Fa?! I thought to myself, while feeling something bubbling up like giba stew in my guts.

It wasn't a bad feeling, though. It was like a soup of pure concentrated fighting spirit, screaming out, "There's no way I'll lose!"

My real enemy wasn't Donda Ruu, though. No, it was my past self. My thinking had come up short and I got conceited and failed to bring things to a satisfactory conclusion, so I had to overcome that me and reclaim my pride with my own two hands.

"...I'm telling you, you need to calm down a bit. If you go around that angry, will you really last three more days?" Ai Fa said with another jab in the side. She was close enough for us to be having this secret conversation, so her blonde hair had been tickling my cheek for a while now. With that realization, I finally figured maybe she was a little *too* close. And as I had that thought and looked back their way, I found the two wives watching over us with innocent smiles.

A sudden wave of embarrassment washed over me, and I moved an appropriate distance from Ai Fa.

"O-Oh right, where's Rimee Ruu? I haven't seen her at all today."

"Rimee, is it? Hmm? She was just with us, and I know I told her you two were here. Hey, Rimee?" Mia Lea Ruu called out loudly, sounding clearly puzzled.

I tried looking around the area too, but when I realized Ai Fa's gaze was fixated in a particular direction, I turned and looked that way as well. The bit of reddish-brown hair peeking out from around the corner of the house quickly disappeared from view.

"Ah, so that's where you were, huh? Thanks for helping out, but we're fine now, you can go play with Ai Fa and Asuta for a while."

With that, we said our farewells to the two women and they circled around to the other side of the house.

We were told that Granny Jiba was in the middle of a nap but should be waking soon, so we were allowed to stay till then. And since it took an hour to walk here, this was a fortunate opportunity for Ai Fa to rekindle her old friendship with Rimee Ruu. However, Rimee Ruu's fluffy reddish hair only ever peeked out of the shadows of the wall, and she made no signs of coming closer.

"What's Rimee Ruu doing? Is this some sort of game at the forest's edge?" I

asked, but Ai Fa just shot me a slightly chilly gaze for some reason and then called out “Rimee Ruu,” to the shadows. However, Rimee Ruu still didn’t move.

“...Asuta, what’s that?” Ai Fa asked, pointing behind me.

I looked that way with a “Huh?” only to hear the pitter patter of footsteps. When I turned back around, Rimee Ruu was hugging Ai Fa. Her little arms were wrapped around Ai Fa’s slender waist, fur cloak and all, and her tiny head was buried in the older girl’s chest.

“That hurts. Cut it out, Rimee Ruu,” Ai Fa said, her face turning just a bit red. I thought of pointing out how that didn’t look like it hurt at all, but I didn’t want to get kicked so I just let it drop.

“Long time no see, Rimee Ruu. I was wondering if you could let me see your face at least once. Have you been doing alright?” I asked, greeting the girl with a smile. Rimee Ruu’s back suddenly quivered, and she stopped moving.

“What’s wrong? You haven’t forgotten me, have you?”

Rimee Ruu slowly turned to face me, still clinging to Ai Fa. Then, she nervously glanced up at me and... For some reason, she looked absolutely terrified. She was so frightened that she was even redder than Ai Fa. Her round little eyes were tearing up, and her tiny lips were quaking. She was just as animated as always, but for some reason she looked like she was about to start bawling.

“Asuta...”

“Hmm?”

“Asuta, did you see me naked?”

I was so shocked that it was like God had thrown a thunderbolt in judgment and landed a direct hit to the top of my head.

“W-W-W-What are you saying, Rimee Ruu? N-N-Naked?”

“...Asuta, you peeked when the women were bathing, didn’t you? Did you see me naked then?”

She means that incident from that morning ten days ago, right?! Since I’d been focusing on experimenting with cooking day in and day out since then, I’d long since stowed it away in my memories, but that wasn’t the case for this girl,

huh? And wait, no matter how I looked at it, Rimee Ruu couldn't be more than 7 or 8! It'd be preferable to get this treatment from the other girls, because seeing such a young girl on the verge of tears seriously made me feel like a criminal!

I ended up screaming out with all my heart and soul, "The only one I saw naked was Ai Fa!" again. Today, she chose to kick me in the rear rather than the leg. Yeah, that was a middle kick with the weight of her body behind it, so it felt like my pelvis shattered there.

After just a few more minutes, we ended up moving to the stoves in the back of the house. The men would be back from the forest soon, and I didn't want to run into that jerk Darmu Ruu.

"...You promised not to mention that incident to Donda Ruu or the other members of the house, did you not? And yet you went and yelled about it in such a ridiculously loud voice right out in the open," Ai Fa said angrily, with Rimee Ruu still clinging to her left arm. Perhaps because she'd been forced to recall that unwanted memory, her face was still a little red.

"Hey, I just said I saw you naked, so it should be fine, right? Ah... Sorry, please forgive me for that. If you kick me again, I really won't be able to walk."

I looked up at Ai Fa and saw her give a "Hmph!" with flushed cheeks, while Rimee Ruu's face was even redder as she sadly whispered, "Hey, did you really just see Ai Fa naked, Asuta? Then does that mean you're going to marry her for real?"

Her voice was quiet, but I could hear her clearly.

"I have no intention of taking a husband, especially one outrageous enough to go around breaking taboos!"

Ugh, just cut it out with that. I've already paid my dues by being made to feel like a criminal all day.

Anyway, we finally reached the rear of the house.

After passing by and saying hello to Granny Tito Min chopping wood, we kept walking along till we reached the building with the separate kitchen, where we found two girls working away at some strange task. They were the second and

third daughters, Reina and Lala Ruu.

There were large doors laid at their feet with giba pelts spread out atop them, and they were stomping away on them. They were barefoot and walking around in a clockwise circle, as if they were chasing one another. It must have been a step in the tanning process.

Before long, Reina Ruu noticed us, and her blue eyes opened wide. Her lovely face went a clear pink. I was surprised to see her dark brown skin go such a rose color. Well, at any rate, she was definitely beet red.

Reina Ruu kept stepping along while facing down a bit, and she was followed by the third daughter of the house, Lala Ruu. She was still only just at the age where she'd be hitting middle school (well, that didn't exist in this world, though), and she was just as impudent of a kid as always, so just maybe... I vaguely hoped in vain.

That still youthful little face of hers practically exploded in brilliant red. She frowned even deeper, ground her white teeth, placed her hand on the grip of the small blade at her side, then approached me despite still being completely barefoot.

"Hey you! How shameless can you be, just showing up here like this?! You're out of luck now, you bastard!"

"S-Stop, Lala! Look, Granny Tito Min is right over there! If you make a fuss, well... S-She'll find out what happened that morning, right...?" Reina Ruu pleaded, desperately grabbing her sister's arm as her face grew even more red and she shrank down further.

Reina Ruu had her long black hair done up in two braids, and though she was petite she was positively bursting with style and charm.

Lala Ruu had her red hair in what looked like a ponytail, and despite how young she was, she was actually taller than her big sister, and had a face brimming with willpower that reminded me of a boy. She was a rather cute girl too, though.

Seeing the two sisters with their faces so beet red, my heart plummeted into the depths of shame.

Figuring I'd have to hope I could get off with just a kick, I gave a big sigh, only to shockingly get beaten to the punch by Rimee Ruu.

"U-Um! Asuta said he only saw Ai Fa naked! S-So he doesn't have to marry us!"

The sisters froze in their tracks. They both turned and stared at me, their faces still bright red as their emotions showed clearly in their eyes.

"Right! I only saw Ai Fa's—" I stopped midway through, on account of the palm strike to my forehead. Ah, that was a new one. I think it gave me a bit of a concussion, and left me clinging to the wall of the kitchen going "Ugggggh..."

"...Give that a rest already, Asuta."

As I just barely made out Ai Fa's expression through my blurry vision, I couldn't help but regret my actions.

In order to provide some assurance to the other girls, I had gone and sacrificed Ai Fa's pure, shy heart. I mean, who was it that was most important to me? Ai Fa, of course. I was a big dummy, relying on Ai Fa's strong nature for the sake of self-preservation.

I was getting ready to seriously apologize, but the world was still spinning at the moment, so that wasn't quite possible.



3

“Um, you see, I’m really sorry about the other day. I swear I didn’t see any of you in the nude, but I apologize from the depths of my heart for causing you such distress.”

I had recovered from the blow to my head about a minute afterwards, and then bowed my head deeply to the women of the Ruu clan and offered that apology. Reina, Lala, and Rimee stood in order of age across from me, wearing a variety of expressions.

Reina Ruu looked embarrassed.

Lala Ruu was clearly mad.

And Rimee Ruu wore a slightly bashful smile.

Regardless of the expressions on their faces, though, they were all beet red.

Ai Fa was one thing, but I really hadn’t seen any of them, so why’d I have to be made to feel so guilty over this? It definitely felt more than a little unreasonable, but well, I guess the crime of disturbing such young ladies’ hearts was rather serious. Plus it was true that I was a big old careless idiot, so I just went ahead and bowed.

“U-Um, please don’t worry about it! Jiza already explained everything to us. It was all because of Ludo’s prank, right?” said Reina Ruu, offering me a lifeline despite the fact that her face was the reddest of all, which made me feel even more pathetic.

“Hmph! Jiza’s too soft! We should’ve gouged out the bastard’s eyeballs and tossed him out into the forest! Then he would’ve become food for the mundt and everything would be wrapped up cleanly!” Lala Ruu violently declared, but the way that her face stayed red was still making me feel guilty.

“B-But Asuta isn’t the type of person to lie! I’m sure he really didn’t see us naked! It’s embarrassing, but it won’t happen again!” Rimee Ruu chimed in. I seriously wanted someone to strangle me at the thought that I may have traumatized her young heart.

“...Are you done, women of the Ruu clan? I have to bow my head thanks to my clan member’s idiocy, too, but we came here to your home today to have a discussion,” Ai Fa said, smoothing things over. Her face was as cool and calm as always, not a hint of a blush to it.

“What did you come to discuss, Ai Fa?” The eldest of the sisters present, Reina Ruu, asked, and Ai Fa gave a small nod.

“Before that, you all were in the middle of your work, weren’t you? I couldn’t apologize to your other family members enough if we interrupted that. Please, keep working as you listen.”

“Right. Well then...” Reina responded, patting the dirt off her feet and then getting back to stomping the pelt.

“What are you doing there?” I asked, only for Reina Ruu to finally regain her usual innocent look and respond, “We’re stomping on it in order to make the fur softer.”

I wanted to ask more about how they tanned their pelts, but there wasn’t exactly time for that. After all, we were only allotted a short stay at the Ruu house, until Granny Jiba woke up.

“10 days have passed since our last time here, but how are your meals going? Has Jiba Ruu been doing alright?”

“Yeah! Granny Jiba has been eating each and every day while crying a whole lot! We can’t make it as tasty as you do though...” Rimee Ruu replied. “Everyone has gotten pretty good at making baked poitan, though. That... hamburger, was it? Anyway, that stuff is still tricky even for Reina. When she cooks them it all falls apart while it’s baking, or ends up all black, or there’s still red meat on the inside... And it’s still stinky, too. It still smells like giba whether we make hamburgers or a stew without poitan.”

“Are you washing the meat properly?”

“Yeah! We wash it in water with rock salt, just like you told us! But there’s always still some smell left...”

I had gone ahead and taught them a way to wipe out the stench, but unsurprisingly, it was difficult to get rid of it entirely without performing

bloodletting right after capturing it. I'd already established that back at the Fa house.

"Man! I'm sure Reina would get lots better with practice, but Papa Donda won't let her! 'It's ridiculous to waste giba meat playing around like that!' he said. So she's only allowed to make enough hamburgers for Granny Jiba."

"I just can't do it as well as you, Asuta. You really are amazing," Reina Ruu said, her black eyes sparkling like something out of a shojo manga. I felt incredibly honored, but the stare coming from the other direction was painful.

"I mean, we've got plenty of meat! Ugh, I want to eat hamburgers again too! I don't need any dried meat anymore! I just want to eat hamburgers, day and night!"

"That's for sure. I feel the same way, Rimee," Reina Ruu said with a sad smile.

As I watched the two sisters, I actually felt a little scared. How should I put it...? They were a lot more addicted than I had expected. Donda and Jiza Ruu rejected it, but Rimee and Reina Ruu were completely captive to its flavor. Had the brand new dish of hamburgers been too intense for the people of the forest's edge, who hadn't experienced any soft meat but that mushy stuff from their giba stew?

I couldn't help but think even more strongly that I needed to shatter the fantasy surrounding hamburgers with my cooking this time around.

"By the way, there's a bit of something I want to ask... How do you cook giba here at the Ruu house?"

"How? We just cut it up like *slice, slice, slice.*"

That didn't help at all, but fortunately Reina Ruu followed up.

"We prepare it like you showed us that time, cutting it all off the bone first, then slicing it thinly before cooking it. And I make sure to slice it evenly, leaving the white fat on top."

That wasn't much different from how we handled pigs and boars back in my world, then. Giba legs pretty much only had fat around the outside, so if you shaved it down like Ai Fa had done, you wouldn't get anything but red meat

before long.

“Oh yeah, how thin are you talking about?”

“Huh? About this thin.”

About a centimeter thick, huh? Slicing raw meat thinly was tough, so that was plenty enough to satisfy me.

And hey, it was pretty unfair using her two index fingers rather than her hands to show me “how much.” I mean, she was just too cute and innocent, which made her look super adorable. I broke out into a grin without thinking, and as a result I felt a gaze painfully piercing my cheek.

“Hey, why are you asking about that, Asuta?”

“Hmm? Ah, I was just asking to have a point of reference. To be honest, I’ll be manning your stove again three nights from now.”

“Huh, really?!” “Seriously?!” two of three sisters asked, practically exploding with delight.

Only one of the girls kept on stomping with a sulky look and said with a sharp tongue, “What, you’re manning the stove again? Well, whatever. Just don’t make me eat that mushy meat again.” She was abusing me in the guise of just talking to herself.

I silently turned to face her. Well, she was moving around though, so it was pretty difficult to get our gazes to meet.

She was the third daughter of the Ruu house, Lala Ruu. The only woman in the family who didn’t acknowledge my cooking.

I couldn’t change the plan at this point based on what she said, but I still wanted to hear her opinion.

“Hey, Lala Ruu... You prefer tough meat to the soft stuff like the men do, right?”

“Huh?” She replied with a dangerous glare in her eyes. But even so, her face regained a bit of red, so she wasn’t all that frightening. “What’s with you, you peeper? Don’t just go striking up a conversation with me.”

“L-Let’s just put that matter aside, alright? Even if I’m still in training, I’m a chef, so people’s impressions of my food are very important to me. And I especially wanted to hear what exactly you had to say.”

“What’s with that? Normally manning the stove is women’s work, you know.”

“That’s not the case in the country where I was born. At the very least, the majority of the folks making a living by cooking were men.”

Lala Ruu kept on silently stomping for a while, but before long, her face got a little redder and she shot me a glare.

“So what?! You won’t leave till I talk to you?! I’ve got nothing to say to a peeper like you!”

“Huh? I’ll apologize as much as it takes for that, so won’t you please help me out here?!”

“...No matter how much you apologize, it’s still embarrassing,” she said while looking down a little and biting her lip.

Was she... like Ai Fa? With that thought, the glare on my left cheek grew even more intense.

I was breaking out in a cold sweat, but I kept piling on my words.

“I-I’ll be leaving soon for today. But can’t you at least talk to me a bit before that? If I recall correctly, you said the baked poitan and soup weren’t bad, right?”

“Ugh, you’re such a pest! I just hated that mushy meat is all! That warm fruit wine stuff on top was good, and the crispy aria were tasty too! But what matters most is the giba meat!” she yelled out as if she was desperate, shooting me a thorny glare. However, her face was still clearly red. “What, are you angry because I’m the only one who didn’t give you a blessing? Well, I can’t help you there! I mean, I really couldn’t stand that meat! Yeah, and wait! It was Reina’s fault to start with for giving you a blessing!”

“H-Huh? Me?”

“Hey, wait, you shouldn’t be fighting amongst yourselves...”

“He must’ve persuaded you while you were cooking, right? That’s why you

gave him a blessing right away, isn't it? You're always, always acting so serious, but that's just dirty!"

"That's not true at all! I really thought it was delicious!"

"Um, you see..."

"I thought it was yummy, too!"

"Butt out, baby Rimee! The only reason men make a fuss over you is because your breasts and butt are big, Reina! If you don't get married while that belly of your is still nice and slim, you really might just miss out, you know."

"W-What are you saying?! That's awful! And how could you say such things in front of Asuta?!"

"I'm not a baby, you man-woman!"

Aaaaaaagh! I had absolutely no clue what to do here. And for some reason, I got the feeling that the glare piercing my left cheek was only growing sharper and colder. Could you seriously blame this all on me, taking everything into account?

"...What're you all screaming about?" Ah, a savior! It's the youngest son of the house, Ludo Ruu! "Hey visitors, Granny Jiba has woken up from her nap. Geez, give me a break... This is why I told you to hurry up and grab one of them."

"Shut it, Ludo!" "T-That's rude, Ludo!" "Cut it out, little Ludo!" the three sisters yelled out in synch, only to get a wave of a hand and a, "Ugh, you're so loud," back as the boy nodded towards me and Ai Fa.

He had a bit of a tough look on his face today, somehow. He had a bow and quiver over his left shoulder, so he must have been heading out into the forest.

Before leaving, I called out one last time to Lala Ruu, who was still grinding her teeth.

"Lala Ruu, this time I'll prepare meat you can really dig into, not that mushy stuff! You'll enjoy it too."

"Oh, shut it! I won't give you a blessing, no matter what food you roll out!"

“T-That wasn’t my intention at all! Can we just get away from that topic already?!”

The firing angle had shifted so it was hitting the back of my head rather than my left cheek, but my benefactor’s glare still felt like the tip of a metal blade pushing up against me. I was already in enough trouble for throwing myself into this fight, so could we please treat “marry” like a swear word for a while?

“Hmph. Well, whatever,” he said, locking his thin yet strong and firm arm onto my neck from the side.

“If you prefer Lala over Vina or Reina, you can have her. But if you lay a hand on little Rimee, I’ll kill you,” he said in a low, quiet voice full of real bloodlust.

I prayed that Rimee Ruu’s future suitors would find happiness in the afterlife, at least.

Anyway, we headed nonchalantly back to the front of the house like that, where I couldn’t help but freeze and go “Whoa...”

It wasn’t just the men I knew from the main family in front of the house. No, it was a full-on giba hunting party of nearly 20 warriors.

“Ah, so you’re back, Ludo? Listen up, men! We’re going to get ourselves plenty of life out there in the forest today, too!”

The men gathered let out a “Yeah!” so loud that it felt like the earth was trembling. All of them had on giba cloaks and massive blades, and a few of them were equipped with bows. Some of them even had what looked like short spears. Some were old, and some still looked to be around Ludo’s age. Some of them had bandages around their heads, while some had one of their arms bending in a strange direction.

However, they were all unmistakably hunters of the forest’s edge.

Whether they were old or young, injured or healthy, they all had eyes like beasts and gave off some sort of invisible fighting spirit as they headed off into the forest.

Donda Ruu stood at the head of them all, naturally, but he didn’t even seem to see me or Ai Fa.

Ludo Ruu called out, “See you around!” and took off running towards the group, his eyes just as beastly as the others.

They just made for such a heroic sight, like something out of a myth, that I was left unable to speak or even move for a bit.

“...Those are the men of the Ruu branch families, who support these houses.”

Ai Fa slapped her hand down on my shoulder. I turned around without even thinking, and saw the same sort of intensity in her burning blue eyes.

“They’re Donda Ruu’s younger brothers and their sons. Or perhaps the younger brothers of Donda Ruu’s parents and their children. And the one leading them all is the head of the main Ruu family, Donda Ruu.” Her wildcat-like eyes were staring right into mine. “On top of that, the Ruu clan has six other clans under them as retainers who follow their orders. The Rutim, Maam, Min, Lea, Ririn, and Muufa. Added together, they number over 100 strong. Are you feeling timid, Asuta? That’s the sort of man you picked a fight with.”

“No... I’ll probably be fine,” I replied, somehow forcing a smile. “Yeah, I’ll be alright. Actually, it just gave me more confidence in what I’m trying to do. I’m... probably not wrong with what I’m doing.”

Ai Fa furrowed her brows, looking like she was about to sigh. However, she soon gave me a daring smile of the sort I only rarely got to see in our day to day life, and then she roughly rustled my hair, towel and all, which she would normally never do.

4

Now then, it was all well and good to say that we would visit Granny Jiba, but there was a strong taboo against stepping foot into someone’s house without a member of the family to guide you. However, we couldn’t find Rimee Ruu and the rest, (and they were probably still quarreling anyway) nor could we track down the two wives who had been drying out pico leaves. We didn’t even know if anyone but Granny Jiba was in the house right now, but I went ahead and tried calling out, “Excuse me, is anyone there?”

Someone was indeed there.

There were three people we still hadn't seen yet today. The second son, Darmu Ruu, must have headed out into the forest, but that still left two. And in fact, both of those two opened the door in response to our call. That said, one of them was Kota Ruu, who was still just a baby.

The eldest daughter of the house, Vina Ruu, was standing on the other side of the door with a look of bewilderment, holding Kota Ruu up to her rather impressively shaped bosom.

This wasn't exactly a pleasant reunion for me. After all, she'd thrust her sex appeal right in my face, even before that whole thing with everyone bathing. But I figured that meant she wouldn't act all shy over that incident like the other girls. And yet, I could see the blood rather vividly rush to her porcelain-smooth cheeks.

Oh, come on! You're a devilish woman who was going to get naked all on your own, right?! I screamed out in my heart. All the while, Vina Ruu hid her mouth with the swaddled infant, her drowsy-looking eyes grew moist and showed her clear embarrassment, and she started wriggling her sensual body as if she was desperately trying to escape my gaze.

"A-Ah, Asuta... And Ai Fa, too... I-I was wondering who was visiting, and it turned out to be you two... I-I've been watching Kota here in place of Sati Lea, so I didn't realize at all..." she said, her voice sounding a bit restless.

She was a bundle of sex appeal and coquettishness just like before, but how should I put it...? This sexy big sister was valiantly trying to maintain her posture even while twisting about with embarrassment. And it didn't seem at all like an act, which left me at a loss.

"U-Um... Jiza told me everything, and I understand, but... I'm sorry. Even so, could you please try not to look at me so much...?" Vina Ruu asked, her face finally completely hidden behind the baby.

Kota Ruu stared straight at me with those black eyes he had gotten from his mother, and let out a "Gah?" while tilting his head. Cut it out! Don't look at me with such pure little eyes after everything that's happened today!

"Y-You came to see Granny Jiba, right? Her bedroom is this way. Follow me..."

With that, Vina Ruu took off in a hurry to the other side of the room, practically running rather than gracefully sashaying as she went like she usually did.

I quickly turned around, and found Ai Fa staring back at me with eyes that looked like ice crystals.

“W-Well then, let’s get going to see her!”

There really was no reason for me to be so flustered, but I just couldn’t keep myself calm.

But at any rate, we were visiting Granny Jiba.

There were hallways on either side of the banquet hall leading further into the house, and Vina Ruu headed towards the right-hand one. The corridor was just wide enough for two people to walk side by side and continued straight for about 10 meters, after which there were three doors in a row on the inner wall. If the left-hand hallway was built identically, then that would make for six rooms in total.

The house was certainly bigger than I had thought. They may not have needed to have anyone sleep in a huddle in the banquet hall, even with a huge family of 12 plus a baby.

Vina Ruu opened the door furthest in, then stood in front of it while still squirming all the while.

“Pardon me, Granny Jiba,” Ai Fa said, then passed beyond the door.

Well then, I should too... I thought, but surprisingly (or maybe not?) Vina Ruu grabbed the hem of my clothing.

I turned around, figuring the way she’d been acting really had just been a ruse to get me to let my guard down and seduce me somehow, only to find Vina Ruu hanging her head so much that I could hardly see her face, as she looked at me with teary eyes from the other side of her long, chestnut colored bangs.

“T-The laws of the forest’s edge bind your agreement, don’t they...?”

On their own, those words would sound like some sort of sensual declaration of war.

However, the way she was acting so pathetic made me think this devilish woman was pretending to be an innocent maiden or something, and I had no idea how to react.

“Um... what’s up with the way you’ve been acting?” I asked, making sure to be quiet enough that they wouldn’t hear it inside the room. However, Vina Ruu’s shoulders jumped and she hid her face behind Kota Ruu again.

You know, I really don’t think you should be treating a baby like that...

“D-Don’t look at me so much... P-Please, just leave it at that for today...” she finally squeezed out, then she hastily hurried back down the hallway.

Feeling completely exhausted, I listlessly shuffled on in through the door.

Ai Fa was already in the middle of a conversation with Granny Jiba.

“Oh, is that you, Asuta...? Thank you for coming. You’ve made this old lady very happy...”

The clear smile on the elder’s face caused my heart to ache today just as much as the baby’s innocent gaze from earlier. I couldn’t exactly say so, though, so I just walked further into the room and then kneeled down next to Ai Fa.

The room looked to be around 10 square meters. As for furnishings, there was just a large shelf decorated with stuff like nuts I didn’t recognize, bundles of branches, animal bones, carved wood masks, and the like, while the rest of the room was empty.

Granny Jiba was seated atop a bed made by layering a number of sheets, and her shoulders and feet both had what looked like beautifully colored shawls over them.

The climate around here was like a tropical rainforest, meaning it was always like early summer in Japan. However, the thought of this little old woman sleeping all alone in this dreary room somehow caused me to feel a chill.

“...At nighttime, Tito Min sleeps together with me. That girl lost her husband quite some time ago, too, after all...”

It was as if she had read my mind, earning a bit of a jump from me.

Granny Jiba was sitting up while being supported by Ai Fa as she reached out

fingers like withered branches and took my hand.

She looked just like a wrinkled little baby monkey. She must have been naturally small, even before she got this old. However, I could see the clear sparkle of intellect in her eyes that were almost completely hidden by her drooping eyelids, and her face like a dried fruit bore an affectionate expression.

Granny Jiba was looking remarkably healthier than the last time I had seen her, which made me very happy to see.

“Thank you for before, Asuta and Ai Fa. I’ve been eating properly ever since. It may not be as tasty as what you made, but Reina and Rimee are trying their hardest...”

“I’m glad to hear that. It makes me happy to see you well, Granny Jiba.”

Ai Fa may not have been showing her emotions on her face, but the look in her eyes certainly seemed gentler than usual. It was almost enough to make me think I must have imagined that fire in her eyes when the men of the Ruu clan were heading out. And the same was true of her icy glare, too.

“...Donda actually came to see me before, which is unusual. He said you would be coming again three nights from now...?”

“Yes. We will be manning your stove once again. I’m sure that Asuta will cook you another delicious meal, Granny Jiba,” Ai Fa said, shooting me a glance. “...He’s very skilled when it comes to cooking.” The fact that she didn’t add, “but nothing else” must have been down to her samurai-like mercy.

“I’ll do my best to satisfy you,” I added, trying my best to offer a humble response.

“That makes me glad... But that night is the celebration for the Rutim wedding, isn’t it? Donda said so with a big grin on his face...”

With that, her nearly hidden eyes gained an even more penetrating light to them as they looked between me and Ai Fa.

“Tell me, Ai Fa... just what is Donda planning...?”

“Planning, you say?”

“The head of the Rutim clan, Dan Rutim, is just as rough-natured as Donda,

like a large ape from the southern forest... If you were to feed that hot-blooded man the same sort of food as last time, he may fly into even more of a rage than Donda and completely ruin the celebration...”

“And he wishes to shame Asuta and I in that manner. Donda Ruu seems to truly not like us from the depths of his heart, after all.”

“Not like you... That must be because you rejected the offer to marry into the family, yes, Ai Fa...?” Granny Jiba said, her eyes fixed on Ai Fa.

My benefactor gave an ever so slightly pained frown.

“There was no helping that, though. Even we women have the right to choose our own husband... But still, Donda must have come to like you. Otherwise, he never would have offered to have one of his precious sons marry you. I’m sure he fell for the way you valiantly stood up to that heir to the Suun clan head on... But then you went and turned down his offer, and on top of that, you even said you would live as a hunter...”

“...”

“I’m not judging you for that, of course... I’m glad that you’re living the way that you believe in... But Donda has pride in his work as a hunter, and at having been born a man. He also thinks of a woman’s work protecting the home as equally important... I’m sure that’s why he cannot forgive you for choosing to be a hunter despite being a woman...”

“...”

“Ai Fa... Donda entrusted the stove to you on such an important night for the Ruu clan. Just what is he plotting...?”

Surely no one could refuse to answer after being asked by someone with such a piercing gaze. And so, Ai Fa bit down on her lip like a child, and then replied after a moment.

“He said that if we fail to satisfy him and the head of the Rutim clan, he will cut off all ties with the Fa clan.”

The room was silent for a while.

Before long, though, Granny Jiba Ruu quietly said “I see,” gently closed her

eyes, and then muttered “I see...” once again. “Ai Fa, and Asuta. Are you not able to refuse...?”

“We can’t. In fact, we’re actually the ones who suggested it. Donda Ruu only added his conditions,” Ai Fa said in a firm voice.

Granny Jiba slowly turned and looked at me.

“Right... We didn’t wish for this to become such a huge thing, but we can’t withdraw now, and I also believe this is important for the sake of the Ruu clan, too,” I responded, after giving the matter some serious thought. “Of course, I went and came up with this whole troublesome plot in the first place to defend my own pride and conceit. But now it’s more than just that. I want to satisfy Donda Ruu for the sake of the Ruu clan, too... It’s pretty hard to put into words, but that’s how I feel.”

“I see...” Granny Jiba muttered again. “You believe that to be the correct path, don’t you? Then... if Donda really, truly does try to act so cruelly towards you, these old bones will leave the Ruu clan.”

“Huh?”

“I’m saying I’ll discard my Ruu name... Will you then welcome me as a member of your clan and house, Ai Fa?”

“W-What are you saying, Granny Jiba?! I can’t do that!”

This was probably the most flustered I had ever seen Ai Fa.

But I mean, it made sense. Seriously, I was pretty darn shocked myself.

And yet... I sort of got the meaning behind what Granny Jiba was saying.

“Oh my, so you intend to abandon a poor old woman with nowhere to go to her fate...? If I leave the Ruu clan and the Fa clan won’t accept me, then I suppose I’ll just be left to die by the side of the road...”

“I’m telling you, there’s no need for you to do so! Why should you have to leave the Ruu clan? That doesn’t make any sense!”

“Yes, it does... If the Ruu clan were to cut off all ties with you, then I wouldn’t be able to meet you like this anymore, now would I? And those folks from the Suun clan may well stop holding back and try to do something horrible to you...

There’s no way I could simply allow that to happen, right?”

“But why does that mean you have to leave?! Even if you were with me, the Suun clan would still—”

“The ones I would be unable to forgive wouldn’t be the Suun clan. No, it would be Donda for trying to thrust that fate upon you...” Granny Jiba firmly stated in a quiet voice. “Donda’s father was my own son. I couldn’t forgive my own grandson trying to force something so cruel on you... And so, I would cut my ties with the Ruu clan. That’s all.”

“That’s ridiculous... What about Rimee Ruu, then? And Reina Ruu? And Jiza Ruu? They’re all your precious family, aren’t they?!”

Ai Fa looked like she was on the verge of tears, but Granny Jiba just quietly stared back at her and gave a relaxed smile.

“Of course they’re all precious family. Jiza, Vina, Darmu, Reina, Ludo, Lala, Rimee... The previous clan head’s wife Tito Min, Donda’s spouse Mia Lea, and Jiza’s beloved Sati Lea... They’re all very important to me, and part of my family... But the head of the clan is Donda. When someone cannot abide by their clan head’s words, they have no choice but to leave.”

“But...!” Ai Fa started, only to be stuck at a loss for words. As if she couldn’t hold it back any longer, a single tear rolled down her cheek.

“If Donda were to cut off ties with the Fa clan, I could never forgive that. I’m certain that is absolutely wrong... So as the elder of the Ruu clan, it’s important that I make sure Donda knows that full well.” Granny Jiba gently wiped away Ai Fa’s tear with the tip of her finger. “So you see, leaving the clan is the only proper path for me... Do you understand that, Asuta...?”

“I think I do,” I replied, only for Ai Fa to shoot me a scathing glare. However, I had no intention of retracting what I’d said. “Well, I don’t think I can fully understand the thinking of someone as amazing as you so easily, Jiba Ruu. But if I were in the same position... If my family was trying to do something horrible to someone I cared about, I couldn’t just accept that. I don’t know if I’d really be strong enough to choose to leave my family, but I can understand the idea behind wanting to do so.”

“Asuta, you—” Ai Fa started, grabbing me by the collar, but I placed my own hands on top of her firm grasp.



“Ai Fa, Rimee Ruu may end up thinking the same way as Jiba Ruu. Do you think she would really accept her own father plotting to crush her precious Ai Fa? Rimee Ruu may leave her clan alongside Jiba Ruu. And if she can’t then she may live her whole life hating her father, right?” Ai Fa turned pale, looking absolutely shocked. That pained face caused me to claw at my own chest, but even so, I continued on. “That’s the sort of challenge we’ve taken on. If you can’t stand that, then no matter how much shame it may bring you, we should call it quits here and now. We’re... only thinking of our own lives and our own pride, after all.”

That was especially true of Ai Fa. She really should be more aware of how loved she was by the people around her.

No matter what happened to her, no one would be sad. No one would get angry. That’s what she had thought for these past two years of her life.

I thought that strength of hers was amazing. That loneliness didn’t eat away at her tenacious soul, and I respected that from the depths of my heart.

But... even Ai Fa had made at least that one mistake.

Even as she distanced herself from others, Ai Fa was thinking of Rimee and Jiba Ruu inside. So Ai Fa should have realized the possibility that they were thinking of her just as much, too.

The only people who could achieve true isolation are probably those who never think of anyone else. Anyone who possessed a heart capable of loving others could never truly wish to live all by themselves.

“...Ai Fa. What we need to do hasn’t changed.” I gripped Ai Fa’s hands tight. “We’ve just got to win this fight and satisfy Donda Ruu. That way, no one has to get hurt. Jiba Ruu won’t need to leave her clan, and Rimee Ruu won’t end up hating her father. We just need to satisfy Donda Ruu with a delicious meal.”

If we bowed down to Donda Ruu now, we would lose pride, honor, trust, and status... but we wouldn’t lose Jiba and Rimee Ruu.

I didn’t think that was enough, though. I wanted to be involved with the Ruu clan in a better way than that. And that feeling only grew stronger by coming here today and seeing so many people.

“You can see the proper path forward, can’t you, Asuta...?” Granny Jiba quietly whispered. In response, I smiled back at her as gently as I could manage.

“I don’t know if it’s the proper choice or not. But all I can do is prepare delicious food. Look forward to three days from now, Jiba Ruu.”

Chapter 4: Cooking with a Rookie

1

At last, the day arrived. That night, the people of the Rutim clan were invited to a celebration before they held the wedding.

Apparently, it was the custom at the forest's edge to meet for an inconspicuous party with just the relatives seven days before a wedding, like they were doing here. From what I heard, they would hold a series of banquets, first with the groom's Rutim clan tomorrow night, the day after that with the bride's Min clan, and then finally the Lea family, with whom they had deep ties. It sounded like a real pain of a custom to me, but the only part that mattered on my end was tonight: The first celebration in the chain, held at the house of the highest ranking person involved. In other words, the banquet that would be held at the main Ruu house.

I would be in charge of the stove for the event, which was a weighty responsibility. And on top of that, Ai Fa and I had an agreement with the head of the Ruu clan, Donda Ruu: If this banquet didn't satisfy Donda Ruu and the head of the Rutim clan, then the Ruu clan and every family affiliated with them would cut off any and all ties with the Fa clan. And if that happened, the heir to the Suun clan, Diga Suun, may come after Ai Fa again. Plus, on top of that, if Donda Ruu tried to force such a cruel fate on Ai Fa, the elder of the Ruu clan, Jiba Ruu, had decided to renounce her clan and join the Fa house. Rimee Ruu also cared about Ai Fa just as Jiba Ruu did, so all that would surely cause her to suffer greatly.

I couldn't help but sigh at what a complicated mess this had turned into.

But still, there was only one thing for me to do: Present Donda Ruu with a delicious meal that would satisfy him.

◇

"I'll be counting on you all today," I said with a deep bow in the Ruu family kitchen.

I had my white towel wrapped around my lengthening hair, a white t-shirt under a buttonless vest, my necklace with its eight sparkling blessings, a grigi berry bracelet, an ethnic-looking cloth around my waist, and white shoes, adding up to the sort of hybrid outfit I'd grown accustomed to wearing.

The knife that was my old man's heart and soul was placed atop my work space.

I was totally prepared, physically and mentally.

Ai Fa stood by my side, and three women were in a row across from us.

The chief Donda Ruu's wife, Mia Lea Ruu.

The oldest daughter of that pair, Vina Ruu.

And lastly, their second daughter, Reina Ruu.

"So Reina Ruu is the only one carrying over from last time, huh?"

"Yes! It would have been Lala normally, but she seemed reluctant for some reason, and I really wanted the chance to study more of your cooking techniques... So I traded with her."

"You're a real lifesaver. Our odds of success are way higher with at least one person who knows how to handle things."

I was just talking logically rather than paying mere lip service, but for some reason, Reina Ruu's face went red and Ai Fa shot me an icy glare.

However, I was determined not to let anything throw me today. Of course, that didn't have anything to do with my screw up last time. But still, I intended to take on this challenge with a dauntless spirit.

After all, the fates of numerous others were riding on how I wielded my knife today.

"What, so you don't think we're reliable? How rude! I won't lose out to Reina when it comes to manning the stove just yet," Donda Ruu's better half said with a hearty laugh. She was big-boned and sported plenty of meat on her body, had red hair with a bit of white mixed in, and bold brown eyes. She wore the single-piece outfit characteristic of married women, and seemed like a trustworthy lady.

Vina Ruu stood next to her, fidgeting with her long hair and looking bored. She was completely different from her mother in every way, from her hair to her eyes to her physique. Her eyes looked drowsy, and her lips were full. The contours of her body were positively stunning, and she exuded pheromones. It was as if she'd been born for the purpose of enchanting men.

She wasn't blushing bright red all over at the sight of me anymore, but in exchange, she seemed to have replaced her usual friendliness with pure apathy.

Anyway, looking at the three of them sure did remind me of how I hadn't informed them of the brutal agreement I had with the head of the clan.

"Well then, here's the plan for today. There are going to be 12 folks from the Ruu clan, three from the Rutim, plus me and Ai Fa, adding up to 17 in total. I'm only looking to prepare a special menu for Jiba Ruu," I started, keeping things extremely business-like. "As for everyone else, we'll be making the same giba stew and baked poitan, and then grilling giba meat. I was thinking we'd make hamburgers for Jiba Ruu, but, um... have you been making her giba stew specially so it was easier to eat, normally?"

"We have. We dice up her aria smaller so they're easier to chew, and then heat them up in a separate pot. And we put all the meat in our pot, since Granny Jiba gets plenty of hamburger to eat," Mia Lea Ruu answered with a smile.

Reina Ruu had a serious look on her face and was hanging on my every word, while Vina Ruu looked like she was trying to catch her balance as she stifled a seductive yawn.

"I see. That's what I'd like to do too, then. Now, about the cooking... Are any of you especially good at preparing the giba stew or the baked poitan?"

"Reina is the best at baking the poitan. We're all about equal at preparing the giba stew, but Vina here is easily the worst at manning the stove."

"Got it. Then Reina Ruu will be in charge of the poitan, while you'll handle the giba stew, Mia Lea Ruu. I'll leave most of that up to you. Vina Ruu will be in charge of the meat along with me, and will lend everyone else a hand, alright?"

"...I'll just be a hindrance though, won't I? Should I just have Granny Tito Min

or Rimee take my place...?” Vina Ruu said, sounding a bit sulky for some reason.

In other words, she was feeling inferior to Reina and Mia Lea Ruu because of their cooking skills, huh?

While pondering on how intricate of a personality she had, I broke out in a smile and said, “No, that wouldn’t do. You’re a woman of the Ruu clan too, so let’s give this our all together. I have every intention of taking care of my task as well.”

Vina Ruu didn’t say anything.

“Alright, Reina Ruu, could you get started on the poitan? And please help her carry stuff, Vina Ruu.”

Vina Ruu really was sulking now, but she still obediently followed Reina Ruu out of the kitchen.

“So? What should I do, Asuta?”

“Right, there’s something I want to ask you, Mia Lea Ruu. I heard that you’ve been adding baked poitan to the nightly menu since I manned the stove, but have you also been adding the various vegetables from your pantry to the giba stew since then?”

“That’s right. Otherwise, it would be the exact same flavor every single night. And besides, when we make it, we just can’t get rid of that giba stench. So we need to add stuff like tarapa or lilo to cover up the smell.”

“Huh, so you add lilo, too? But isn’t that way too harsh?”

“It covers up most of the giba stench as a result, though. Hey... what’s with that meat you brought here, anyway? Those hamburgers were just the best, but that giba stew not having any smell about it was a real shock, too! Just what sort of magic did you use to make it that delicious?”

“It wasn’t magic at all. It’s just the result of draining the giba of its blood when it’s caught. That’s why it’s a job for the men, not the women.”

“I see... Then I guess there’s nothing we can do about it. There’s no way those stubborn bastards would listen to what you have to say.”

As I watched Mia Lea Ruu sadly slump her shoulders, I continued on with,

“Well then, I heard that you pull out all the stops for this banquet thing, but what exactly does that entail here at the forest’s edge? Do you use all sorts of those vegetables in your pantry?”

“Yeah, that’s right. We go right ahead and toss plenty of those veggies, which are way pricier than aria or poitan, right on into the pot. Well, that said, if you just did it without any planning, you’d end up with something inedible.”

“I see. Then you throw them in after thinking it over carefully... Well then, I don’t mind if it’s just based on your personal preferences, but if we were to make a giba stew without the stench like I did last time, which of those vegetables do you think would be the tastiest?”

“Hmm? Well, tino goes well with anything. And if there’s no stench, there’s no need to add lilo or tarapa... Gigo wouldn’t be any good. It’d just end up all mushy like when you add poitan. And it might be a little on the bitter side, but I think pula would be pretty nice. Ludo and Lala may end up frowning about it, though.”

I was at the point where the names of people and foods were becoming a jumbled mess in my head. If I mixed up the pula with Lala and threw her in the pot, she’d probably get pretty angry.

“Then it’s tino and pula? Should we go with those two for today?”

“Huh?! No, don’t! If the taste were to become a mess thanks to me running my mouth, that’d be a real waste of you coming all the way out here. And we have guests from the Rutim clan here today, too!”

“It’s alright. You’ve got to be ready to take on the challenges that come your way. And besides, if you don’t get creative with it, your cooking will never improve.”

I glanced over at Ai Fa as I said that. Even though I was saying the complete opposite of what I had last time, she just silently watched over me with a look of strength in her eyes.

I explained today’s entire plan to Ai Fa in advance. She was pretty surprised at first, but at the end she said, “I leave it all up to your judgment.”

I wanted to respond to that trust.

“...By the way, how has the clan head seemed lately?” I threw out there.

Mia Lea Ruu had been deep in thought, but with that she gave a pleasant, “Oh?” Had she been simulating the giba stew in her head? Sorry about that.

“What is it about the clan head? You two met with him three days ago, didn’t you?”

“Right. I wouldn’t think there’d be any changes after that, but have there been?”

“Changes, huh...? Now that you mention it, I feel like ever since that night, he’s been randomly pouting. And I think I’ve spied him going into Granny Jiba’s room pretty often, too. Is he getting lectures or something?”

No, that wasn’t it. Granny Jiba was well aware of Donda Ruu’s nature, so she wouldn’t be trying to lecture him at this point. The wise elder had long since chosen her path, and I couldn’t imagine she had any further use for Donda Ruu at this point.

Then... Was Donda Ruu heading to Jiba Ruu in the hopes that she would talk him out of this foolish contest?

I seriously hoped that was the case.

Donda Ruu was related to Rimee and Jiba Ruu, so there was no way he seriously sought Ai Fa’s destruction... That was my heartfelt wish.

But regardless of the truth of the matter, the die had already been cast, and what I needed to do wouldn’t change.

I reigned in my feelings, then set about my work.

“Now then... I should start preparing the meat. There should be plenty of time to finish the soup after the poitan start coming together, so shall we go over how to cook the hamburger for Jiba Ruu?” I asked, opening up the bundle of giba meat I had brought with me.

Last time we stuck with just leg meat and shoulder roast, but this time I prepared three different types of meat.

To be honest, after all my experimenting, it was proving difficult to secure enough of each type for everyone, so I was actually starting to think there

wouldn’t be enough for me and Ai Fa right at the end there. But just two days beforehand, Ai Fa came back with another young giba in the 50 kilo range, clearing that up nicely. And so, rather than not having enough, we actually ended up with a bit extra.

I carefully laid the meat out on my cooking station bit by bit, only for Mia Lea Ruu to worriedly ask, “That’s a giba’s torso, isn’t it? You showed me that it’s ever tastier than leg meat, but still... The Rutim clan head is coming today. Wouldn’t it be better to just stick to using leg meat?”

“Huh? So the Rutim clan head won’t eat torso meat either?”

“I don’t know. But since our clan head looked so annoyed over it, I’d imagine the Rutim clan head could definitely react the same way. Plus he’s even more short tempered than our leader, so wouldn’t it be better to err on the side of caution?”

Someone even more short tempered than Donda Ruu... He sure sounded dangerous.

But there wouldn’t be enough for everyone to just eat leg meat, and besides, that would make for a completely dull menu for the meal.

“You and the other women didn’t seem to be especially opposed to eating the torso meat, though. Why was Donda Ruu so against it?”

“I’m not sure. But Jiza and Darmu didn’t seem to have any objection to his words, so maybe the men have some sort of suitable reason...”

A suitable reason for the men, huh...?

I’m pretty sure I remember Donda Ruu yelling something like, “Only scavengers like the mundt eat the giba’s torso!” And then he added some sort of thing about, “How dare you feed something like that to a proud hunter of the forest’s edge?!”

But Ai Fa also lived as a hunter, yet she never showed any hesitance to eat giba torso. I turned around to Ai Fa to ask just what the deal was, only to find my clan head with an even more puzzled look on her face.

“Mia Lea Ruu, I have something I wish to ask you. Is it true that the Rutim are

second only to the Ruu clan in terms of power?”

How rare, for Ai Fa to address a member of the Ruu clan.

Mia Lea Ruu looked a bit happy as she responded, “Yeah, that’s right,” with a nod. “The Rutim certainly wouldn’t fall short of the Ruu in terms of strength, and the clan head Dan Rutim is also an excellent hunter. That much is certain.”

“I see. So that’s why he would think of giba torso as nothing but mundt food...?” Ai Fa said to herself, and then turned to me with an undaunted expression on her face. “Asuta, there’s nothing to worry about. Just carry out your own task as planned. If the head of the Rutim reacts the same way to the idea of eating giba torso as Donda Ruu did, I’ll convince him.”

“Huh? You understood the reason behind all that, Ai Fa?”

“Yes, most likely... At any rate, you can’t complete your cooking without using the torso meat, correct? In that case, you should just do what you need to rather than worrying about it.”

There was no hesitation in Ai Fa’s eyes. So I had to stop hesitating, too.

This wasn’t my fight alone. The fate and name of the Fa clan were also on the line.

Ai Fa and I needed to use every power at our disposal to prevent this from becoming a tragedy for the folks around us, too.

2

A few hours passed, and we had finished the cooking with some time to spare.

Two of the four stoves had pots of giba stew simmering (in the giba soup style, as I’d come to call it), and there were piles of baked poitan atop plates. Now all that was left was to grill the meat and wait for the guests to arrive.

“Hey, Asuta... Is this really going to be alright...?” Vina Ruu asked in a worried voice. She was seated listlessly leaning up against the wall, cradling one of her knees.

My plan for this event placed a bit of a heavy load on her.

“This banquet is really important, right...? I’m not exactly confident...”

“You’ll be fine. At least for right now, there aren’t any problems.”

“But after this...”

“We’ll just have to pray everything goes according to plan.”

As she hugged her knee tight, Vina Ruu shot me a very reproachful sidelong glance.

Just having this thought was probably enough for my character to be called into question, but her large breasts were being smooshed by her knee, and I could clearly see them squishing even through her clothing, which made for quite the erotic sight.

“Asuta, could it be... That you hate hearing complaints, so you’re trying to offer me up as some sort of sacrifice...?”

“What the heck? What reason would I have for doing something like that?”

“I mean... I’m nothing but a pest to you, right?”

The rest of the women were out front getting some fresh air. That must have been why she felt willing to raise the topic, but I still panicked a bit when I saw that the door was left wide open.

“T-That’s not true. I feel just like I told you before. I just seriously want you to stop thinking such crazy things.”

“But... Even if I can change my way of thinking, I can’t change how I feel, right?” Her smooth cheeks got just a little redder. “Do you really believe I did all that just as part of some sort of plan? Do you honestly think a woman who held onto her virginity till she was 20 could go and do something like that...?”

“N-No, you see...”

“Ugh... That heir to the Rutim clan who’s coming today is one of the guys who I turned down,” she said, hiding her face behind her knees. “If I make a big mistake at the celebration before his wedding, the head of the Rutim clan will really give me hell again... Agh, I just want to drop dead already...”

“I-I’m telling you, it’s alright! Even if you screw up, all the responsibility will

still fall on me! It was all my doing, right?! But if you succeed, you'll get the glory for it!"

Vina Ruu shot me a sidelong glance from behind her knees.

"You say that now, but you plan on betraying me at the last moment, don't you...?"

"I'd never do that! I swear on this knife!"

With that, her slightly droopy brown eyes started to tear up in a somehow coquettish manner.

"That's just not fair... How am I supposed to change how I feel...? I feel like you're just teasing me, sometimes being cold to me and then going and acting all kind..."

Then what exactly do you want me to do?!

And then, a voice called out coldly from behind, "What are you getting all worked up about?"

Apparently I'd been the only one raising my voice. I felt a chill run down my spine thanks to my own carelessness.

Ai Fa was standing in the entrance to the kitchen, looking back and forth between me and Vina Ruu with a piercing gaze.

"It seems the Rutim have arrived. Wouldn't this be a good time?"

That statement instantly caused me to change gears. I gave a nod, then turned back towards Vina Ruu.

"Alright! Well then, let's get started! Vina Ruu, I'm counting on you to do it as we planned!"

◇

"Hmm! So you're the outsider staying at the Fa house, huh?!" a loud voice suddenly called out as I was carrying in the giba soup pots along with Mia Lea Ruu.

A large man I didn't recognize was there in the seat of honor. He was so big that even having Donda Ruu seated next to him didn't make him look any

smaller. Naturally, I was talking about his height, but his breadth and thickness were impressive, too. He was wearing a vest just like me, but that only really covered his shoulders, leaving his potbelly fully exposed. On top of that, he had a shiny bald head, thick eyebrows, a big nose, mouth, and eyes, and a broad chin with a dark brown beard. With that brown skin and the ethnic outfit, he really was the spitting image of an Arabian genie.

Right now he was giving a hearty smile, but I could certainly see his rage driving not just Vina Ruu but the world at large to despair.



I placed the pot down atop a stove to keep it warm, then got down on my knees and gave a bow.

“I’m Asuta of the Fa clan. I was allowed the honor of manning the stove for today, alongside the women of the Ruu clan.”

“Ooh, that’s right. I heard someone from another family was supposed to be preparing a different sort of exciting dinner for us. We’ll still end up with the same giba meat in our bellies, but I’m definitely interested to see what you have in store! I’m really looking forward to this, Asuta of the Fa clan!”

“I sincerely hope that it’s to your liking,” I replied, keeping things formal, as awkward as I may be at it, then stood up and said “Well then...” I mean, I cooked at an eatery. I wasn’t the chef for some french restaurant or the hostess at some fancy joint or anything. I generally didn’t greet customers with anything more than a “Hey there!”

As Mia Lea Ruu started having a pleasant chat with her guests, I moved towards the room’s exit. And as I passed on by, I took the chance to observe the other guests. Toward the head of the seating, there were a man and a woman I didn’t recognize off to the left and right. They must’ve been the heir to the Rutim and his fiancée.

If I recall correctly, the groom’s name was Gazraan Rutim. He was a large, honest looking man. In terms of physique, he probably wouldn’t fall short of the eldest son of the main Ruu house, Jiza Ruu... And speaking of which, Jiza Ruu himself was seated next to the man, giving off his usual intense pressure.

Their dads were both giants, but they possessed robust bodies to match those men, and they seemed to exude the sort of character and intensity you would expect from the heirs to their clans. I could firmly sense a sort of silent dignity about them.

Everything about Gazraan Rutim’s face was big, which he must have gotten from his father, but rather than being fat he had something of a square look about him, which I wouldn’t quite call all that handsome. His dark brown hair was cut nice and tidy though, and there was a gentle shine in his blue eyes that seemed both really masculine and sincere. I couldn’t help but think he’d probably make for a good husband.

On the other hand there was the bride, whose name was Ama Min, I think.

After the Ruu, Rutim, and Lea, the Min clan was a mainstay of the Ruu's followers, and I heard Granny Tito Min was born to that family. In other words, when a woman married into a family, she added her old name to the new one, which told where she came from. So when Tito Min entered the Ruu clan she became Tito Min Ruu, and in seven days this woman would be Ama Min Rutim.

Hmm...

That my following thought was the ridiculous delusion of *Ai Fa Tsurumi, huh?* was a secret I would take to my grave.

And maybe it would be Asuta Fa... At any rate, it was nothing but a stupid thought that had no chance of coming true.

But anyway, the bride was Ama Min.

She was neither too thin nor too fat, and she was a perfect height. She looked like she was in good health, had great posture, and even seemed to have a great upbringing. Her blackish brown hair was done up in a sporty style and her pale blue eyes shone bright. She looked neat, tidy, and serious, but she didn't appear timid in the least. She simply sat there silently as she waited for the banquet to begin.

Her age couldn't have been all that far removed from mine. It was amazing seeing how calm she was before her own wedding. Honestly, she made the similarly aged Reina Ruu look pretty childish in comparison.

Well, at least in this blockheaded 17 year old's opinion, an innocent and bright young girl was more appealing than a woman who was more calm and relaxed than you would expect from her age. And on top of that, a girl who's usually cool but will occasionally be super open with her feelings and kicks you in the leg, and has eyes like a wildcat... No, no, I should drop that.

Anyway! The two really seemed to make a good pair.

I felt a little awkward somehow, getting their wedding's celebration mixed up in this weird fight.

And just as his wife had mentioned, the very man who brought our fight here

had quite a displeased look on his face. When I went to talk to the person next to him he looked off towards nothing at all and kept on chugging down the fruit wine like he had been doing for a while now.

I kept on walking while worrying that he may not be able to make out the taste if he drinks too much, only to find a tilted gaze fixed on me from below.

It was coming from the second son of the Ruu house, Darmu Ruu. He was the only one I didn't meet when we visited three days ago. I guess that meant we were seeing each other for the first time in two weeks. As always, he had a stiff, vicious looking face that reminded me of a wild wolf, as well as that glint in his eyes that he got from his father.

If it weren't for that predatory face and those eyes, he would probably be the most handsome of the Ruu men. But thanks to his history with Ai Fa, he was also the only one of them I absolutely couldn't forgive.

And so, I put just a bit of strength in my gaze, only for him to suddenly and unnaturally avert his eyes. What was that about? Looking at his stiff face from the side, I saw that he was seriously frustrated and sulking.

After bowing to the youngest son who had his cheeks resting on his hands like he was about to collapse, the third daughter who was outright ignoring me, and the youngest daughter who was energetically waving my way, I went to exit the banquet hall. Before I could do so, though, I ran into Ai Fa, Vina Ruu, and Reina Ruu, who were carrying the last pot and the plates of poitan.

"Ooh?! What's that? Is that seriously food?!" I heard Dan Rutim yell out in astonishment from behind me, and then I returned to the kitchen.

It was already getting dark out, but there were candles set between the banquet hall door and the separate building, so I didn't have to worry about where I was stepping.

I made it back to the kitchen before long and waited for the women to return, feeling seriously nervous before the big showdown.

"Sorry, we got caught up talking with everyone. They were really surprised by the baked poitan."

They ended up coming back with a rather energetic older woman in tow.

Well then, time for the initial skirmish.

“I’m sure they’ll have all sorts of things to say, so I’ll be the one to bring the plates to the seats of honor,” I said, grabbing wooden plates with the main dish, only for Mia Lea Ruu to call out to me.

“Hey, are you really going to be alright? Our clan head has a really displeased look on his face, and I just can’t help but worry...”

It was a little scary seeing her look so serious, considering she was always so bright and cheery.

I guess it was the gravity possessed by a woman who raised seven children while also managing all the housework.

While thinking how my mom would be about her age if she were still alive, I replied, “The only way to end things peacefully would be never involving ourselves with the Ruu clan ever again. I didn’t want that, so I had to get a little rough and pick a fight with the head of your clan.”

Mia Lea Ruu looked shocked and astounded... and then she smiled.

“Got it! I can’t quite side with my husband’s enemy, but I’ll be rooting for you to at least not get killed, so give him everything you’ve got!”

With that, she gave me a hearty slap on the back. It hurt like hell, but it also made me happy.

“Well then...” I said, holding a plate in both hands as I exited the kitchen.

And then, Ai Fa called out, “Hold on. Don’t go off on your own,” and hurriedly caught up to me, holding the same sort of plates that I was. “What did you intend to do if those large men flew into a rage? You don’t have the strength needed to protect yourself, so don’t go acting alone.”

“Hey, I might have said I was picking a fight, but I wasn’t exactly planning on a slugfest.”

“Are you saying it wouldn’t be a serious matter if one of their fists suddenly came flying your way?”

“...I’d probably die.”

“In that case,” Ai Fa said, drawing her face in close, “Don’t leave my side.”

Ai Fa’s face was like that of a gallant, brave prince, so much so that I couldn’t help but think it might be nice to be reborn as a princess in my next life, assuming such things existed.

Hey wait, isn’t this pretty much my ‘next life’ as is?

It wasn’t so bad of a second life, either.

I really was happy as that thought passed through my head.

“Thanks for waiting. These are the last dishes.”

I entered the banquet hall alongside Ai Fa.

Donda Ruu and Dan Rutim were in the seats of honor.

Off to the right were Gazraan Rutim, Jiza, Darmu, Ludo, Lala, and Rimee Ruu.

On the left was Ama Min, Tito Min Ruu, and Sati Lea Ruu. Oh, and there were empty seats for the three who helped cook.

Kota Ruu was babbling away in a cradle behind Sati Lea Ruu.

Setting aside the infant, those faces greeted me with brilliant expectations, displeasure, and complete emotionlessness.

With everyone’s eyes on us, Ai Fa and I approached the head of the group.

I offered the plates I was holding to the two clan heads, while Ai Fa did the same for their heirs.

The second they saw what was inside... a rage ignited in Donda Ruu’s eyes, and Dan Rutim yelled out, “What the hell is this?!”

3

“It’s cooked giba meat.”

Fortunately, no fists came flying my way. I just got eyes like flames staring me down as an angry roar smashed into me.

The three women arrived in the now dead silent hall and started laying out plates from the right. It was much more reserved, but I could sense some

confusion from over that way, too.

Ama Min said “My...” as her eyes went wide.

Gazraan Rutim remained politely expressionless.

It wasn’t like I had gone and presented some bizarre dish. The reason it had caused such confusion in spite of that... was probably because you could tell it used the torso even at a glance.

The glare in Donda Ruu’s eyes burned intently. Meanwhile, there was a vein throbbing on Dan Rutim’s bald head as his thick lips quaked with rage.

“Donda Ruu! What the hell is the meaning of this?! Are you going to explain this to me?!” he roared angrily once again.

Donda Ruu slowly, silently turned to face him.

“This... This giba meat... It’s from a giba’s torso, isn’t it?!”

Sure enough, the Rutim family didn’t seem to eat anything but the giba’s hind legs, either.

Things were turning out just like Mia Lea Ruu had feared.

“...So it seems,” Donda Ruu responded in a low voice. He had transcended mere anger, and his voice sounded so grave that it was like I could feel my insides shrinking up in fear.

“What the hell do you mean, ‘So it seems’?! This is a celebration for the wedding of the eldest son of the Rutim main house! What the hell are you thinking, serving this mundt food for such an event?! The Ruu and the Rutim are tied together by blood deeper than any other clans...!”

“I don’t know anything about it.”

The force behind that voice caused Dan Rutim to suddenly swallow his criticism.

Dan Rutim’s big goggle eyes stared at Donda Ruu, clearly showing how hard he was finding this to believe.

“You don’t know...? What does that mean, Donda Ruu?”

“I just ordered that kid over there to man the stove for this incredibly

important banquet. I had nothing to do with anything beyond that."

As he heard that, Dan Rutim's burning anger pointed my way instead. It was so intense that I could see his forehead quivering.

"Cook! You were entrusted with the Ruu stove, and knew this was a celebration for our Rutim wedding, but you prepared this mundt feed?!"

"It's not mundt feed. It's giba steak. I've prepared spare rib, shoulder roast, and leg meat for our guests to enjoy."

As I explained, Mia Lea Ruu and Vina Ruu headed back to the kitchen to grab new plates, while Reina Ruu proceeded further in to assist Jiba Ruu.

Now then...

For the moment, the focus was the content of the plate in front of the honored guests, giving off steam. Just as I said, they contained giba steak.

I had prepared this menu based on the thought that having a chewy texture was key. Naturally, that wasn't the only reason I went with this, but it just made sense when you were considering staple meat dishes.

Since it was steak, it didn't involve any unusual cooking techniques. It was all about regulating the heat as you cooked it.

The leg meat was just like it sounded, while the shoulder roast used the meat from the back to the shoulder. The spare rib, meanwhile, was rib meat still on the bone.

In fact, all of the dishes atop the plates had plenty of meat still on prominent bones.

Thanks to that, there was no mistaking them for meat that came from the rear legs.

"This... This mundt feed...!" Dan Rutim carried on, his lips quivering again.

I wasn't a person of the forest's edge, so that spare rib looked incredibly tasty to me. The shoulder roast and leg meat weren't lacking in impact either, though. They had some serious volume to them, with a thickness of roughly 2.5 centimeters.

It had taken some real effort to overcome that thickness.

In terms of preparations, all of the meat was very sinewy, so I started by putting a cut through them. And then I was afraid that the leg meat would become too tough when it was cooked because it had such a high amount of red meat, so I beat it in a clean pot to break down the fibers some. All that was left was to sprinkle one side with rock salt and pico leaf and then leave it to sit for 10 minutes, which finished off the prep work.

Then I plopped down some fat into a metal pot that had been heated over a strong flame, stirred it around for about 10 minutes, then added in the meat with the pico side facing down.

Once it reached a golden brown, I moved the pot to a stove on a low flame.

It depended on the strength of the fire, but after roughly two minutes the meaty juices would come bubbling up from the red surface of the meat, telling me it was time to flip it.

Up until now, that was just the preparation method for steaks at the Tsurumi Restaurant (800 yen). But I wasn't dealing with beef; this was giba meat. I was a bit scared of leaving some red to the meat. Ai Fa told me that rare meat was out of the question, too.

And so, though I would normally finish it up over a low flame, I instead returned it to the stove with the high flame at this point.

If I had to make it well done rather than rare or medium, it would take too long to do it with just a low flame, and if I cooked it for that long the meat juices would steadily seep out, too.

As a result, I ended up cooking the reverse side quickly over a strong flame too, adding in fruit wine, and then blasting it with a quick burst of heat like I had done with the hamburgers. Then when I figured the alcohol had burned off I opened the lid, waited till the surface was golden brown, then returned it to the low flame. Once I saw the clear meat juices bubbling up on the cooked surface, it was finished.

With that, I had a complete cooking method.

After that, I just had to experiment with what thicknesses worked best with

this cooking process. If I made it too thin, though, it wouldn't be all that different from the grilled meat that the Ruu family often ate. And as a result of that experimentation, I settled on a thickness of roughly 2.5 centimeters. That made them decently thick, as far as steak went.

It would be pretty tough thanks to the fact that I had to make them well done, but that shouldn't be any problem for the people of the forest's edge, who frequently ate hard, dried meat. And Ai Fa went ahead and proved that for me.

This was a giba steak, challenging the limits of thickness.

I firmed up my resolve to challenge Donda Ruu with that menu, but it seemed like first, I needed to take on the even more wild head of the Rutim clan.

"Only scavengers like the mundt eat a giba's torso!" Dan Rutim yelled out. "The only ones who would think otherwise are powerless families who can't even hunt giba!" As he roared that out, Dan Rutim's gaze shot over towards Ai Fa. "Ai Fa of the Fa clan! That's a rather splendid necklace you're wearing, but are those tusks and horns just for show?! You're hunting plenty of giba, but you're living on by stealing food away from mundt?!"

There was a rather dangerous looking expression on Dan Rutim's large face. I'm sure if he had a blade at his waist, he would be reaching towards the scabbard.

"No, there aren't any humans out there who would do something so bizarre. So does that mean you're making light of my clan, thinking it's fitting for the Rutim to eat the same thing as mundt...?"

"Neither Asuta nor I have any intention of insulting the Rutim, our brethren at the forest's edge. Could you not try calming down at least a bit, head of the Rutim clan?" Ai Fa asked, incredibly calm and composed. Her blue eyes actually looked even clearer and more chilly than usual. "Also, there is one question I wish to ask you. Are you perhaps thinking that eating the torso of a giba shows your lack of strength as a hunter? Is that why you have flown into such a rage at the mere sight of it being presented at this banquet?"

"What are you saying, all of the sudden?! If you do a proper job as a hunter, the meat from a giba's legs should be plenty! What else could be greater proof of your weakness as a hunter than eating the torso meat?!"

“So that really is it.” Dan Rutim was heating up, but Ai Fa’s tone of voice was just getting chillier. It wasn’t just that she was calm and composed, though. No, it was like the chill of a steel blade. “In that case, it would seem the Rutim and Fa clans have rather different customs. I’d like to offer an apology for failing to realize that point... The Fa clan was never as well off as the Ruu or Rutim to start with,” Ai Fa said while staring right at Dan Rutim’s frightening face. “For example... When I was young, my father Gil hurt his leg and was not able to hunt for a while. We used up our horns and tusks, and eventually had nothing left to eat but dried meat. At that time, a young giba fell into a crude trap I had set, and my mother Mei brought it back whole to our house.”

It was rare for Ai Fa to talk about her parents.

As my breath caught in my throat, Ai Fa kept on strongly yet firmly talking by my side.

“My mother cooked not only the giba’s legs, but its back meat as well. What you teased as ‘stealing food from mundt’ referred to such desperate circumstances, correct?”

“...Yeah, that’s right. Starving folks will even eat a giba’s torso and head. That kind of weakness isn’t permitted of the people of the forest’s edge!”

“Very well. My father certainly was a weak hunter back then, for driving his family to the brink of starvation. At least when discussing that time in particular, he likely wasn’t even worthy of being called a hunter. I’m well aware of how greatly that must have caused him to suffer. After all, for a hunter of the forest’s edge, weakness is a sin,” Ai Fa said, her words carrying some serious force.

Then, she did something I never would have expected.

I had been thinking she was going to fly off into a rage like Dan Rutim, but instead, she broke out in a smile.

“But we only discard a giba’s torso into the forest because we don’t need it, so eating it while still fulfilling one’s duty as a hunter should bring no shame. This meat is fittingly delicious for such a celebration, so I ask that you keep that in mind, head of the Rutim clan.”

“Fittingly delicious for a day of celebration, you say...?”

Just when it looked like the bald giant was about to yell something else, his son calmly said, “My father, Dan Rutim. No matter what they may present, those are the actions of the Ruu clan. Even if they should spit upon us, we should follow the proper customs. Regardless of if it’s mundt feed or a giiz’s intestines, as long as those in charge of manning the stove eat the same thing, we must partake in that blessing alongside them.”

“But Gazraan...!”

“If they have committed a sin, we shall question that after we eat.”

His voice remained perfectly calm from start to finish, but his blue eyes were closed, as if to hide how he was feeling.

Now that I think of it, Donda Ruu didn’t say a word the other day until he had finished eating. It wasn’t until he was done that he started yelling about how it was mundt food and poisoned his soul and all that.

I had been told that manning a stove meant taking charge of everyone’s lives for that night. So no matter what food was presented, it wasn’t something you could complain about. But if you judged it as something that dirtied your life or soul after eating, then the one who manned the stove would be questioned for having betrayed the trust between you.

How would this earnest looking young man behave if he determined I had defiled the soul of the woman who would become his wife? It pained me just imagining it.

“Sorry for the wait...” an old woman’s hoarse voice called out.

Just like on that prior night, Granny Jiba had come to the banquet hall with Reina Ruu’s assistance.

Dan Rutim’s bald priest-like head was still flushed bright red, but his son placed his right hand on his father’s left shoulder and gave a bow. Ama Min did the same with the reverse hand and shoulder, also bowing.

“Well then, let us begin the banquet. You all should take your respective seats,” Donda Ruu stated, his voice solemn with a boiling anger behind it.

4

“We give thanks for the blessings of the forest...” Donda Ruu stated.

Apparently even if it was a big banquet, they still kicked things off with the usual ritual rather than a special one.

“We offer our gratitude to Mia Lea, Vina, Reina, Ai Fa, and Asuta, who manned the flame and gave us our life for this night...”

Everyone chanted along, but I’m sure Dan Rutim must have been boiling on the inside. I couldn’t imagine that rage would dissipate so easily, no matter what was being said.

No, if I was going to have him acknowledge the value of this meal, it would have to be by having him actually taste it.

Today’s menu consisted of giba steak, giba stew, and baked poitan.

The steak came in three varieties: leg meat, ribs, and shoulder roast.

The soup was light on meat, but used three types of vegetables, including aria.

The poitan were served as they had been in the Ruu house for the past however many days, with a large serving meant for everyone piled up on three big plates. They actually looked more like lightly colored hotcakes than okonomiyaki. They must have each been made with the two poitan you needed to eat each day, and the men were eating between two and four of them.

Now then...

I was interested in everyone’s reactions, but first up I needed to check how it tasted myself.

I started off by picking up the spare rib.

I ran a metal skewer I had borrowed from the Ruu house through it then supported the bone with my other hand, and finally bit into the piping hot meat. It was well done, so there wasn’t a lot of meat juice and a good bit of the fat had cooked off, too. Ribs had a layer of fat overlapping them to start with, though, so it was still pretty juicy even after grilling it so thoroughly. And you

could just bite into the familiar pork ribs rather than having to slice it into thin bits, which made for an explosive flavor.

The fatty parts were soft, while the meat itself was a little tough. When I filled my mouth with both at the same time, it made for a truly pleasing texture and chewiness.

And since I was a big fan of pork ribs in both the usual and the Okinawan style, I couldn't get enough of the flavor.

Yup, this turned out well.

After giving my jaw a break with some baked poitan, I moved on to the shoulder roast. It looked like it had a good bit of fat to it, too. However, it was more of a cohesive lump than meat taken off the rib, giving it some serious chewiness. And it was 2.5 centimeters thick, too.

As I chewed away, a smooth, delicious flavor filled my mouth.

A good bit of the meat juices had flowed out while cooking this one too, but the fat was all still trapped inside, so it wasn't dry in the least.

It made me want to scream out, "Meat! Yes, this is real meat!"

Heck, it was enough that it would probably make someone with a bit of a weak stomach wince.

I thought it was pretty darn delicious, though... But eating it made me feel a bit like my jaw was going to give out.

Next up I had my fill of giba soup, which Mia Lea Ruu poured for me. Following her suggestion, this batch had the tino and pula added to it. I had already given it a taste test, but tino was a vegetable that looked like a rose made out of lettuce. It was ever so slightly leafy but had hardly any flavor, with its main benefit being how enjoyable of a texture it provided. That texture was actually closer to cabbage than lettuce. It got mushier as it heated up, but in exchange the soup seeped into it, making for a pretty exquisite flavor. At the very least, it wouldn't lose out to those pseudo-onions, the aria.

On the other hand, pula was a vegetable with a rather strong bitterness to it. It was shaped like a fleshy ginkgo leaf and was about the size of one, too. In

terms of color, it was a deep green. At first I was a little uncertain about it, but now that I tasted the result, the unique bitterness added a rather nice accent to the dish. And even after being heated up, it didn't get all that mushy. It was cut pretty thin, but it still had some real snap to it. It was a pretty fresh flavor for me, but if I had to compare it to a vegetable I was familiar with, I'd probably have to choose bell peppers.

At any rate, the flavor of the giba soup had clearly improved. It really gained a greater depth, after adding a variety of vegetables to the dish.

Still, this soup got its main flavor from the stock made out of giba meat, so if you added vegetables that didn't pair well, it definitely would have wrecked the taste. The power of a mom sure was impressive, being able to manage all this despite being from a world that hardly paid attention to flavor. I mean, the success of the dish was all down to Mia Lea Ruu's efforts.

Now then, with this, I had sampled most of the menu. All that was left was the leg meat.

It was a pretty formidable foe for me, but if I didn't take a bite I would never get anywhere. I screwed up my courage, and then sunk my teeth into the lump of meat.

In that very moment, a shout filled the room.

"W-What is this?!" the voice called out, clearly from someone who had lost control of themselves. And that someone just happened to be Dan Rutim.

He had frozen in place, still holding the spare rib in his hands. There was fat smeared all around his big old mouth.

"Hey, you! Just what in the world is this meat?!"

His wide-open eyes were staring straight at me.

While thinking to myself, *Well, guess he couldn't wait till he finished eating to share his impressions...* I went ahead and replied, "As I said, it's giba rib meat." Then I decided to tease him a bit and added, "Is there something up with it?"

"Ugh..." he let slip, his moist lips trembling. "...It's delicious!" he yelled out, then took another emphatic bite of meat. It almost looked like he was going to

bite all the way down to the bone. “It’s so good! This meat is amazing! But why? Why would giba ribs taste so fantastic...? They’re supposed to be nothing but mundt feed!”

“It’s not mundt feed. In my country there was an animal that greatly resembled a giba, and we used all parts of it when cooking.”

“B-But a giba’s torso is supposed to stink so bad you can’t eat it...!”

“That’s just because you didn’t know the proper technique for preparing it... Or perhaps I should say because you didn’t have the need to learn it. The people of the forest’s edge haven’t solely been hunting giba for food, after all.”

I hadn’t been planning on giving a lecture in the middle of dinner like this, but well, my jaw was feeling awful tired, so this worked out just fine.

“The giba population won’t be impacted even if you kill fifty of them a day, making them a terrifying pest. The people of the forest’s edge have continued to hunt them at the risk of their lives, to protect the fields of the western kingdom. And as a result, you ended up with a surplus of meat, right? And so your people just discard the giba torso into the forest for the mundt, as it’s a pain to prepare and more easily retains a giba’s stench. Those actions may be completely natural, but... Every part of the giba is delicious. I prepared this meal so that all of you would understand that fact.”

Dan Rutim’s face looked like that of a sleepwalker as he listened to my words while tearing away at the meat. Meanwhile, Donda Ruu sat silently by his side, just chewing his meat as if he couldn’t hear a word I was saying.

Everyone else reacted in their own way, too.

Rimee Ruu was chewing away and satisfying her appetite as she watched me, while Jiza Ruu was probably quietly looking back and forth between me and the clan heads. I just couldn’t tell for sure, because his eyes were so narrow.

Reina Ruu was staring at me intently while helping Granny Jiba, sure enough, the wives were happily eating away while pretending not to notice Dan Rutim’s astonishment.

Gazraan Rutim and Ama Min merited special mention from amongst the group. They were also eating in silence, but occasionally they would glance at

each other and quietly share a little smile. Ah, they sure looked happy.

And as for Ai Fa... She was staring pointedly at Donda Ruu while chewing away at her meat.

“Head of the Rutim clan, Dan Rutim... How about trying some of the leg meat?” I threw out there, feeling like an idiot being the only one talking while everyone else remained silent.

“I’ll give it a try. Ooh, this is great, too!” Dan Rutim said with a nod.

I secretly thought to myself that with his shiny head and round belly, he looked sort of like a big baby.

“That leg meat doesn’t stink for the same reason. With giba meat, if you perform something called bloodletting, you can get rid of most of the stench. So it’s possible to make a delicious meal with just leg meat, but I hope that today will teach you how delicious other parts of the giba can be.”

“It’s good! It’s really, really good! This stuff with the bone is my favorite! But the leg meat’s fantastic too!”

He was like a completely different person compared to how he was before eating. I mean, he was just being so earnest that it was actually making me feel a bit embarrassed.

“It also makes sense to just bring back the legs with you if you lack the manpower to carry back a giba’s massive frame whole. But at least to me, when a big family like the Ruu here bring back a whole giba each time to skin and then throw away everything but the legs, it feels like a real waste.”

“My clan brings them back, too! We... We’ve been just giving something this delicious to the mundt...?!”

Hmm... It really was tough dealing with someone being this earnest.

“Anyway, as long as they perform bloodletting when they capture it and then dissect it appropriately after peeling the pelt, anyone can prepare meat this delicious. It certainly isn’t anything difficult. I mean, if a rookie can manage this much, then anyone should be able to, if they put their mind—”

“What need is there to go through all that extra effort?” Donda Ruu finally

interrupted. Amazingly, he had apparently finished eating all his meat in this brief period of time. I'd still just taken a bite or two out of the ribs and roast... "Such things are pointless to the act of partaking in a giba's life force. Us hunters have no use for such things," he continued in a frighteningly calm voice.

I was shocked to see that man was able to speak in a quiet tone... Actually, looking around, his whole family looked surprised, too. Rimee and Ludo Ruu kept passionately chowing away even so, but pretty much everyone else had stopped in their tracks.

That was just how unusual the situation was.

And so... we'd finally reached the critical junction.

"...That may be so, for the sake of just living."

I could feel the moist sweat clinging to my back.

This time around, the taste of my cooking alone wouldn't be enough. No, to satisfy this man, I needed to use words, too.

To be honest, it was a real heavy burden for a mere chef in training. But even so, I needed to do it, for the sake of the girl sitting beside me with a fire in her eyes, too.

"A life of just eating and sleeping would make you no different from a wild animal... But that's not how you people live. No, the people of the forest's edge work for the sake of living, and support their family, and find happiness in that. That lifestyle is completely different from how people lived back in my old country, but at their core... I don't think there's all that great of a difference."

"Hmph. What are you prattling on about, kid? Are you trying to deceive not just my family but me as well with that tongue of yours, which is even more skilled than your hands?"

"I'm not that skilled at all, actually. In fact, to be honest, I still have a long way to go. And I had no intention of deceiving your family, either."

I looked around at everyone present. At the twelve members of the Ruu clan, the two of the Rutim, and the one Min clan girl. And at Ai Fa.

Everyone but Ai Fa looked worried about what was about to happen.

What was coming next was a fight. Then, an apology, followed by mutual understanding. At least, that's what I thought.

"I didn't trick your family. I just wanted them to experience the joy of eating something delicious. At first it was just about Jiba Ruu, but Rimee Ruu praised my cooking and called it tasty, so I wanted to feed all of you something good... I grew conceited, I think."

Donda Ruu didn't say a word.

"As a result, I received a great number of blessings. For that, I'm truly grateful. But... on the other hand, I ended up resenting those of you who didn't praise me. I especially hated you, Donda Ruu, for ridiculing my cooking like you did. So to be honest, I had made that request to man the stove again in order to get back at you."

"I was already plenty aware of that. You don't need to go on about it at length."

"Please allow me to do so anyway. The words are nearly the same, but this time I can speak them from the heart."

With that, I uncrossed my legs and got into the same deep bow I had made three days prior.

"As an inexperienced chef, I served you, the head of the Ruu clan, food that may well have ate away at your hunter's soul. For that, I would like to once again offer my apologies."



5

“...What sort of farce is this?” Donda Ruu asked in a low voice.

“It’s no farce. I’ve repeated what I said to you three days ago, but now I truly mean it.” While still down on bended knees, I raised my head and looked straight at Donda Ruu. “My cooking may well have been poison for a hunter’s soul. It was the eldest son of the Ruu house, Jiza Ruu, who taught me that.”

Jiza Ruu turned my way with a look of surprise. It really must have shook him to cause that expression to show on his face.

“I’m sure it’s just as Jiza Ruu had said. The food I made on that night is ‘poison’ for hunters... Well, that may be an overstatement, so I should say it can become poison.”

“Hold on, Asuta. What are you saying? What did I say to you?”

“Didn’t you say that if someone ate nothing but such soft meat, their teeth would grow weak and fall out? That’s probably the truth.”

“Huh?! Then my teeth will all fall out like Granny Jiba’s?” Rimee Ruu asked, frozen while holding a wooden plate in both hands.

I gently smiled back at her and said, “No. If you just eat it once or twice, nothing will happen at all. That may be true even for a hundred or two hundred times. In fact, you could be alright even eating it a thousand or two thousand times.”

“Oh, then it’s totally fine! Thank goodness...”

Being rather earnest herself, Rimee Ruu gave a big sigh.

Sure enough, the man in his prime and the girl of seven or eight each had their own fitting reactions.

By the way, the bald old guy who seemed to be regressing and acting a bit childish himself was nodding along to what I was saying enthusiastically while tearing into his meat. He didn’t know anything about the giburgers, though, so it didn’t really have anything to do with him at this point.

Anyway, for now, my focus was on Rimee Ruu.

“Right, you don’t have anything to worry about. But what was it that you said to me three days ago, Rimee Ruu? Was it that you could eat hamburgers day and night, and didn’t have any need for your old meals?”

“Yeah! I mean, hamburgers are so tasty!”

With that, I glanced over at Donda Ruu, only to find the head of the Ruu clan silently glaring back at me with flames in his eyes.

...It was honestly kind of troublesome, the way the old guy to his side was just nodding along.

“That’s no good, Rimee Ruu. If you eat nothing but hamburgers day and night, each and every day of the week, then your teeth really may end up growing weak. And even if you’re fine, your children’s teeth may end up weak. And if those children eat nothing but hamburger too, then their kids could end up with even weaker teeth... The people of my country ended up with weaker and weaker teeth like that.” I was basing this on stuff I only vaguely remembered, with a bit of trickery mixed in. But regardless, I kept on sincerely spinning my tale. “I have to confess that today’s meal was a failure, at least to me... After all, I can’t really eat it properly.”

Everyone’s eyes went wide, aside from the men of the Ruu clan (Ludo Ruu excluded).

“This meat is too tough and hard to eat. I’m satisfied with the ribs, and the fatty shoulder meat is edible enough, but the leg meat really is tiresome to eat. I think about half this thickness would be just right.”

“No way! The leg meat is really chewy, but it’s not tough at all! I love this meat too!” Rimee Ruu exclaimed.

“Then could you eat my share for me? My mouth just can’t handle it... It simply isn’t possible for me.”

I looked back over at Donda Ruu, but he was still sitting there, silent and expressionless.

This was the first part where I needed to hold firm.

“That’s the sort of people I come from. I could never become a hunter. For example, there were people in my country whose work taxes their bodies... Um, let’s call it a mock battle. They make a living by comparing their strength and skills with a bat and ball rather than swords and shields, and striving to achieve victory.”

Hopefully at least the basic gist got across. Anyway, I was trying to explain pro baseball players.

“Those men wring out all of their strength while using that bat and ball. They clench their teeth while doing so, and apparently some of them have ruined their teeth in the process. And so they put a sort of padding in their mouth with the appropriate toughness, to bite down on instead of their teeth.”

That was a mouthpiece.

To be honest, I didn’t really know what I was talking about. I was just reciting something I’d once heard my old man say. He mentioned that teeth were really important, and that wasn’t just limited to baseball players; it included boxers too.

And so, I expanded the scope of the discussion in the same direction.

“...There were also more direct contests, which involved hitting each other with fists. They also use the same padding to protect their teeth, but it’s a much greater matter for them. I heard that apparently, the destructive power of punches was completely different depending on if they were using one or not. By being able to bite down without restraint, they were able to display even more power than usual.”

Everyone was slowly eating along as they listened to my story, puzzled looks on their faces.

Donda Ruu remained unshakably expressionless, though.

“There’s a strong relation between biting and wringing out the depths of your strength. I believe the hardness of teeth is affected by the nutrition of what you eat, so it may not quite be accurate to say that they grow weaker. But even so, if you only ever eat soft foods, I’m sure the gums that support your teeth, your biting power, and your jaw strength would weaken. That’s why I’ve changed my

way of thinking about what you said, Jiza and Donda Ruu. That this was poison to a hunter's soul, that would cause your teeth to weaken and fall out."

Everyone was silent.

"Of course, I'm sure you weren't thinking so deeply on the matter when you said that, and Lala Ruu didn't like that soft meat despite being a woman, so maybe it simply comes down to tastes. But I had a different thought, too: Just what would have happened if you had fallen as deeply in love with my cooking as Rimee Ruu did, Donda Ruu?"

What came next wasn't based on vague recollections or trickery. No, it was how I truly felt. My true, undiluted thoughts.

I should have thought everything through this thoroughly before I presented my food to the people of the Ruu clan half a month ago.

"I used techniques that didn't exist at the forest's edge in my cooking. As a result, the majority of your family called that food amazing. But if you all had reacted that way and unconditionally accepted my cooking, then you really could have ended up eating nothing but hamburgers day after day. That thought causes me to tremble."

The bud of that thought was planted in me some time ago, since I saw Ai Fa become so insistent on eating hamburgers. Of course that made me very happy, but at the same time, I also felt uncomfortable about it.

Naturally, she also ate tough dried meat alongside the hamburgers every day, so there wasn't any chance of her losing her jaw strength. But still, it wasn't good to be so insistent on eating hamburgers.

On the off chance that change in diet happened to harm Ai Fa, I'd want to strangle myself to death. And that thinking applied to the Ruu clan, too.

I strongly felt the need to tell these folks, who had become involved with a person like me from another world in such a strange manner.

And then, three days ago, I saw that sight.

Those manly, fierce warriors heading off into the forest to hunt giba... When I saw their wild energy, I grew even more certain in how I was feeling.

My cooking could become poison to the people of this world.

“This isn’t about my country, but I heard a terrifying story that if you give alcohol to a tribe that had never heard of it before, the majority of them would become unable to live without it. I don’t believe my cooking holds that much power, but even so, it frightened me... The idea that my cooking could have a negative effect on people.”

Was it getting through to everyone?

At any rate, we finally hit the climax of this long-winded speech, which had already gone well beyond the limits of my skill as a speaker.

“That’s why I wanted to convey the knowledge I possessed. That if you ate nothing but soft meat there was a danger of your teeth and jaw growing weaker, and that giba torso could be a delicious dish rather than mundt feed if you just put in a little extra time. And I wanted to provide you with the joy of a tasty meal rooted in those ideas.”

When I glanced her way, I found that Ai Fa had finished her meal and had started staring at me rather than Donda Ruu at some point. It seemed like there was an incredibly gentle light in those eyes, somehow.

“Now then, I guess it’s about time to reveal my trick: The only dish I made today with my own two hands is the hamburger Jiba Ruu is eating.”

“What?!” Dan Rutim yelled out.

With few exceptions, the rest of the group was also astir, too.

“Reina Ruu made the poitan and Mia Lea Ruu handled the soup, while Vina Ruu prepared the meat dishes. I just provided her guidance on how to do it. There was a bit of burning along the way, but we had excess meat, so it wasn’t a problem. And I don’t think there’s any issue with the results, either.”

Everyone’s gazes seriously darted around, but most of them ultimately settled on Vina Ruu. They were all full of admiration, and yet despite Vina Ruu hiding her expression behind her long bangs for some reason, I somehow got the feeling that she was seriously glaring at me.

“This is a simple dish made solely by grilling meat. Figuring out the ideal flame

strength and thickness of meat to use took a good bit of time, but now that I know the answer, that information can be easily shared. It doesn't require as much labor as hamburgers. Wouldn't you agree that it would be plenty possible to have such dishes each day without needing to sacrifice other work?"

I got the feeling a gentle gaze was pointing my way from somewhere. But well, gazes didn't actually have a physical presence to start with, so I was probably just imagining things.

Anyway, I also felt like Granny Jiba was fixated on me from Donda Ruu's side, too.

And so, I wrapped up my speech to her, Donda Ruu, and everyone else present.

"My intention was to come up with a menu that suited you people of the forest's edge, who are hunters by nature. And I wanted it to be something that you all could make by cooperating as a family, even if I wasn't around. Hopefully, with this the bonds between the Ruu family can grow deeper, and an unknown outsider like me coming to the forest's edge can turn out to be a medicine rather than a poison... That's what I was thinking about as I carefully studied how to grill delicious meat for ten days." With my knees still even, I gave another bow. "As food presented by a chef, it probably wouldn't be wrong to call this a ridiculous failure I couldn't even taste test, but I'd like to think that it was a great success as home cooking meant to be eaten as a family. If it serves as medicine for you all, then I'd be glad... My apologies for speaking so long in the middle of your important banquet. Please, continue with your meal."

Epilogue

And so, it was decided that I'd spend another night in a vacant house at the Ruu settlement. Apparently, the three guests were staying in the home of Donda Ruu's nephew, who had especially close ties to the Rutim.

Though with that said, the banquet at the main Ruu house was still going on.

After the meal, the people of the Ruu clan (excluding the unmarried women) started drinking alongside the three guests.

After Ai Fa and I finished cleaning up after the dinner, we met with Rimee Ruu and had a bit of a chat with her and Jiba Ruu in the elder's bedroom, and then we finally settled down in the vacant house for the night. My idea of settling down, of course, was letting out a big "Aah!" then collapsing into a sprawl on top of the rug.

"The meat was tough and I gave that big speech, so it's been a tiring day for my mouth! I don't feel like saying another word all night!"

Nothing from Ai Fa.

"You're not going to say something like, 'Then don't go talking all loudly to yourself!'?"

I turned and looked at Ai Fa, only to find my benefactor with one knee up in the air, her back against the wall, and a serious look on her face.

"What's wrong? Are you worried because Donda Ruu never really voiced his impressions in the end?"

Still nothing.

"It's fine! If he wasn't satisfied, then he would've said so then and there. And the folks from the Rutim clan were so happy that there's no way he'd have the clan and all their allies cut ties with the Fa clan."

"...I wasn't thinking about such matters."

She'd had a rather calm look in her eyes back in the banquet hall and Granny Jiba's bedroom, but now it seemed to have gone too far, somehow, and she

looked outright depressed.

There wasn't anything I wanted to see less.

"What are you thinking about, then? Rather than brooding over it by yourself, how about talking it out?" I said as I slowly drew closer.

I figured this was where she'd yell out something like, "Stop acting so gross!" but she didn't react at all. I was looking like a real idiot here. Well, I guess I was one, though.

"Asuta, you..."

"Hmm?"

"Are you planning on leaving the forest's edge?" Ai Fa suddenly threw out there.

I was honestly completely shocked.

"Why are you asking that all of a sudden? I've got no idea where this is even coming from."

"When you were giving that long speech at the banquet, it somehow felt like you were saying your farewells to everyone. Like you wanted to leave behind medicine rather than poison before you left..." Ai Fa was looking straight at me, her face half illuminated by the animal fat candle. "Am I wrong?"

"You are... But well, I guess maybe it's something similar?"

I couldn't exactly look serious while sprawled out on the floor, so I got up and sat cross-legged in front of Ai Fa.

"I really do feel just like I told you before. Even if I don't know why I was thrown into this world, as long as there are people living here, I want to be involved with them in a positive way. I'd prefer to be helpful rather than cause harm. I just earnestly expressed how I was feeling."

Ai Fa remained silent.

"But well, there's something else I told you about before, too. If I was sent here for some unknown reason, then I may be yanked back the same way. And if that happens, I'll probably end up burned to a crisp and squished flat. And in

that case, I want to live in a way that won't leave behind regrets if that happens. I guess that feeling spilled out a bit? I don't really know."

"...You've been living feeling that way all this time?"

"No, of course not! I'd never last like that! But it's not just something I can forget, and suddenly it'll hit me every now and then."

Ai Fa looked at me with her somewhat obscured eyes and tilted her head a bit.

"...I never thought about that."

"Hmm?"

"I'd never considered the possibility that you may someday disappear against your will."

Ai Fa's voice was incredibly quiet. It wasn't emotionless or flat, though... No, just quiet.

"Well, as long as I don't get hit again by that absurd event, I've got no intention of leaving on my own! In fact, I'm actually worried you'll throw me out before that happens... Anyway, if I suddenly disappear, that's definitely the work of either a god or a devil, so pray I find happiness in the next life, alright?"

Ai Fa opened her mouth to say something, but I never got to hear what it was. That was because for some reason, someone had knocked twice on the door with a *bang, bang.*

Ai Fa slowly raised herself up and stood in front of the door.

"Who is it?"

"...Head of the Ruu clan, Donda Ruu."

So, the final boss had appeared at last.

Well, I'd figured this was plenty possible, but I still found myself surprised when it happened for real.

Ai Fa silently unlatched the bolt and opened the door. At once, a large black shadow like that of some massive carnivore slid into the room.

Then, he said "Pardon me," and started removing his footwear.

To start with, I went ahead and confirmed that he didn't have a blade on him. In its place, though, he was holding a container of fruit wine in his left hand. Could I... interpret that to mean this was intended to be a friendly meeting?

He lumbered on over my way, then plopped his huge body down near the candle sitting by the window.

Those glaring eyes of his glanced around the room, not looking amused in the least.

"What're you two doing up this late without even drinking?"

"Ah, we were just about to go to bed..."

"Hmph," Donda Ruu retorted as he tore out the stopper with his teeth and took a swig of fruit wine. He must have been a seriously heavy drinker, seeing how he was at a drinking party up till now.

As for his face, well, it was hard to tell due to his naturally violent features, but he didn't seem to be feeling anything especially strongly. There was a piercing, unrelenting light in his wild beast-like eyes, but well, I'm sure he never had a weaker look in them anyway. In fact, he actually looked calmer than he usually was.

With that said, though, he was a little close for comfort.

He was always sitting at the head of the group looking all arrogant, but the pressure I was feeling now that he was sitting here in the same room, illuminated by the same candle, was seriously no joke.

Ai Fa re-bolted the door, and then sat down so that she, Donda Ruu, and I were in a triangle.

We were all so close that "face to face" would *certainly* be an apt way to put it.

Donda Ruu thrust the fruit wine in front of Ai Fa's face and said, "Drink. Drink, and swear... that here and now, you won't speak even a single falsehood."

Ai Fa silently brought the container to her mouth, without even a hint of hesitation. Then, she took a rather hearty swig.

Next, the container came my way. Well, I couldn't exactly use the excuse that

I was a minor. I tilted it while taking care not to choke, and took just enough of a taste to wet my tongue.

Aah, it was sweet and sour.

“...Just what have you been plotting, kid?” Donda Ruu asked, kicking off the conversation. “You’ve got no ties or debt to the Ruu clan, so what are you doing prattling on about our bonds? What’s your plan?”

Even if he was being calm and quiet, the man was still a giba incarnate by nature. Those eyes glared at me in the darkness, and his massive frame was naturally exuding pressure.

I wanted to say I wasn’t planning anything, but that wasn’t technically true. Lying had been forbidden, so it was best to just be honest and open.

“I don’t know if you’d call it plotting, but there’s just one thing I’ve been thinking. I wanted to satisfy you, Donda Ruu.”

“Satisfy me...?”

“Yes. No matter what dish I make, it will only be for one night. I man the stove for the Fa clan, and besides, I’m sure you can’t go entrusting yours to me constantly, anyway. And so, I started to question whether or not it would even be possible to have you find value and meaning in just a single night’s meal.”

I hadn’t thought I’d be forced to give another long speech tonight. But still, it was to achieve today’s purpose, so I didn’t exactly have a choice.

“For example, even if I worked myself to the bone and presented you with a crazy delicious dish, would that really bring you satisfaction and relief? If I owned a restaurant and you were a customer, then maybe things really would end with that. But I plotted to force my way into the house of someone who said ‘When it comes to food, there is no good or bad taste,’ throwing around my cooking. So I figured even if I offered something incredibly tasty, you could cut me down just by saying, ‘And so?’”

“...”

“But you’re the head of the Ruu clan. I figured if you were able to enjoy delicious food together with your family, prepared not by some outsider but by

their own hands, and if you thought it was tasty too, then maybe that would bring you more satisfaction and peace of mind than ever before."

"..."

"And well, that was part of the reason I decided to go with three different types of meat. If I just went with steaks and hamburgers, some of the group may end up saying the hamburgers are tastier. Then they may end up feeling dissatisfied if they aren't able to keep on eating hamburgers. That's why I thought it would be best to use three different types of meat in addition to the hamburgers. That way, it'd be easy to bring to life that whole idea you and Jiba Ruu mentioned, about people deciding what they find correct and delicious."

"But why...? What did you stand to gain from doing all that? You risked your life and that of your benefactor for something like that?" Donda Ruu asked in a low voice.

I gave a sigh.

"You're the one who brought up all that stuff about cutting off ties. You just didn't expect how much Ai Fa and I hate to lose... You were losing your nerves because we wouldn't even listen to a lecture from Jiba Ruu, right? And you knew that at this rate, Rimee Ruu would end up hating you."

Donda Ruu's knee twitched. That alone was enough to make me feel like my life was in danger, but this was the one matter I simply couldn't accept, so I paid him no heed and continued on.

"I don't know what your intentions were and I don't care to ask, but please don't risk your relationship with your family so lightly. Did you think when you raised the stakes by bringing the Rutim into things, we would just turn tail and run? Shouldn't your first priority have been the thought that if we screwed up and you cut off ties with the Fa clan, it might cause a rift between you and Rimee Ruu, plus other members of your family? I won't go as far as to say you should treat an outsider like me kindly, but it's real stupid to sacrifice your bonds with the people close to you just to mess with me."

"Kid, you..."

"I don't mind if you don't care for me and Ai Fa or how we live. I just ask that

you don't forget that Rimee Ruu and Jiba Ruu *do* care for Ai Fa like she was family... If you're really the head of the Ruu clan, that is."

I was trying to express what I thought was right, in my own way.

If I lost my nerve or wavered even a bit, I probably would've ended up pissing myself or bawling as I bowed so deeply my head touched the ground. After all, Donda Ruu's eyes had lost their calm from before, and became the strong, intense eyes of a wild beast. That light in their depths was that of a hunter of the forest's edge, of a warrior, just like I had seen three days ago.

"I still don't understand how things work at the forest's edge all that well," I said half unconsciously as that light scorched my very soul. "You all are just way too different from the sorts of people I used to know, after all... Even in the future, we really may not be able to sympathize with and understand one another. But even so, I want to be a medicine, not a poison. I really do feel that way. And my cooking's pretty much the only thing I've got going for me... I want to keep on living here at the forest's edge until I die."

What was going on with Ai Fa? She probably had just as bright of a blaze in her eyes as Donda Ruu, but... I couldn't take my eyes off of the mountain of a man in front of me right now.

"The rest is just like I said before. You don't need a chef for home cooking. What you want isn't a chef's food at all. What would really satisfy you deep down was just sharing a joyous moment together with your family... If that conclusion I reached was wrong, then I'll return this necklace of blessings I received from your family to the Ruu clan."

The large shadow slowly stood. And sure enough, Ai Fa stepped in between the two of us.

"...Let me ask once more. Why did you risk your life for something like that?"

His voice reverberated like an earthquake, completely cold and devoid of emotion, perhaps because his anger had reached its peak.

"Because I'm a chef. Just like you're a hunter, that's what I am... Well, I'm still just a half-baked rookie, though," I replied, trying my best to keep things light.

After a few seconds that felt like an eternity, Donda Ruu finally turned his

back to us.

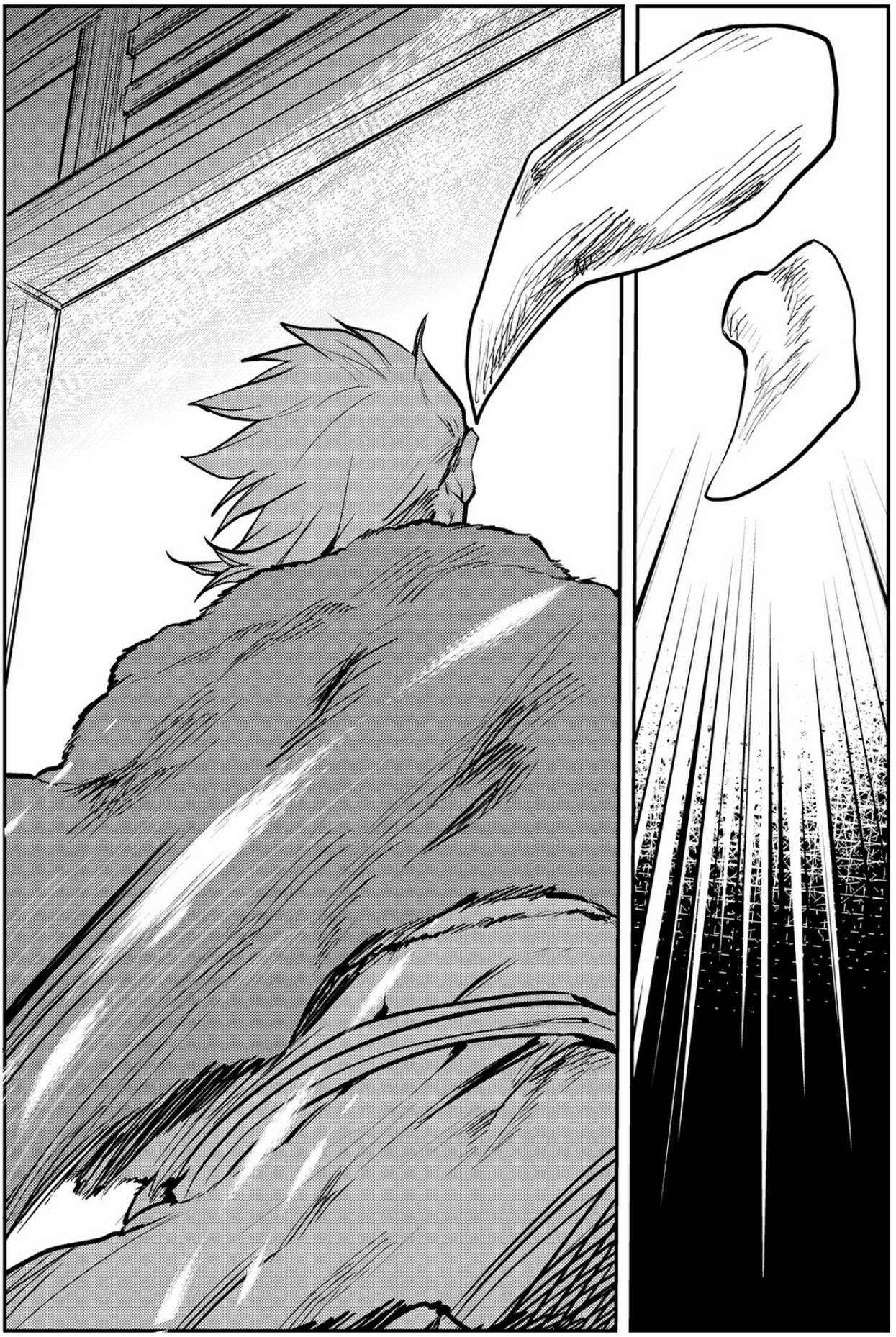
“I’m a hunter. I can’t understand the thoughts of someone like you,” he muttered in that same emotionless tone, then began walking towards the door. He picked up his shoes in his right hand rather than putting them back on, unbolted the door, and added, “...Speaking of things I don’t understand, I have a message from that idiot head of the Rutim.”

“Huh?”

“Apparently he wants you to man the stove at the wedding in seven days... If they have a man who says stupid stuff like that leading them, the Rutim must not be long for this world...”

Well that was a shock. Seriously, what was that old guy thinking?

As I stood there dumbfounded, something suddenly came tumbling to my feet. Donda Ruu must have thrown it my way through the door. It was... A white, impressively curved tusk and horn.



“It’s a blessing,” Donda Ruu said before disappearing into the darkness at last.

“...I guess that settles things?”

I picked them up and handed one to Ai Fa. My fingers were actually trembling a bit. Pathetic.

Ai Fa silently accepted it, then stood up to re-bolt the door.

“Man... How many years did my life just shorten by?”

I suddenly broke out in a cold sweat, which was coming a little late there. But well, it looks like somehow, this fight had come to an end. It was a real once in a lifetime showdown, started by my own selfishness.

“Still, what kind of joke is that about manning the stove at the wedding? That’s just way too big of a responsibility, no matter how you look at it! I’ve seriously got to find a way to turn him down.”

Rather than responding, Ai Fa simply bolted the door and came back over. She’d been keeping silent for quite a while now, hadn’t she? Actually, I don’t think she even said a single word while Donda Ruu was here.

As I shot her a doubtful look, Ai Fa made it back to me without a bit of hesitation.

Her pink lips slowly opened once again, and she said, “...I don’t want that.”

“W-What?”

“I don’t want you to go away.”

Her voice was very quiet.

There weren’t any tears streaming from her wildcat eyes.

Her fingers didn’t touch me, and her shoulders didn’t shake.

Ai Fa just silently kept staring into my eyes.

Apéritif: The Hunter's Path

1

Ai Fa's father Gil Fa lived his life as a hunter, and met his end in the forest.

It happened the month after Ai Fa finally turned 15.

Gil Fa had been a very strong man, and he carried out his work as a hunter more splendidly than anyone else.

He had been Ai Fa's greatest pride, and now she had lost him.

Obviously, it was only natural that a hunter would die in the forest. Hardly any men of the forest's edge died of old age rather than meeting such a fate. And so, Ai Fa earnestly believed that Gil Fa had lived a good and proper life, having hunted more giba than anyone before one finally took him down.

But even so, Ai Fa's heart was full of grief. She had lost the only family she had left.

Ai Fa's mother Mei had passed away a long while back, and the Fa clan didn't have any branch families or followers. Over the decades the Fa bloodline had been withering down, and as of today, Ai Fa had finally found herself the only one left.

How should I live my life from now on...?

Ai Fa leaned listlessly against the wall in the moonlit room, the hunter's cloak her father left behind wrapped around her as she hugged her knees tight.

Her father had often said with a smile that she looked like a little kid when she sat like that. He wasn't around to smile anymore, though.

Ai Fa brought back just his giba fur cloak; his two well-worn blades, one large and one small; and the necklace of tusks and horns that were his pride as a hunter. Then, she buried his corpse in the forest, so his soul could return there.

From now on, Gil Fa would surely be watching over Ai Fa along with the souls of their ancestors.

He had truly experienced both a proper life and a proper death as a hunter of the forest's edge, so it wasn't permitted to grieve and mourn more than was necessary. But Ai Fa was just too young, so she didn't even know if this pain filling her up inside was proper for a person of the forest's edge.

I wish my father would have taught me just a little more about being a hunter... But even if I have such thoughts, would I truly be permitted to live as one?

She reached out and touched the necklace and sword in its leather sheath on the floor.

Ai Fa didn't know if she was qualified to take up these belongings that her father had left behind.

A necklace with three tusks and horns from her father hung around Ai Fa's neck.

The only hunting tool she had been given before was a single small knife.

When Ai Fa had turned 13, she was allowed to enter deep into the forest, and started helping her father on his hunts. She had already learned the basics of living as a hunter. How to set a trap, find a giba's nest, mask your presence, and handle the dangerous fruits that attracted giba to you...

However, Gil Fa still hadn't acknowledged her as a full-fledged hunter. He had said that since she was a woman, Ai Fa still needed training before she could live that life, and she honestly thought the same. But Gil Fa had also said that someday she would gain that strength and bring back a giba she had hunted with her own two hands, and have the neighboring women make a hunter's cloak out of it.

She was just one step short. Just a little bit more, and she surely would have gotten ahold of the power and techniques she needed to become a hunter her father could be proud of.

Ai Fa hugged her knees even tighter.



She didn’t have any family or followers, so would she really be able to live on her own as a hunter from here on out? And would it even be proper to do so, as a person of the forest’s edge?

She didn’t have an answer.

My mother wanted me to live as a woman. My father was happy when I helped him in his work as a hunter... Which path should I take?

Her elderly friend Jiba Ruu’s kind face came to mind. When Ai Fa had opened up and mentioned she wanted to become a hunter, her friend’s response was that she should follow the path she believed to be correct.

But everything was hazy right now, and she didn’t know what was right, or even what she wanted.

What should I do...?

Ai Fa buried her face in her knees, feeling like she was wandering aimlessly through a labyrinth without an exit.

It was then that she heard a strange sound from the darkness. It was a *creak, creak* coming from somewhere nearby.

What is that?

Normally, she would have stood up immediately and searched for the source of the sound. But tonight, she couldn’t even muster the willpower for that much.

Her arms and legs were completely devoid of strength. She was a complete wreck inside, too. Having lost her father just a few hours prior, Ai Fa’s heart was still sinking in a deep swamp of sadness.

Did a giba come down into the settlement? Is the forest trying to help itself not just to my father’s soul, but mine as well?

Naturally, even if a giba did come down to the settlement, it wouldn’t just go sticking its tusks into the sturdy walls of a house, but Ai Fa’s thoughts were in such disarray that she couldn’t even realize that much.

And then, something every bit as unbelievable as a giba attack occurred.

A door at the far side of the hall was suddenly violently wrenched open. The room on the other side was used for storage, and it didn't have any doors to the outside. And on top of that, she had already checked that everything was normal in all the rooms upon returning home, then bolted the entrance door.

But despite all that, the door had opened from the inside.

Soon, a large man holding a candlestick appeared from inside... He had on a hunter's outfit, marking him as a young man of the forest's edge.

"Hey there. Sorry for dropping in so suddenly, Ai Fa of the Fa clan..." he said in a strangely sluggish voice that hurt her ears.

She didn't recognize the man.

In addition to his hunter's cloak, he had on a necklace of horns and tusks, as well as an impressive blade at his hips. He looked to be just a bit older than Ai Fa, but he was still quite young.

"W-Who are you? What are you doing in this house?"

"I'm the oldest son of the Suun clan, Diga Suun. I'm the eldest of the main family, y'know?"

The Suun clan led the people of the forest's edge. If he was the eldest son of the main family, that meant he would eventually be in charge of their people.

"I've got some business with you, y'see? So even though it's not quite proper of me, I went ahead and let myself in through your window."

There was a wooden lattice in each of the windows. That must have meant the sound from before came from him breaking one.

Ai Fa was frankly more dumbfounded than angry.

"That's ridiculous... You do not just break a part of a person's house to enter it. Even stepping foot inside without permission breaches one of the strongest taboos of the forest's edge. Just what were you thinking?"

"The only thing I was thinking about was you."

The candle lit up the lower part of Diga Suun's otherwise expressionless face, revealing an incredibly repulsive smile.

With that, Ai Fa finally realized the danger she was in, but it was already too late. She grabbed for the blade laying on the floor, but Diga Suun snapped it up quicker than she could reach it, laughing all the while.

That violent action caused the flame to go out, turning Diga Suun's large body into nothing but a black silhouette. That shadowy figure threw away the extinguished candle, then held down Ai Fa's body with both arms.

"I heard your old man, your one and only family left, went and kicked the bucket, Ai Fa. So, how exactly do you plan on living from here on out...?"

"That has nothing to do with you!"

Ai Fa struggled, but Diga Suun had both of her wrists firmly in the grasp of his thick fingers. He was holding her down atop the fur rug, seated atop her waist. No matter how much she fought, his heavy frame didn't budge in the least.

Ai Fa was tall for a 15 year old girl, and her whole body had been honed by the harsh work of a hunter, but there was still just too great of a difference in their physiques.

As he straddled Ai Fa, Diga Suun whispered, "Oh, it has plenty to do with me. You see, Ai Fa, I was planning on welcoming you into the Suun clan as a retainer."

"Welcoming me into your clan...?"

"Yeah, that's right. I'm the next head of the clan, after all. I mean, I couldn't quite go and make a woman from a puny clan like the Fa my wife, but if you're just a retainer, then nobody should be able to complain about it. Clans who have lost the ability to keep on living on their own have no choice but to rely on the bigger families, right?"

Ai Fa didn't say anything.

"Cast aside the Fa clan and become a Suun. Then, I'll look after you for life."

As the pale moonlight illuminated his face, he licked his lips with a repulsive look of joy about him.

Ai Fa glared back at his face, a violent fury pulsing in her chest.

"...There are rumors that the Suun clan has been simply living a life of luxury

with the coins given to them by the city of stone, not even bothering to carry out their work as hunters. Is that true?”

Upon hearing her words, Diga Suun broke out in a smirk.

“If you want to know the truth, then just join our clan. If you become a part of the clan that leads our people, you’ll be able to live however you please, too.”

“...And you call yourself a man of the forest’s edge?!” Ai Fa yelled out, and smashed her right knee into Diga Suun’s back.

He was still on top of her waist, so she couldn’t put any proper power behind it. But even so, the shock of the attack caused him to move his upper body forward a lot. Ai Fa took advantage of that opening and headbutted him as hard as she could.

Diga Suun cried out “Ugh!” as blood spurted forth. She had most likely broken his nose.

The large man collapsed and fell off of Ai Fa, writhing around in pain as he held both hands to his face.

“You don’t carry out your work as a hunter despite being born a man, break taboos, and even assault women...! You haven’t earned the right to call yourself one of our people!”

“Eek!” Diga Suun shrieked as he started fleeing towards the door. He removed the bolt, swung open the door, and then tumbled outside.

Ai Fa, meanwhile, grabbed hold of the sword her father had left behind, yelled “Stop!” and chased after him.

Ai Fa could feel an anger of a sort she had never known before filling her up inside. It was like all the sadness she felt over losing her father had turned into pure rage.

Why...?!

Why did a splendid hunter like her father have to die while this scum shamelessly lived on?

Why did the forest thrust such an unreasonable fate on its people?

Diga Suun ran like a wounded animal under the pale, frozen moon, and as Ai Fa chased after him she angrily yelled out without thinking, “Stop running, you coward! Take your punishment for your sins!”

“Waaaaaa!”

Thanks to the weight of the blade, Ai Fa wasn’t quite able to gain on Diga Suun. However, when he hit the point where the flat ground transitioned to the rocky terrain around the Lanto River, he tripped and fell.

As he gasped for breath down on the ground, he turned and looked up at Ai Fa. His expression was one of pure terror, and his face was soaked with blood and tears.

“H-Hold on! I was wrong! I’m begging you, please forgive me!”

“Are you really a member of the clan that leads our people...? No, are you really even one of our people in the first place?”

Ai Fa lifted up the blade with both hands, ever so slightly out of breath. That incredibly heavy steel blade...

When he saw Ai Fa grab the leather sheath, Diga Suun yelled out in even more of a panic, “Y-You’re pointing a blade at a member of the family that leads our people?! Do you really think something like that will be forgiven?! If you kill me, the Suun clan will crush you into dust, Ai Fa!”

“Don’t be a fool! No matter what family you may be a part of, it’s only obvious that you face punishment for breaking the law.”

“J-Just what are you saying I did?! I still haven’t done anything! Killing an innocent person is a greater taboo than any other, right?!”

“...I see. It’s true that you have yet to truly do anything to me. Perhaps it wouldn’t be proper to demand your life for just shoving me down to the floor,” Ai Fa coldly said as she slowly approached Diga Suun. “But you stepped foot in the house of another without permission. I believe the law states you should offer up a toe for that.”

“Eeep!” Diga Suun shrilly screamed out like a little girl, down on his hands and knees on the rocks. “Please! I’m begging you! I just wanted to invite you into

the Suun family! I didn't want to leave a beautiful woman like you all on your own!"

"You *fool*..." Ai Fa said, her voice quaking with anger, but she could soon feel her own heart go cold.

This blade was meant for hunting giba. It was a precious heirloom, left for her by her father Gil Fa. It felt incredibly foolish to let the blood of scum like this sully it.

"...You truly are the sort of man who isn't even worth cutting, Diga Suun of the Suun clan."

Diga Suun slowly looked up. His face, bloodied from his broken nose, turned up at her and twisted into a cowardly smile, as if he sensed her hesitation.

"Right, cutting me down won't bring your father back, will it? I won't say anything, so just come live with me in—"

Ai Fa swung the blade in its leather sheath at the side of Diga Suun's head as hard as she could. With that, Diga Suun's massive body splashed into the Lanto River, leaving behind a pathetic shriek.

"W-What do you think you're doing?! You stubborn, violent woman! Don't think you'll get off lightly after defying the Suun clan...!"

Ai Fa turned her back to the sound of Diga Suun yelling out as he was swept downriver, and started making her way back home.

As she felt the rocks of the shoreline on her bare feet, she hugged the blade tight. That heavy blade that her father had left behind had nothing to tell Ai Fa, though.

◇

A few hours earlier, the banquet hall of the main Ruu house was filled with the sound of a young child sobbing.

The family was gathered there, and they were in the middle of dinner. Normally there would be endless laughter as everyone sat together, but that day nothing but that heart wrenching sound could be heard.

The one crying was the youngest daughter, Rimee Ruu. The six year old child

had been on the verge of tears ever since the meal started, all the while as she scooped up the white stew with thinly cut chunks of giba leg meat. Since she couldn't neglect her daily partaking in this precious life force, she kept on forcing herself to eat as she sobbed away.

"Hey, won't you cut it out already, Rimee?" said her father in a voice that rumbled like an earthquake, causing her to stop for a moment. But soon enough, she started sniffling again and wasn't able to hold back the tears, the sound of crying again filled the hall alongside her chewing her food.

"Hey! Didn't you hear me say to cut it out?!" the head of the Ruu clan finally exploded.

Rimee Ruu winced and slowly turned to face her father, but those tears streaming down her smooth cheeks showed no sign of stopping.

"But... But Gil Fa died... He was still so young and strong, but..."

"No matter how young or strong someone may be, as long as they're living as a hunter, they should expect to die in the forest at any moment. It isn't wrong to lament that loss, but if you go too far, you could end up sullying that hunter's pride." The one who said all that wasn't the clan head, but the eldest son, Jiza Ruu. As he looked at Rimee Ruu with his thin eyes, he tilted his thick neck just a bit. "Who was that Gil Fa person to start with, anyway? I haven't heard of any family with such a name."

"He was the dad of Ai Fa, who Rimee and Granny Jiba formed a bond with... Not that I know more than his name myself, though," the youngest son Ludo Ruu said while chewing his meat. Then he turned to the second son, who was seated next to him, and said, "Darmu, you said you'd seen him before, didn't you? Back when you accompanied dad to that meeting of clan heads last year."

"Yeah. He was a real strange man," Darmu Ruu replied while drinking fruit wine, sounding rather uninterested in the subject. "Even though he didn't have any family to bring along with him, he still showed up to the meeting with a necklace of tusks and fangs. He didn't look too odd in terms of appearances, but something about him felt fishy."

"He wasn't fishy! Gil Fa was just that strong of a hunter!" Rimee Ruu yelled out loudly, tears streaming down her face. "But even so, a giba killed him... Now

Ai Fa's all alone..."

"That Fa clan only consisted of the father and daughter? In that case, though, the girl's only options are to marry into another related family, or else become a retainer," Jiza Ruu said in a severely calm voice, only for Rimee Ruu to shake her little head back and forth, causing her reddish brown hair to sway.

"The Fa clan doesn't have any family left... What'll happen to Ai Fa...?"

"No family? In that case, just how was that Gil Fa man hunting giba? No matter how strong a hunter may be, it simply wouldn't be possible to hunt down enough on his own, right?"

No one had an answer to that question.

After a bit of silence, the second son Darmu Ruu muttered with a look of displeasure, "That's why I said he was fishy..."

"And I said he wasn't! Ai Fa's been helping him with his hunting ever since she turned 13! For these past two years, it's been the two of them, not just him on his own!"

"What? Why was a woman helping a hunter with his work?"

"That's..." Rimee Ruu muttered, hesitating a bit. "...That's because Ai Fa wanted to become a hunter, so she just ended up helping Gil Fa..."

"A woman hunter?"

The women present had just been politely watching over the proceedings up until now, but even they couldn't hide their surprise.

The only ones who really knew Ai Fa were Rimee Ruu and the elder, Jiba Ruu. And Jiba Ruu had been sick in bed since last month, plus it was too hard for her to make it to the dining hall, so right now Tito Min Ruu was assisting her in her bedroom.

"What a ridiculous story. Normally under those circumstances, he would have had no choice but to become a retainer to another family along with his daughter. That way even if the Fa name was lost, they would still have their lives."

"Yeah. And for him to make his daughter help him in his work as a hunter.

Come on! I really don’t know what he was thinking.”

“Like I said, Ai Fa was the one who said she wanted to help out! Don’t say mean things about Ai Fa and Gil Fa, stupid Ludo!”

“Oh, shut it. Don’t take your anger out on me, little Rimee.”

“You’re little too, Ludo! Little Ludo! Little idiot Ludo!”

Ludo Ruu’s cheeks puffed up and he looked about ready to say something back, but when he saw his tiny sister’s tear stained face, he started looking a little down, too.

“...Well anyway, now that her dad is dead, that Ai Fa girl really doesn’t have any choice but to rely on another family. If she marries into some nearby house and lives as a normal woman, then she can live enough for herself and her father, right?”

“Right. That’s the proper way for a woman of the forest’s edge to be,” Jiza Ruu said, signaling the end of the conversation.

Rimee Ruu resumed dejectedly eating her dinner afterwards, and Donda Ruu ultimately didn’t have anything else to say after his previous outburst.

Nobody present realized those blue eyes that shone brighter and more intensely than anyone else’s were deep in thought.

2

“Ai Fa, what in the world is going on?!” cried out Saris Ran, the daughter of one of the neighboring houses.

Ai Fa didn’t have much involvement with people from other clans, making this girl one of her few friends.

“As you can see, I’m repairing the broken lattice in this window,” Ai Fa bluntly stated while sawing wood.

It was currently right between daybreak and noon. After finishing her usual gathering of herbs and firewood, Ai Fa had set about fixing the lattice that Diga Suun had broken the previous night.

The hunter's cloak and sword were safely stowed away inside of the house. Currently, she just had on the same light women's attire as Saris Ran.

Saris Ran came running up to her, a look of concern on her face.

"How awful... Just what happened to cause it to break like that? It almost looks like a hunter's blade or something got shoved in there and then it was forced open, doesn't it?"

"That was just the sort of barbaric act that did it. Really, he went and made more unnecessary work for me..."

A smile broke out on Saris Ran's slender face, perhaps because she was relieved to see Ai Fa acting like her old self so soon after the loss of her father. It didn't take long to shift into a frown, though.

"Is there really someone out there who would do something so awful? Just what were they planning, doing something like that?"

"Who knows? I don't know what he was thinking, but regardless, such actions are unforgivable. And so, rather than slicing off his toe, I knocked him into the Lanto River."

"Oh, my... Was it someone from town who had sneaked in?" Saris Ran asked, turning a few shades paler as she wrung her hands.

Ai Fa stopped cutting the wood, and looked right at her childhood friend's worried face.

"As if people from town would set foot in the forest's edge. No, that lawbreaker called himself Diga Suun."

"Diga Suun... Huh? Ai Fa, isn't that the name of the main Suun house's oldest son?"

"Yeah. That's definitely how he introduced himself. I'd heard rumors that the clan that leads our people had fallen to the depths of depravity, and it looks like they may actually be true."

With this, all the rest of the color drained from Saris Ran's face.

"A-Ai Fa... Do you understand what you're saying? The Suun clan leads the people of the forest's edge, right? And as the eldest son of the main family, that

means he'll eventually be in charge, so..."

"Right. That's why I figured it was entirely possible he was just some shameless man falsely giving that name. After all, someone brazen enough to commit such a lawless act would surely be fine giving someone else's name."

"Y-You're wrong, Ai Fa! Plenty of members of the Suun clan pay no heed to the law! Especially the eldest son of the main house... He's rumored to go after beautiful women indiscriminately, isn't he?"

Ai Fa looked a bit annoyed at the way her friend unnecessarily added "beautiful" to her statement.

"Why is such lawlessness permitted? What meaning do the laws of the forest's edge even have at that point?"

"I mean, the Suun clan is stronger than any other family... The only ones who can oppose them are the equally strong Ruu clan, right?"

Ai Fa scowled even further, then scratched her blonde-haired head.

"So, that shameless man really was their next clan head... What a wretched thought. There's no way that someone like him is capable of leading our people."

"T-This is no time to be so nonchalant about things! Ai Fa, did you really strike Diga Suun?"

"Indeed. I sunk him in the Lanto River."

Saris Ran almost collapsed, only to grab Ai Fa's shoulders in a panic. As the outfits worn by women only hid their chests, her shoulders were completely exposed. Thanks to that, Ai Fa felt Saris Ran's hands touching her bare skin, and secretly thought to herself that they felt warm.

"Ai Fa! Go apologize to the Suun clan! The one at fault really was that eldest son of theirs, so maybe what you did will be forgiven... But anyway, you must hurry and go now!"

"What are you saying? I let him off with just a soak in the river so they should be thanking me. There's no reason I should have to apologize."

"That sort of logic won't work with the Suun clan! You should have a man you

can trust accompany you... Ah, but the Fa clan doesn't have any family, right? What should you do...?"

Looking half fed up with the girl, Ai Fa grabbed Saris Ran's slender shoulders back.

"Saris Ran. I'm grateful for your concern, but I have no intention of bowing my head when I'm not at fault. It's fine to just ignore that dunce."

"But that can't be true, right? We're talking about the clan that leads our people..."

"If the Suun clan really is as the rumors say, not even carrying out their work as hunters, then there's no need to fear such lowlifes. I'll just keep turning the tables on them and throwing them in the river as many times as it takes."

"That's...! Even you wouldn't be able to do anything if he came after you with more men, right?"

"I won't know until I try."

And even if she couldn't do anything about it, she could see no reason to yield. After all, wouldn't it be better to let her soul return to the forest than to live in a way that went against her ideals?

That was how Ai Fa felt, but Saris Ran had a real look of concern on her face.

Am I the strange one here...?

Ai Fa's late father had taught her that this was the proper way for the people of the forest's edge to live. Obey the law, hunt giba, live in the forest, and die there as well. Ai Fa had heard since she was a little girl that that was how the people of the forest's edge should be.

However, Saris Ran was staring at Ai Fa like she was a real blockhead who wouldn't listen to common sense, an unusually strong look in her eyes. Saris Ran was a good, kind girl by nature, but it wasn't at all rare for their opinions to clash like this.

And that wasn't just limited to Saris Ran. The neighboring Ran and Fou clans kept a close eye on the Fa clan, who they had only loose ties to, but occasionally they looked completely dumbfounded by what Ai Fa or Gil Fa were doing.

The easiest example was of course the way that Ai Fa helped out with her father's work as a hunter. They all said that women should stick to women's work, things like gathering firewood and herbs, skinning pelts, manning the stove, and waiting for the men to return home from their hunts.

Ai Fa gathered firewood and herbs, too, and she also manned the stove. She couldn't skin pelts on her own, but ever since her mother passed away she had done it alongside her father. In fact, for the two of them, there was no distinction between "men's work" and "women's work."

Plus, men helped the women with their work even at the Ran house. She had seen men who weren't out on the hunt doing things like carrying water jugs or chopping firewood plenty of times.

And yet, women hunting was the one thing that wasn't permitted. The main reason she was given was that women were too weak for the work. But Ai Fa had been adeptly helping out her father even though she hadn't been a full adult. Once she got just a bit taller and her muscles only a touch stronger, she surely would have been able to wield a large, heavy blade just like the men did. In terms of speed and agility she had already surpassed her father, and she had even managed to somehow take down a giba she happened to run across with just a knife. With just a bit more training, she would surely become a hunter worthy of the title... Her father Gil Fa had said as much, and he hadn't been the sort of man to say things lightly.

There was no law at the forest's edge that women couldn't be hunters. And Ai Fa certainly had a talent for the work, too.

But in spite of all that, the only people at the forest's edge who accepted her earnest wish to become a hunter were her father Gil Fa, Jiba Ruu, and Rimee Ruu.

"Ai Fa... What do you intend to do from here on out?" Saris Ran finally asked, looking like she had a bit of trouble saying it. "Gil Fa was a gallant hunter, but he still died in the forest. And you didn't have any other family to rely on other than him to start with, so how are you going to make a living?"

"That's..." Ai Fa started, only to stop midway through.

"You've been able to manage up till now because Gil Fa was by your side, but

it’s just not possible for a woman to live on her own. You don’t have a choice but to marry into some house or become a retainer, right?”

“But then the Fa name will die out.”

“That will still happen as things are now, so what difference does it make? No matter how pretty you may be, there aren’t any men out there who would marry into a clan with no family or retainers.”

“...I believe I already said that I’d like you to stop talking about my appearance in that manner,” Ai Fa said with a frown, only for Saris Ran to say “Sorry,” with a smile.

“It’s true though, right? And you finally turned 15, so you’re old enough to marry. I’m sure you’ll have plenty of marriage offers before I even have time to worry about you...”

“I’m not thinking of getting married. If it came down to it, I would at least like to hunt as a retainer for some family.”

“There aren’t any houses out there who would take on a woman as a hunter. Ai Fa, a woman’s work is to watch over the home, birth children, and carry on the bloodline, right?”

Ai Fa gave a deep sigh.

“I haven’t thought of getting married, and besides, I’m sure no men would have me, anyway. I’m sure you’re under some great delusion, Saris Ran.”

“That’s not true. You’re a very charming woman, Ai Fa,” Saris Ran said with a smile as she grabbed hold of both of Ai Fa’s hands. “Your light hair, and your face, and that slender, shapely body of yours are all so very pretty... Why have you been helping out with hunting of all things when you’re so slim?”

“I’m not as skinny as you... And besides, weren’t you the one who got a marriage proposal?”

Ai Fa’s counterattack caused Saris Ran’s cheeks to go red.

“Um, that’s right... Ah, it’s not all locked down just yet, though. But I think I’ll probably end up marrying into the Fou clan.”

“The Fou clan, huh? Then you won’t be moving all that far.”

“Yeah. The Ran and Fou were originally part of the same family, after all... Hey, wouldn’t it be nice if you married into the Ran clan? Then we’d be related, too, right?”

After she said that, Saris Ran’s eyebrows drooped sadly again.

“You would have to do something about the Suun clan before that, though. There’s no way you could marry into a clan when you’ve earned the anger of the leaders of our people...”

“What’s this about the Suun clan?” a little girl’s voice suddenly asked from below.

Reflexively, Ai Fa leapt to the side and glared at the source of the voice.

“Rimee Ruu, how many times do I have to tell you not to approach me while hiding your presence before you finally understand?”

“Hehe, you seem energetic, Ai Fa! That’s a relief!”

The little girl with the fluffy reddish brown hair, Rimee Ruu, shot a gleeful smile back at Ai Fa.

“So, what’s this about the Suun clan?”

◇

The dinner that night at the Ruu house was even more boisterous than it had been the night before.

Naturally, this was because of the shocking news that Rimee Ruu let slip.

“Hmph... So that blockheaded Suun boy went and did something like that, did he?”

Today, Donda Ruu was wearing a smile that made him look like a carnivore that had found its prey.

“It’s such a ridiculous story that it’s almost hard to believe. Just how far must one fall to be willing to do something so wretched?” Jiza Ruu harshly criticized while wearing an exceedingly gentle expression.

Across from them, the clan head’s wife Mia Lea Ruu gave a sigh.

“That Ai Fa girl really is unfortunate. She not only lost her father, but had to

deal with something that horrible on the very same night... What happened after that, Rimee?”

“Nothing happened! Ai Fa’s friend or whatever said she should apologize to the Suun Clan, but Ai Fa was the same as always. She said regardless of if he was part of the clan that led our people or whatever, she just gave a shameless man his just punishment... Hey, will Ai Fa really be alright?” Rimee Ruu asked, her eyes already tearing up.

Nobody present was willing to say things would be just fine. After all, the Suun clan that led their people had only fallen deeper and deeper into depravity over the past 20 years.

The Ruu clan was similarly powerful, so as long as they kept a watchful eye, the Suun wouldn’t make a move on the surface. But at the same time, they were absolutely the sort to use cruel and cowardly tactics to strike in secret.

“What do you want to do, clan head? That Ai Fa girl’s got some real guts, but if she keeps acting so tough, even the houses in her neighborhood won’t want to take her as a bride, right?”

“Oh...? You think so too?” Donda Ruu said with a smile that bared his teeth.

His wife put down her half-eaten plate of food, a sullen look on her face.

“I’ve been thinking... I’ve never heard of the Fa, Fou, or Ran clans before. That must mean none of them have much in the way of family or retainers, isn’t that so? There’s no way such small clans would possibly defy the Suun, right?”

“That only makes sense... But there’s no reason for us to save someone who isn’t even one of our retainers, and the Fa house is so far from the Ruu house to start with. We couldn’t send help to her even if we wanted to.”

“That’s true. We can’t exactly post a lookout when the Fa house is so far away...”

Mia Lea Ruu and the other women all looked concerned.

Even if Ai Fa wasn’t related to them, she still had a bond with their precious family, Jiba Ruu and Rimee Ruu. None of them knew how strong that friendship was, but when they saw how Rimee Ruu was wailing, they couldn’t help but feel

for her.

“Darmu, you’re already 17, aren’t you?” Donda Ruu said with a grin like a wild beast as he looked at his second son.

With a look in his eyes just as intense as his father’s, Darmu Ruu gave a dubious nod and said, “Yeah.”

“Then you’re at the age where you should be taking a wife soon. It wouldn’t be such a bad idea taking that tomboy as your wife, don’t you think?”

Almost everyone present looked shocked.

“Are you serious, dad?! You really want Darmu to take a girl from a small clan without family or retainers as his wife?!” the youngest son, Ludo Ruu, asked as the representative for the group.

“Yeah. You only just turned 13, and Jiza already has a fine wife for himself. So Darmu’s the only man left around here who can take a wife, right?”

“Yeah, but...”

At the forest’s edge, blood ties mattered above all else. That made marriage a means of furthering a clan’s power, either by forming deeper bonds with retainers, or by forming a new connection with a powerful clan.

“Clan Head Donda, I didn’t think you had become so taken by the Fa clan... But even so, wouldn’t it make sense in that case to have her marry into a Ruu branch family, or perhaps the Rutim or Lea clans? That should allow for plenty of unwed men to choose from,” Jiza Ruu calmly stated.

With that, Donda Ruu’s fierce smile drew back and he replied, “Hmm? Jiza, you want to foist a tomboy who snapped at the Suun clan on a branch family or one of the other clans under us?”

“Yes. We must treat the bloodline of the main Ruu house with care. I am the oldest son and I have already taken a wife, but sadly we have yet to be blessed with a child. If I should happen to die in the forest before I receive such a blessing, the next clan head will be Darmu, and in turn his child will become the heir to the main Ruu house, yes?”

Jiza Ruu’s wife Sati Lea Ruu looked down a bit. As he cast a sideways glance at

that, Donda Ruu gave a “Hmph.” Then, he continued on, “You shouldn’t be saying stuff like that after just a year or two of trying... And besides, that crazy father and daughter were going after giba all on their own, so don’t you think she’d give birth to a splendid hunter? Even without family or retainers, as long as there’s strong blood running through her veins, it shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Clan Head Donda, could it perhaps be...” Jiza Ruu started, his eyes narrowing even further. “Did you have some sort of connection with that Gil Fa man? Something deeper than just seeing him at a meeting of clan heads, I mean...”

“It’s nothing all that serious. We just knew each other a bit way back,” Donda Ruu said in an annoyed tone, waving it off with his thick hand.

With that, a pleasant smile crossed his face again, and he turned to face Darmu Ruu, who had been sitting there in gloomy silence.

“It’s just that I knew that ridiculous bastard’s skill as a hunter full well. I feel that it’d be plenty worthwhile to see if that girl is worthy of being part of our Ruu clan.”

After dinner, Rimee Ruu visited Jiba Ruu’s bedroom.

The ill Jiba Ruu was lying atop a pile of blankets, gently looking back at Rimee Ruu’s face.

“So... Just what is it that you wish for, Rimee...?”

“I don’t know. I really don’t want those Suun guys to do something awful to Ai Fa, but... I just can’t imagine her becoming Darmu’s wife,” Rimee Ruu replied, looking completely stricken with grief.

Jiba Ruu took hold of the little girl’s hands with fingers like withered branches.

“Only a man and a woman can know of the bond they share... If they share one they can come together, and if they don’t, nothing may come of it... I’m sure that regardless of our concerns, Ai Fa will choose the best path for herself...”

“Yeah, I wouldn’t be worried if Ai Fa was her usual self, either. But now that Gil Fa passed away... She still looks like normal, but I think something’s definitely off about her.”

Jiba Ruu's lips trembled a little in concern upon hearing those words.

"Is that so...? I haven't seen Ai Fa in some time, so I don't know about how she is now... I'm sure she must be devastated, having lost her precious father..."

Rimee Ruu had met Gil Fa many times, but with her weak legs Jiba Ruu had never visited the Fa house. Since their houses were far apart, Ai Fa and Jiba Ruu would met midway, where they always deepened their friendship.

It had been four years since the two first met. The old woman had been out with a two year old Rimee Ruu, who loved walks, and they ran into Ai Fa after having gone rather far out.

Then, two years after they met, the 13 year old Ai Fa started helping her father with her work, and so they had far fewer chances to see each other. And as Jiba Ruu's legs weakened, they started seeing each other only once a month, then once every two months... And in time, Jiba Ruu grew sick.

Now that she was old enough to go out and play on her own, Rimee Ruu never spent more than half a month between visits to the Fa house, but Jiba Ruu hadn't seen Ai Fa for over two months. And in the midst of that time, Ai Fa's father Gil Fa suddenly died.

"Rimee... Can I count on you to take care of Ai Fa...?" Jiba Ruu weakly asked.

When she heard that, Rimee Ruu looked like she was about to break down crying.

"Take care of her...? But I can't do anything! I'm not a really good speaker like you are, Granny Jiba!"

"You don't need to be all that skilled with your words... You just need to be by Ai Fa's side, Rimee. If you're with her and smiling, I'm sure Ai Fa will be alright..."

"It won't be alright! You need to help save Ai Fa too, Granny Jiba!"

The tears finally started to flow from Rimee Ruu's big eyes.

The exhaustion from her illness clearly showing in her gaze, Jiba Ruu listlessly stared back at the crying little girl.

"These old bones may already be done for... Even if I survive this illness, I may

lack the strength to walk anymore... And even today, another one of my teeth fell out...”

“No! Gil Fa already died, and I don’t want to lose you too, no matter what! You said you’d keep on living till I get married!”

“I’d like to keep living... But it’s only natural for us old folks to die first... I’ve lived longer than anyone else at the forest’s edge, so I no longer fear death...”

“I don’t get it! Granny Jiba, you big dummy!”

Rimee Ruu clung to Jiba Ruu’s withering body and wept.

As she ran her trembling fingers along the little girl’s back, Jiba Ruu whispered to no one at all, “I’ve already lived plenty... So, mother forest... If you really are our mother, please, bring these young folk happiness... Help yourself to this old woman’s soul, and in exchange, lend these children your strength...”

3

The following day, Ai Fa found herself greeting some rather unexpected visitors: Donda Ruu, head of the Ruu clan, and his three sons.

“So you’re the head of the Ruu clan, are you? I’m Ai Fa of the Fa clan,” Ai Fa said, greeting them with a firm look on her face as the midday sun shone down on the nape of her neck.

They were standing in front of the Fa house, since Ai Fa had run into her visitors while heading outside to dry pico leaves.

“By chance, I happened to form bonds with Jiba Ruu and Rimee Ruu of your house. I heard tell that Jiba Ruu had fallen ill, but how has she been since then?”

“It appears she has gotten past the worst of her illness, but her spirit seems to have weakened. And she still can’t even walk properly on her own two legs... Hmm, you certainly do seem to have some guts.”

Donda Ruu’s massive frame dwarfed Ai Fa’s, and he was glaring down at the girl.

Frankly, Ai Fa was astonished by the fierce strength emanating from the man.

And it wasn't just Donda Ruu. His eldest son was just as tall as his father, and seemed to be full of the same sort of strength. The second son was still young, but he was plenty tall with a taut body and limbs, as well as beastly eyes that shone just like his father's. The youngest boy, meanwhile, still appeared childish. He did technically have a hunter's uniform on, but he had the same sort of necklace with three tusks and horns on it as Ai Fa, and she couldn't sense any real pressure coming off of him. He must have just turned 13, the age at which he would be allowed out into the forest.

If it had been men like these who attacked me two days ago, I surely wouldn't have made it, Ai Fa thought, which she found frustrating. Her own strength wasn't even a fraction of what they possessed. If they got into a fight, she probably wouldn't even be able to get away from them. She could clearly feel that.

The only one she felt she could beat was the boy who called himself Ludo Ruu, and that was surely just due to his youth. Once he had a year or two of hunting experience under his belt, he would certainly possess the same sort of strength as his father and brothers. She could sense that sort of strength budding within the boy.

"So, just what business do you have with me?"

While fiddling with his wiry tough-guy beard, Donda Ruu glared at Ai Fa. Before long, he muttered, "I see..." in a low voice. "You look just like your mother in your face and hair. But those eyes... Hmph, seems you really do have that crazy bastard's blood running through your veins."

"Donda Ruu, were you acquainted with my parents?" Ai Fa asked, looking shocked.

"A bit, a long time ago," the man bluntly responded. "It's not as if we had some sort of special bond or anything. I only met your mom once when she was young, and lately I only ever saw your old man at meetings for clan heads. More importantly, Ai Fa of the Fa clan... I hear you got on the Suun clan's bad side, right?"

"Yes. It's nothing all that important, though," Ai Fa earnestly stated.

Compared to the men in front of her now, Diga Suun was like a defanged giiz. Perhaps that was all the strength men who didn't carry out their work as hunters could manage.

"You say having bad blood with the clan that leads our people is 'nothing all that important,' huh? You're underestimating them a bit there. After all, no matter how much you may have polished your skills, you're still just a woman, aren't you?"

"...You don't need to emphasize such facts."

"Then you should behave yourself like a woman. If you do, then maybe we could let you marry into the Ruu clan."

Ai Fa was left dumbfounded once again.

She had told Rimee Ruu about the matter with Diga Suun, and she imagined that must be related... but this was just too much.

"Are you sane, Donda Ruu of the Ruu clan? I don't have any family or retainers. What advantage could the Ruu clan hope to gain from welcoming someone like that as a bride?"

"It's my job to evaluate whether or not we have anything to gain from it. Though with that said, we won't get anywhere without bringing your partner into the conversation... What do you think, Darmu? Are you up for taking this tomboy as your bride?" Donda Ruu asked his tall second son. The boy, Darmu Ruu, had eyes that were a bit gloomier than his father's, and they narrowed as if he was staring at something bright.

"...I don't have a lover. If it will help to strengthen the Ruu clan, then I don't mind marrying anyone."

"No, I—"

"I've got no interest in a woman who's obsessed with playing at being a hunter, though," Darmu Ruu added, interrupting Ai Fa. "It's a woman's job to take care of the house, right? I can't see any value in a woman who won't take care of that task. At least, that's what I think."

"That makes sense. Ai Fa of the Fa clan, are you prepared to live your life as a

woman?”

Four sets of eyes shot sharp gazes full of varying emotions at Ai Fa.

As if brushing them aside, Ai Fa stated, “How I live my life is up to me to decide! I don’t understand why I need to be asked such things by people I’m meeting for the first time!”

“Like I said, because we want to welcome you into the clan as a bride. You really do make it hard to save you, tomboy,” Donda Ruu said with a smirk. It was a really irritating grin... But Ai Fa couldn’t sense any ill will or hostility behind it.

“Ai Fa of the Fa clan, you’ve earned the ire of the Suun clan. At this rate, you won’t be allowed so much as a peaceful night’s sleep in the future. But if you become a member of the Ruu clan, even the Suun won’t dare lay a hand on you.”

“That may well be so, but—”

“Additionally, you already have bonds with members of our clan. I won’t just hand over someone my family calls a friend to those Suun bastards so easily,” Donda Ruu said, his tough, rock-like face shifting into even more of a smile. It was like the grin of some ferocious beast.

“Let me swear, here and now: Ai Fa of the Fa clan, if you become part of our Ruu clan, we will do whatever it takes to protect you. If those Suun jerks try to lay a hand on you... We’re prepared to crush them.”

“Crush... the Suun clan...?”

“Yeah, that’s right. 20 years back, the Ruu missed their chance to take them out. We’d happily take up arms against them to clear away that regret, too.”

Ai Fa had heard of the grudge between the Ruu and the Suun. Someone from the Suun clan kidnapped a woman set to marry into the Ruu clan, and then ultimately killed her. However, as there was no proof, the Ruu couldn’t take up arms.

The Ruu and Suun clans held the greatest strength at the forest’s edge, and if they were to fight in earnest, the very settlement itself may be destroyed. That

was why the two families were able to let 20 years pass in frustration, letting that deep grudge fester.

That anger and regret wrapped around this man's massive frame like a blaze. Faced with such tremendous pressure, Ai Fa ended up firmly gritting her teeth.

What a truly intense man... That aspect of him was frightening, but at the same time, it was also strangely awe-inspiring.

People... Hunters, can be this strong and fierce...?

This man Donda Ruu may have been strong enough to not only beat Ai Fa, but also her father Gil Fa. It was hard to compare their strengths, as Gil Fa remained calm and composed at all times, while this Donda Ruu was like a burning flame. But regardless, even someone as inexperienced as Ai Fa could tell that it would be quite a fight.

This man may really be capable of crushing the Suun clan, too...

But would that be what's right for the people of the forest's edge? Couldn't the destruction of their leaders perhaps mean their own deaths in turn?

Ai Fa bit down so hard her teeth creaked, holding back the disturbing feelings she felt running about inside. If she didn't, she may have ended up overwhelmed by this man's strength and collapsing to the ground.

"...It's up to you which path you ultimately choose, Ai Fa of the Fa clan," Donda Ruu said before turning around. "I'll come again in three days. Make your decision by then. We'll be hoping that you choose to join us as a member of our family."

◇

Just what should I do...?

Ai Fa ended up spending the whole day chopping wood behind her house while worrying over the problem.

She had been distressed ever since she lost her father Gil Fa, and rather than being solved and fading away, that issue only seemed to have grown worse day by day.

I can't even decide if I should live as a hunter or a woman, and now I'm being

asked to marry into the Ruu clan...? Damn, just what is that Donda Ruu thinking?!

An offer to marry into the main Ruu house... That couldn't be called anything but a bolt out of the blue.

If she really did decide to give up her hunter's blade and become a bride, then her friends of several years, Jiba and Rimee Ruu, would become family and they would live together. It was an even more unbelievable idea than what Saris Ran had said about marrying into the Ran clan.

The second son Darmu Ruu had Jiba Ruu's blood running in his veins. And if Ai Fa happened to have a child with him, the same would be true of that new life.

As much as that was so sweet of a thought that it might have almost brought her to tears of joy, it was also so frightening that it felt like someone was ripping out her spine.

Is that what it means, to be tied by blood...?

Did everyone, man and woman, have that sort of resolve when taking a partner?

The Fa blood she inherited from her parents, Gil Fa and Mei Fa, would combine with the Ruu blood shared by Jiba and Rimee Ruu, bringing a new life into the world.

That would surely be a joyous occasion. So joyous that it didn't even feel real.

And yet...

She didn't have feelings of any sort for Darmu Ruu. That was only natural, since they only just met for the first time today, and she hadn't even had so much as a conversation with him.

Well, no, apparently there were people out there who said they knew they wanted to marry their partner at first sight. At the very least, Ai Fa didn't have any such feelings towards the young man.

If she had to say, Darmu Ruu actually seemed more to be the type of man that she was wary of. He certainly seemed to possess skill as a hunter, but he also seemed arrogant, and had an air about him like a drawn blade. And he

gave off the impression that the power he possessed was too much for him. The idea that he was Rimee Ruu's elder brother made her seriously doubt the fidelity of their births.

She just couldn't imagine herself marrying a man like that.

Even if becoming part of Jiba and Rimee Ruu's family would bring her extraordinary joy, that alone was no reason to get married. And she couldn't imagine those two would be happy with her doing so, either.

They were irreplaceable friends to Ai Fa, but to people with countless family members and retainers like Jiba and Rimee Ruu had, she must have seemed terribly small. Of course, it wasn't as if Ai Fa was doubting how they felt. It was just that Ai Fa's only relatives had been her two parents to start with, and then she lost her mother two years back and her father two days ago. Their standings were just way too different, she thought.

And currently, her only friends were Jiba and Rimee Ruu, and Saris Ran. But the Ruu family was over 10 strong, there were over 20 more family members in their branch families, and they had 70 retainers.

Considering the value of blood ties, Ai Fa should fall below all of them.

But even so, Ai Fa didn't mind. Even if she was number 101 in her most important people's books, that wouldn't change the fact that their smiles and words had brought her joy.

Even if we aren't tied by blood, we're still friends, she thought while striking her hatchet down upon the firewood.

It was then that she noticed someone standing behind her.

Ai Fa swiftly leapt to the side, threw away the heavy hatchet, and placed her hand on the knife at her waist.

"Sorry, did I startle you?"

To her surprise, it wasn't someone from the Suun or Ruu clans, but rather a man from her neighboring Fou clan. She didn't know his name, but she believed the unaffected youth of around 20 was the second son of the clan head.

"What do you want? Shouldn't you men be out in the forest around now?"

“Ah, you see... It’s a bit embarrassing, but I hurt my ankle during yesterday’s hunt. I can’t exactly chase down a giba like this, so I’m taking the day off.”

His height was pretty middle of the road, and he was more than a little thin. Perhaps the impression left by the men of the Ruu clan had been too strong? After all, even the youngest son of the Ruu looked stronger than this youth.

I feel like if I was up against someone like this, I wouldn’t need to worry about running away. I could just take them down... No, that may be a bit conceited on my part.

Plus, she had a bit of a bond with the Fou clan, so she had no reason to fight one of them anyway. Though with that said, they weren’t exactly close enough for this young man to be calling out to her in such a friendly manner.

“So, what business do you have with me? I’m in the middle of working right now.”

“Um, well you see... I saw the head of the Ruu clan and his sons walking down the road before. The Ruu clan lives further to the south, so... I was wondering if they were perhaps on their way back from the Fa house...”

He wasn’t exactly articulate.

Since he was a member of the Fou clan, it made sense that he’d at least know that Rimee Ruu came and went at the Fa house. And so, it wasn’t all that strange for this man to be making such a guess.

Ai Fa went and picked up the hatchet she had previously discarded, raising it to let the heavy end rest up against her shoulder.

“Indeed, they visited here at the Fa house. I was rather surprised by the sudden visit myself.”

“I knew it... So, what business did they have with you?”

“...It’s nothing I particularly feel like discussing,” Ai Fa stated bluntly.

At that, the youth’s slender face looked clearly shaken.

“Ai Fa of the Fa clan... If this is simply a delusion on my part, then please go ahead and laugh at me to your heart’s content, but... Could it be that they came to ask you to marry into the Ruu clan?”

“How did you know?” Ai Fa asked without thinking.

The young man now appeared completely heartbroken for some reason.

“So that really was it... I had figured with your beauty, someone would approach you, but still...”

“Second son of the Fou clan, are you not being forgetful of your manners, making such statements so lightly?” Ai Fa complained while holding herself back from clicking her tongue.

The youth hurried forward, a look of urgency on his face.

“I wasn’t saying it lightly. You *are* beautiful, Ai Fa of the Fa clan. I’ve thought so for many years now.”

Ai Fa was rather surprised, but she wasn’t about to let the man get any closer. She swiftly stepped back, maintaining a distance where she was just out of reach.

Suddenly, the youth’s sadness gave way to a look of determination.

“Ai Fa, the Fou clan is incredibly small. We’re a poor family, only able to live on by joining together with other small clans. And I’m not anywhere near as fine of a hunter as your father was... I can’t even imagine trying to measure up to the men of the Ruu clan.”

“And what does that matter? Who cares about the size of one’s clan?”

“If you really feel that way, Ai Fa, then I’d like you to become a part of my Fou clan. As the second son of the Fou clan, I, Masa Fou, extend a marriage proposal to you, Ai Fa of the Fa clan.”

Ai Fa was stupefied, left standing in place. Why should such an uncharming girl as her...? No, that wasn’t all. There was no way that such words should be coming from this young man.

“Hold on, second son of the Fou clan. Am I under some misunderstanding, perhaps? I’m fairly certain I heard you were to take Saris Ran as your bride...”

“That matter hasn’t been firmly decided just yet. If I retract my offer and bow my head down to the Ran clan, I should be able to deal with that without causing a quarrel.”

“You would call off your marriage to Saris Ran?! But why?!” Ai Fa asked in an unexpectedly loud voice.

The youth, Masa Fou, stared back at Ai Fa with a desperate look on his plain face.

“I’ve been in love with you for some time. But you said you wanted to live as a hunter, and honestly, you and Gil Fa alone had been hunting more giba than our clan. And so no matter how beautiful I found you, I held back my feelings, as your soul was that of a hunter. But now that Gil Fa has returned to the forest so young, you... You won’t be able to live as a hunter any longer.”

Ai Fa did not have a response to that.

“And so, I just couldn’t hold back my feelings any longer! I mean, some other man could take you as a bride... Someone other than me could end up holding you tight... When I had such thoughts, my feelings came to a roiling boil inside! And so I—”

“Even now, I still hope to live as a hunter, if such a thing is possible,” Ai Fa firmly stated, cutting Masa Fou off.

Masa Fou shook his head and said, “It’s impossible. A hunter’s work can’t be carried out by just one person on their own. Gil Fa had been by your side up until now, but if you tried to do so by yourself, it would simply end with you dying in the forest too. If a woman like you enters the forest on her own—”

“If I die in the forest, then that is simply my fate!”

Ai Fa threw the hatchet in her right hand at the ground, only for its blade to become firmly stuck.

“Even if that weren’t the case, I would never marry someone like you after you went and betrayed Saris Ran! Leave this place, second son of the Fou clan! I cannot stand men like you!”

Masa Fou stood there silently for a short while. Then, he slowly turned around, slumped his shoulders in disappointment like a child, and disappeared from Ai Fa’s sight.

And then, a quiet voice whispered “Why...?” from the direction opposite of

the way he departed.

Ai Fa hesitantly faced the voice and found Saris Ran standing in the shadow of the Fa house, her face as pale as a corpse.

“Saris Ran...” Ai Fa said, taking a step forward, only to be suddenly stopped by a harsh cry of, “Don’t come any closer!”

Ai Fa stopped in place and stared intently at her friend... Saris Ran was crying. Despite the anger in her voice, her face was now wet with tears.

“It’s not your fault, Ai Fa...” Saris Ran said in a trembling voice. “Masa Fou was just weak... And I was stupid... You didn’t do anything wrong, Ai Fa...”

And with that, Saris Ran disappeared from Ai Fa’s sight.

Ai Fa tilted her head upwards, and gazed distantly into the sky. Her thoughts were an absolute jumbled mess.

In all likelihood, she had just lost one of her precious few friends.

The sense of loss and despondency robbed her limbs of all their strength.

However, rather than yielding to those feelings, Ai Fa lifted up her right fist and slammed it into the wall of her house as hard as she could.

“You’ve got to be kidding me! Just what did I even do?!”

With that, Ai Fa finally stopped worrying.

4

“So, that’s the conclusion you reached, Ai Fa of the Fa clan?” Donda Ruu asked in a low voice.

It was three days after their initial meeting, just as he had promised. They were in front of the Fa house exactly like before, and he had once again brought his three sons.

Ai Fa had only offered a greeting so far, but apparently Donda Ruu had already figured out everything just from looking at her. That was because she was wearing a hunter’s cloak made from a giba’s pelt and had a large and small blade dangling at her waist. She was also wearing the necklace she had

inherited from Gil Fa, which felt even heavier to her than the steel sword. After all, it represented her father's pride, as the treasure that he obtained by risking his life and heading into the forest.

"I've decided to live my life as a hunter. As such, I cannot marry into the Ruu clan. My deepest apologies for turning down your kindness."

"Hmph... Looks like your stupidity exceeded my expectations, Ai Fa of the Fa clan," Donda Ruu stated, burning with a quiet rage. Ai Fa gripped both her fists tight so that she wouldn't be overwhelmed by the flames in his eyes.

"Protecting the house, birthing children, and raising them... You intend to cast aside all that women's work and devote yourself to playing at being a hunter?"

"Yes, that's right. I want to strive so that I can one day be acknowledged as a full-fledged hunter."

"Do you really think that you can hunt enough giba on your own?"

"Up until I turned 13, my father Gil successfully carried out his work as a hunter all by himself. I only need to procure enough for myself, whereas he needed to support both my mother Mei and myself, so I don't see it as some great hardship."

"...Do you think your father wanted you to live like that?"

Ai Fa took a short breath, then said, "I don't know what my father thought. And so, I chose this path of my own will."

It was possible that Gil Fa's soul that had been offered to the forest was now grieving and moaning as he watched over Ai Fa. He could have been saying that she still wasn't strong enough, and it was utterly foolish to take on the forest on her own.

She could only imagine that, though.

And so, Ai Fa had made her own decision.

What was right, what others wanted of her, what she *should* do... She stopped worrying about all that, and instead chose to value what she wanted.

She wanted to live as a hunter. That desire had been a part of her from the very start.

Should she live as a hunter, or should she live as a woman...? Once she removed that “should” from the equation, there was only one answer left to her.

Even if she didn’t know what was right, she knew what she wanted.

Ai Fa *wanted* to live as a hunter. Rather than a life of waiting at home for the men to return, she wished for one where she headed out into the forest to seek the life force she needed with her own two hands.

It was better to have your soul return to the forest rather than live a life you didn’t want... Ai Fa decided to live while keeping those words from her father close to her heart.

If Ai Fa’s decision was wrong, then the forest was sure to help itself to her soul. The fifteen-year-old girl still couldn’t properly wield a sword, but she would live on her own as a hunter. And if that choice had been a mistake, then her only option was to perish in the forest.

“...Do you intend to invalidate the wishes of those who don’t want you to die, Ai Fa of the Fa clan?” Donda Ruu asked in an even calmer voice than before. Despite that tone, though, there was clear rage in his eyes. Perhaps he thought she was invalidating the thoughts and concerns of his precious family.

Ai Fa quietly calmed her breathing and replied, “I’m sure very few others would agree with my choice. But I cannot bend my will to the thinking of others.”

Ai Fa’s choice would probably make Jiba and Rimee Ruu sad. Or perhaps they would get angry. But even so, Ai Fa decided to pay that matter no heed.

Even if she was scolded and called foolish, there was no law that stated women couldn’t be hunters. That may have just been because no one was foolish enough to try up until now, but even so, it wasn’t restricted.

And so, Ai Fa had no intention of being ashamed of her way of life.

She couldn’t bring herself to bow her head to the treacherous Suun clan, nor could she ignore her own will and marry into the Ruu clan.

I’ll surely never be able to meet Granny Jiba or Rimee Ruu ever again...

That was only natural, now that she had angered the head of the Ruu clan so greatly.

The thought that she would never again hold Jiba Ruu's withered hands, or see Rimee Ruu's brilliant smile, made her chest feel like it would burst. And since she wouldn't bow her head to the Suun clan, the Ran and Fou had started avoiding her, too. If her bonds to the Ruu clan were severed on top of that, she really would be all alone.

And yet, Ai Fa simply couldn't bend. She couldn't see a point in forming bonds with others if it came with the need to lose sight of herself.

If no one existed in this world who would accept Ai Fa as she was, then her only choice left was to live on her own.

"You are the one to decide your own path... And it appears that path doesn't overlap with the one our Ruu clan walks, Ai Fa of the Fa clan."

"Yes, that appears to be the case."

After hearing Ai Fa's response, Donda Ruu turned around and left, with his three sons silently following suit.

And just like that, Ai Fa was left by herself, starting off her life all on her own.

If she couldn't hunt down a giba on her own before the meat and vegetables in her pantry and the horns and tusks around her neck ran out, Ai Fa would starve to death. That would be her first trial.

Since I'm the only member of my household, one giba every 10 days will be sufficient. If I can't manage that much, then I'm not qualified to live as a hunter.

However, food wasn't the only thing that she needed.

The clothing she wore and her blades would need to be obtained by trading horns and tusks in town. She had a spare knife in addition to the one she already used, but she only had a single sword. If it happened to break, it would require thirty giba worth of horns and tusks to replace.

Well, rather than worrying about this blade breaking, I should use that energy for actually wielding it.

Ai Fa grabbed the sword and headed back outside.

Even if she could bluff against a human opponent, out in the forest it would be a life or death struggle. She couldn't just head off into the forest with a weapon she wasn't in the right mind to use to the fullest.

Well then, let's get to it.

It was time for her first hunt in five days. She stepped outside, feeling a mix of excitement and terror running down her spine.

It was then that she noticed a small figure standing in her way.

"Wow, so you really did decide to live as a hunter, Ai Fa!"

It was Rimee Ruu.

For a second, Ai Fa was at a loss for words, but then she regained her composure.

"Why did you come here, Rimee Ruu?"

"Hmm? Because I was worried about you, of course. I just waited for Papa Donda and them to leave! I saw the angry looks on Papa Donda and Darmu's faces, so I figured you must have turned them down!" Rimee Ruu said with a wide smile as she ran around Ai Fa. "You look so cool! That's Gil Fa's outfit, right? It really suits you!"

Ai Fa didn't say a word.

"Now that I think of it, didn't you wear a giba piglet's pelt cloak when you were a kid? That was really cute, too!" Rimee Ruu said with a giggle.

The smile the girl wore brought Ai Fa an indescribable amount of joy. It was like her fondness for the child had burst open the firmly shut doors of her heart.

Rimee Ruu would still smile at her even now, would she?

Everyone had turned away from her, but this girl would still call her a friend?

Ai Fa felt like she was on the verge of collapsing to her knees and hugging her little friend tight. She wanted to just throw everything aside and weep like a child.

However, Ai Fa managed to suppress those feelings raging within right before they burst forth, using every last bit of her willpower to hold back the torrent,

and then started walking down the path once again.

“Ah, hold on! We only just met up, so where are you going?”

“...I decided to live my life as a hunter. It’s already past midday, so I’m heading off into the forest.”

“Ah, so that’s it? Take care, alright? I’ll be praying as hard as I can that you don’t get hurt!”

Ai Fa stopped in place, her back still facing the young girl, and said, “Rimee Ruu, never come to the Fa house again.”

“Huh?! But why?!”

Ai Fa could sense that Rimee Ruu was about to break out sobbing.

With her back still turned, she continued, “I’ve incurred Donda Ruu’s displeasure. As a member of the Ruu clan, you should act in accordance with your clan head’s will.”

“What’s that about?! I don’t wanna! Why should Papa Donda Ruu be angry because you turned down the marriage offer? It’s fine! And besides, that doesn’t have anything to do with me!”

“That’s not all. I’ve also earned bad blood with the Suun clan, and anyone close to me could be caught up in the disasters that invites. And so... You shouldn’t come near me.”

Rimee Ruu was silent for a little while. And then, in a voice that made it hard to tell what she was feeling, she said, “But... If I worry about stuff like that, then you’ll be left all alone, right, Ai Fa?”

Her gaze fixed on the far-off forest, Ai Fa replied, “That’s fine. I’m sure that nobody shares my will, now that I’ve turned against the leaders of our people, refused the Ruu clan’s kindness, and chose to live as a hunter despite being a woman on top of it all. I want to be alone.”

She could live on her own, and so, she didn’t want to get anyone else mixed up in her problems. She would live and die in the forest, never bending her will. That was all she wanted now.

“I don’t want that! I want to be with you, Ai Fa!” Rimee Ruu stubbornly

insisted.

Ai Fa shook her head, and started walking again.

“At any rate, I don’t have any time to play with anyone anymore. Return to the Ruu house, Rimee Ruu, and never come near here again.”

“I told you, I don’t wanna! I’m definitely going to come back to see you again!” Rimee Ruu yelled out, sounding like she was on the verge of tears.

Those words alone were enough for Ai Fa. The young girl didn’t need to come to see her. As she was now, just knowing that Rimee Ruu wanted to see her again was plenty.

It’s fine, Rimee Ruu...

Even if their bonds were severed, the memories of the time she spent with Rimee Ruu wouldn’t disappear. Saris Ran was the one who had taught her that.

Even if Saris Ran had come to hate her, it wasn’t as if all the smiles and words she had given Ai Fa in the past suddenly became lies. And even now, she could still feel the warmth of her friend’s fingers on her shoulders.

And then there was her father, Gil Fa. He had passed away, and she would never be able to see him again. And yet, he would never disappear from Ai Fa’s heart.

Rimee Ruu... Granny Jiba... Saris Ran... It’s thanks to all of you that I’ve been able to live a happy life.

From now on, those memories would live on inside of her. Just like how Gil Fa was still her father and Mei Fa was still her mother even though they had passed away, Rimee Ruu, Jiba Ruu, and Saris Ran would remain Ai Fa’s friends even if their bonds were severed.

As long as she was able to keep secretly thinking so deep inside, she would be able to keep on living.

“Ai Fa, you dummy! You just don’t get it!”

Rimee Ruu’s tearful voice was growing distant behind her. As she continued to listen to it, Ai Fa reached the path to the forest.

She couldn’t stop the tears from flowing down her cheeks, but even so, there wasn’t any hesitation in Ai Fa’s heart.

In roughly two years, Ai Fa would meet a strange man who was born in another world.

Afterword

You have my deepest thanks for picking up this book, the second volume of “Cooking with Wild Game.”

This volume ended up being a rather unique composition. The way things turned out, roughly a fourth of the book is a freshly written side chapter.

As I explained in the previous afterword, this work was originally published on a website, so I didn’t need to pay any heed to how many words went into an episode. As a result, I had to squeeze down the last volume to fit it into one book, while this time around I ended up writing around 70,000 characters of extra content. I could have added more to the main plot this time around as well, and I actually did consider that method, but I felt like it would awkwardly throw off the tempo, so I went with the method you see here.

From the next volume on, whenever the main story comes up short, I intend to look at what would be best for the story as a whole in order to hopefully deliver the best book possible.

I called that extra chapter an “apéritif,” and it stars Ai Fa and is set two years in the past. That was when Ai Fa had lost her beloved father and earned the disdain of the clan that leads their people, making it the hardest time in her life.

I’d been thinking for a while now that I would like to write about Ai Fa from before she met Asuta, which made this a very enjoyable experience. I actually wanted to include an epilogue of where she met Asuta at first, but it felt redundant, so I decided to leave that for when I could concentrate more time on it.

Asuta is the main character but he often plays the part of the fool, so when he’s not around, the story becomes a lot less comedic. That resulted in an apéritif that’s a bit different than the main story and may have been a little rough, but I hope that you still enjoyed it.

As for the main story, I wanted it to be easy to read in book format, so I went back and read over it, then fine-tuned the parts that caught my eye. And just like with last time, I gave it my all to make this something that both folks picking

it up as a book for the first time and those who already read the web version could enjoy.

The story is quietly, slowly moving forward.

Next time around, that certain matter related to the Rutim clan will be the main event, but I'll also show you a bit of the scenery outside of the forest's edge, and there will be new character introductions, too.

Kochimo-sama, I've greatly enjoyed seeing you bring Asuta, Ai Fa, and the various people of the forest's edge to life perfectly, and so I really look forward to seeing what you'll do with these new additions to the cast, too.

Also, next time will be a long episode just like last volume, so I'll need to squeeze it in tight, too. I'll strive my best to sift out just the off flavors, leaving you with something even nicer.

Now then, this has ended up turning into a rather long afterword.

I would be positively overjoyed if you keep on enjoying the interweaving story of Asuta and the rest of the cast.

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.

Well then, I hope to see you all again with the next volume!

March 2015,

EDA



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by EDA

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VOLUME 2

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