COOKING WITH WILD GAME

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VOLUME 3




As he said that, Gazraan Rutim removed the necklace of horns and tusks around his thick neck. They were offering me those necklaces, the proof of their pride as a hunter, and the love of their parents.
"Will you sell that cooking of yours to us?"
COOKING WITH WILD GAME
VOLUME 3




"ASUTA," A VOICE SAID, AND I FELT A LIGHT TUG ON MY ARM. WHEN I TURNED TO LOOK, I SAW AI FA QUIETLY STARING BACK AT ME.
I GAVE A SINGLE NOD, THEN CLENCHED MY FISTS.
THE BANQUET HAD BEGUN.
Ama Min
A woman set to marry into the Rutim clan. Together with Gazraan, she asks Asuta to man the stove at the banquet for their wedding. More calm and relaxed than one might expect for her age, but a lively and sociable girl at her core.
Gazraan Rutim
The eldest son of the main Rutim house. Having been greatly moved by Asuta's cooking at the celebratory banquet, he asked that he man the stove for their wedding as well. Honest, but a flexible thinker, and a man who truly trusts in his clan.


He certainly seemed to be having fun. I figured he must be overjoyed. I mean, he had to be over the moon, with his son having grown into such a splendid man, and for him to be marrying such a beautiful bride.
I couldn't quite tell from this distance, but I felt like I saw something lightly sparkling in the corners of those big eyes of his.
"Eat and drink up! And give your thanks to the women of the Ruu clan, who worked hard for this day!"
"Hehehe. Look, I'm Dan Rutim!"

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Prologue: Over the Ravine

Before me was a sight that made me feel like my insides were shriveling up with fear.

We were at a ravine, roughly a thirty minute walk from the Fa house. We had passed by the river where I usually did my washing, walked down a rough, rocky path with Mount Morga visible to our right, and then finally arrived at this grand, terrifying scenery.

It really was a *ravine*.

There was a river I didn't know the name of cutting through between the steep cliff faces, making plenty of noise.

That noise was coming from seriously far away, though. The distance between the top of the cliff where we stood and that raging river must have been around 20 meters.

20 meters... by the standards of my world, that was around the same height as a five story tall building.

Well, I wasn't exactly good with being so high up, but it wasn't exactly like I had a strong fear of heights. Looking down from the top of the cliff on the flowing river below, I was just barely able to keep my legs from trembling.

The real source of terror, though, wasn't the ravine itself. No, what had me really shaken was the unsteady-looking handmade rope bridge stretched across.

"You're kidding me, right...?" I asked, only for my beloved benefactor to ask back, "What?" with a truly puzzled look on her face.

I couldn't help but sigh at that reaction.

It looked to be roughly 20 meters across, and the bridge was a meter wide. It had a really primitive look about it, being made out of old logs tied together with light brown dried out vines.

Despite there not being any wind blowing, it was still swaying back and forth. I could feel my spine giving out just from the thought of stepping foot on it.

“I’ve got to say, this thing makes me extremely nervous...” I forced out.

This may have been the most tense I’d been since coming to this other world, but my benefactor just shot me back a doubtful look.

She was a person of the forest’s edge and the head of the Fa clan, Ai Fa. And it probably goes without saying, but she saved my life and let me live with her, and was a daring and dauntless female hunter.

Her long hair was done up in a complex manner, and was a golden blonde that was rare here at the forest’s edge. Her brightly, firmly shining eyes were a deep blue. And her carefully honed, slim body had a creamy, chocolate color to it. Though she was an average height and her body was slender, there was an overwhelming liveliness about her.

She had on the giba fur cloak that proved she was a hunter, as well as beautifully colored cloth hiding just her chest and waist. A knife and savage sword dangled from that tight waist of hers, and she had leather footwear wrapped around the lovely contours of her legs and feet.

A necklace made with quite a number of tusks and horns dangled above her shapely chest, and her slim wrist had on a bracelet made from grigee fruit, meant to ward away insects.

Yup, that was Ai Fa’s usual look.

Last night, after my work for the Rutim’s advance celebration had been safely completed and we were together in the house allotted to us, she had seemed different than usual, but that abnormality seemed to have been completely wiped away with the dawn of this new day.

That was a good thing. It really was, but... I mean, I couldn’t exactly feel glad while faced with the terror in front of me now.

“Asuta, could it be that you’re trying to tell me you’re concerned about this bridge?” Ai Fa calmly asked. “In that case, such concern is unnecessary. This bridge was made using fibaha vines. Even if they appear rather slender, they remain tough like human hair even after withering like this.”

Even if they were tougher than they looked like she was saying, that didn’t exactly cause my fears to just vanish. And I mean, wouldn’t it be better for

peace of mind to use something that looked more thick and sturdy even if it was a bit weaker?

“This bridge has hung here since before I was born, in constant use without any problems up till this day. There is no way that it’s dangerous.”

“No, that’s illogical, saying something will be fine today just because it hasn’t had any problems yet! And wait, the longer it’s been used, the more worn out it must be, right?!”

“That’s why we must carefully check that the vines haven’t been damaged anywhere while passing by. And whenever someone finds an issue, they are to repair it. That is how we have maintained this bridge for decades now.”

“Clan head Ai Fa... Even so, I cannot clear away the unease I’m feeling inside. Are there not any safer, more agreeable routes?”

“This is the quickest route between my home and the Genos post town. Any other path would take several times longer.”

Right, we were in the middle of heading to town to exchange giba horns and tusks for food. Normally Ai Fa would have taken care of restocking our aria, poitan, and fruit wine with more time to spare, but we had the whole showdown with Donda Ruu. That was finally settled yesterday, so after first returning home and taking care of the basic tasks of checking the pantry and gathering pico leaves, we headed out on this trip.

This was my first chance to step outside of the forest’s edge since arriving in this other world 20 days back. My heart was trembling with both excitement and unease towards the unknown I was venturing into.

And currently, it was trembling for a different reason altogether.

“Can’t we move past this already? If you keep on hesitating here, the sun will end up setting before we carry out our task.”

“Please, just hold on! Um... would you mind if I hold your hand?”

Ai Fa’s brows immediately furrowed, and she stated, “I firmly refuse. What purpose would there be behind that? After all, if the bridge were to happen to fall, holding my hand most certainly wouldn’t be enough to save your life. If you

need to hold onto something, then you should make it the vines supporting the bridge.”

“N-No, but you see, I just want peace of mind! I feel like I can rely a great deal more on the beloved head of my clan than on these unstable vines!”

“If you don’t stop with that irritating manner of speaking immediately, I’ll cut out your tongue.”

“I’m sorry.”

“At any rate, I refuse to pointlessly hold hands. If you’re that uneasy, then just hold onto the hem of my cloak or something,” she coldly, calmly stated before turning back towards the bridge.

I caught hold of her cloak and clung to it firmly with both hands.

“A-alright, I’m ready! Let’s head out!”

Ai Fa gave a deep sigh without even turning around, then started walking without a hint of hesitation. I no longer had a choice but to follow along after her like one of the drones from a certain space shooter game.

Ai Fa’s foot touched down on one of the logs, and the bridge swayed far more than it had up until now.

I worked up my nerves, and stepped onto the logs, too. The bridge shook once again.

“Gyah!”

“You’re so noisy.”

“H-hold on! At least hold onto the rope! I mean, I’ve got both my hands occupied, here!”

“You really are noisy.”

Ai Fa simply kept on moving forward at her usual jaunty pace, paying no heed to my concerns.

Sway, sway... Man, it sure is swaying like crazy.

There was no way I dared to look down. If I did, I would probably collapse on the spot.

But still, the rope bridge was only 10 meters long. We'd somehow inched our way over half that distance already, so I felt like if I just kept my gaze fixed on the back of Ai Fa's head, I could make it through this somehow.

However...

"...Hmm. The vines are fraying," Ai Fa nonchalantly stated, which caused the logic and calm in me to get together and fly off into the distance.

"Gyah!" I yelled out and hugged Ai Fa's torso tight, putting my weight on her. The bridge swayed back and forth, and it felt like my feet were going to slip off of the logs.

"Ah! Gyah! Waaaah!"

"You fool! Let go of me! Do you really want to die, huh?!" Ai Fa angrily roared, here voice echoing throughout the ravine.

It was like rifles giving a salute, signalling the start to what would be a very long day.



Chapter 1: Genos Post Town

1

“Genos” referred to one of the territories in the Western Kingdom of Selva. It was at the easternmost tip of the kingdom’s vast territory and a bit to the south, a frontier town at the base of the undeveloped Mount Morga.

Still, even if it was classified as the “frontier” of Selva’s territory, it was extremely close to the friendly Southern Kingdom of Jagar and Eastern Kingdom of Sym, making it very important in terms of trade and distribution.

Furthermore, it had a warm climate and plenty of water, making it a rich and fertile land.

The so-called “city of stone” referred to the castle town at the center of the domain. It was protected by solid ramparts, and apparently you needed a pass in order to come and go there.

To the north was an orchard run by the nobles, and to the south, the plantations run by tenant farmers spread far and wide.

And splitting that Genos domain and Mount Morga in half was a stone highway, running straight across from north to south. As you walked along that road, there were plenty of residents of the domain working away on either side.

Between the castle town and the plantations, there existed a smaller, more open town where a great many travelers and merchants were free to come and go: the Genos post town.

◇

“Whoa...” was my first reaction, as I was unable to formulate a proper response to what I was seeing.

After conquering that terrifying rope bridge and walking just thirty minutes, the world suddenly opened up before me.

Considering our route here from the Fa house, we couldn’t have walked more than about an hour in total. Honestly, it didn’t even seem all that different from

our trip to the Ruu house. But in spite of all that, the world had completely shifted.

“This sure is a shock... It feels like I’ve stepped foot in a whole other world...”

I had finally regained my words, but that irrelevant comment was the best I could manage. Still, the world around me had just undergone that great of a transformation.

“What are you surprised about? We people of the forest’s edge are living there in order to protect the Genos domain’s fields from giba. It only stands to reason that the Genos land spreads out nearby on our western edge, doesn’t it?” Ai Fa responded, looking more than a little displeased, but her cold hard logic simply couldn’t restrain my astonishment.

The people of the forest’s edge made a living by running about the forest in fur cloaks, hunting giba. So how was Ai Fa able to so easily accept this cultured domain existing right next to the settlement of such daring hunters?

Naturally, the buildings were still made of wood. They weren’t all single-story, though, as most of them had a second floor. Some of them used stones and mortar too, and they just looked sturdier all around.

There was white stone paving laid out at our feet, in the form of a highway. It was roughly ten meters across, and was surrounded by crowded buildings on either side, which continued straight off into the distance to the north and south.

More importantly, though, it was packed with people. There were all sorts of folks about, wearing more than just hunter’s garb.

There was a slightly chubby man in a little hat, yellow vest, and baggy, cream-white pants hurrying along with a large basket on his back. There was a sexy girl (though not quite as much as Vina Ruu) sashaying along gracefully, her chest covered, a loose shawl resting over her shoulders, and a long cloth wrapped around her all the way from her waist to her ankles. There was a large man lumbering by wearing a camel-colored cloak made from some other animal than a giba, and he had on a loincloth and leather sandals, plus a hatchet and a leather bag hanging from his waist, making for an outfit sort of like that of the people of the forest’s edge.

There were just so many different folks around that I could never describe them all one by one, even if I tried.

There was a skinny old man wearing what looked like a turban and a long, dark gray robe, kids running around in shabby looking clothes, half-naked brawny men carrying things around on their backs, and men hiding their faces under the hoods of leather cloaks.

The majority of them had tan-white skin like ivory, not so different from Japanese people, though they looked to mostly have a bit darker of a hue. Their hair color wasn't just limited to black, though. Most of them had blackish brown or chestnut colored hair, and they all had deeply chiseled features that made them stand out from the folks back home.

Plus, there were people mixed in that had reddish white skin, as well as those who were even darker skinned than the people of the forest's edge.

Everyone was hurrying down the road, taking care not to bump into anyone's shoulders.

Rather than the variety of people and buildings on display, though, I was more shocked by the way they were all mingling together.

"Whoa, what's that?!"

There was an object poking out roughly a meter above the crowd, bobbing up and down as it approached us.

"A totos bird," Ai Fa said as if it was nothing special.

It was an absolute monster of a bird that must have been three meters long, like if someone had enlarged an ostrich even further. In fact, just like an ostrich, it had a long neck, a round body, and thick legs... but its whole body was coated in dark brown plumage. There was a leather strap around its sharp beak which connected to handles at the base of its neck. The one pulling on them was a large dark skinned man wearing just a hat with cloth around it and a loin guard. And there was luggage held in place with cloth on either side of the massive bird's body.

"There's nothing but inns on this block. The booths that sell food are further to the north."

“Hey, hold on a minute, Ai Fa!”

I instinctively reached out and grabbed Ai Fa’s hand as she prepared to plunge into the crowd.

At first she turned around with a look of anger on her face, but that quickly shifted to shock and she drew close.

“What’s the matter, Asuta? Your face is completely pale. Are you feeling unwell?”

“I’m alright. I’m fine, but just... give me a minute, okay?” I responded, closing my eyes tight while feeling the warmth of her fingers.

My head felt like it was swaying back and forth, and it felt hard to breathe. I could feel my heart pounding hard, and the veins in my forehead throbbing at the same rhythm.

My logic was refusing what it was seeing. It was just way, way too different of a world.

I mean, the forest’s edge was plenty separated from how things were back home. A clan of folks who wore their prey’s pelts and hunted animals out in the forest was the sort of thing I could only imagine in fiction.

But, how should I put it...? They wielded metal weapons, built houses of wood, and prepared food in a stove, so they definitely had some plenty fine culture there. But they lived in tune with nature, and honestly it felt more to me like I had wandered into some unexplored region in the depths of the jungle rather than another world.

This post town was different, though.

The buildings were still made of wood, but the ground was paved with stone, which looked to be carefully maintained. The people didn’t have eyes that burned like those of beasts, and seemed to enjoy peaceful lives, but they still moved about in a hurry.

The sight was familiar to me. It really closely resembled the world I came from.

I’m sure there wasn’t electricity running through town, and their

metalworking techniques probably weren't all that advanced. Their culture was probably around the same level as it was in the Middle Ages. And yet, it definitely resembled my world.

And it was because of those similarities that it felt so alien.

This wasn't the city of stone, just a rustic post town sprawled out alongside the highway... and yet, it was definitely a town. And the people living here weren't hunters, but rather townsfolk who made their living through trade.

Seeing that similarity to my old world threw me into great confusion.

This definitely isn't the world I came from. I was thrust into a whole other world that I don't understand. I can't... ever return back home.

"Asuta." I could feel something strongly gripping my neck from behind, pulling my body in close, and bringing a mouth to my ear. "Are you alright? If you're feeling unwell, you should lay down for a bit. You... you're so pale it looks like you're on the verge of dying."

"I-I'm fine. I'm just a little dizzy..." I responded half unconsciously, then went ahead and finally opened my eyes again.

Ai Fa's blue eyes were staring me from up so close that I was little shocked.

My nose had been paralyzed by there being so many people nearby, but now Ai Fa's aroma was flowing into it. Perhaps because she no longer manned the stove, the smell of meat on her had grown a bit weaker. It was the sweet smell of fruit, and a strong refreshing herb aroma, and it was the most pleasant scent I could imagine. And bit by bit, it cleared away the numbness from my head.

Now that I think of it... I still don't know where that sweet part of her smell comes from...

The aroma of lilo and the powerful scent of pico, as well as that of meat and fat, was something I smelled coming off every person and house at the forest's edge. This sweet scent, though, didn't seem to come from anyone else.

Just what is it? It's a strange scent... I think it's from some sort of fruit, but why can I only smell it on Ai Fa...?

As I felt a hand grip mine tight, that thought suddenly flew from my head and

disappeared.

“Are you really alright? Don’t push yourself. Can you see me?”

“I can... I really am fine. I’m alright now.”

My whole field of view rapidly grew clearer.

Everything but Ai Fa’s eyes had been blurry, but now I could clearly make out her facial features. Her slender nose, her smooth brown cheeks, her little pink lips, and her blonde bangs dangling over her forehead were all clearly burned into my retinas, and I was starting to feel the warmth from the fingers on her right hand touching the back of my neck.

As I felt the firm sensation of the stone path under my unsteady legs once again, I knew that I had finally pulled myself back to reality.

“The light seems to have finally returned to your eyes. What exactly just happened, Asuta?” Ai Fa asked, removing her hand from my neck and stepping back. She kept on holding my hand though, which brought some relief to my still-exhausted heart.

“It’s a little hard to explain. The feel of this post town is kind of like where I came from... But even though it’s similar, the whole townscape and people around are completely different, so everything got all jumbled up in my head.”

Ai Fa furrowed her brows, looking like an elementary schooler who’d been presented with an especially baffling problem.

“I don’t quite get it, but you looked terrible. Please try not to worry me so.”

My eyes darted about unintentionally in response to that rather direct statement, only for Ai Fa to give a “Hmph” and gently let go of my hand.

“If you’re feeling better, then we’re heading for the street stalls. Make sure not to get separated from me.”

“Got it. If it comes down to it, I’ll just grab you from behind again.”

Seeing that I had recovered enough to joke around like that, Ai Fa gave my leg a merciless kick.

2

The townscape didn't continue on for quite as long as I expected. After less than a ten minute walk the wooden buildings suddenly disappeared, only to be replaced by an even more jumbled flea market of sorts. The land seemed to be cleared out pretty far to the sides around the highway stretching off into the north, and there were plenty of shops aimed at travelers set up there, some being wooden stalls with roofs over them, while others were simply set up by spreading out their goods atop a cloth on the ground.

"Wow... This sure is something."

The majority of the goods being sold were foodstuffs, with most of those being vegetables. I could see all those countless different vegetables from the Ruu pantry spread out here. The lettuce-like tino that helped me out last night, the thick ginkgo-esque pula, the bright red one that looked like a mix between a pumpkin and a tomato, the massive burdock that was bigger than me, and the creepy one that looked like a coiled snake... they were all here.

Since these shops were part of a post town alongside the highway, naturally their main clientele was travelers. They were also selling stuff like some huge chunk of grilled meat that I didn't recognize, fur cloaks, wooden and metal bowls, pots, daggers, and bows and arrows.

I was also frequently spying those giant totos birds like the one we ran into earlier, and nobody seemed to treat them like they were anything unusual. I even saw some pulling a massive wagon, so I guess they were treated like horses and oxen from back in my old world.

My head was still feeling a bit dizzy, but rather than feeling terror, I was currently looking at everything with curiosity in my eyes.

And then, finally, I realized something: Here in this post town, Ai Fa was attracting more attention than I was.

There were all sorts of people wearing all sorts of outfits here, so I could see how I sort of blended into the crowd. But still, I would think that'd also mean Ai Fa wouldn't be too out of place here either, with her wild outfit and everything. I mean, there were plenty of people with fur cloaks around, and it didn't exactly

seem rare to spy someone with a blade dangling from their hip. Plus there were a good number of women dressed in even more risky, revealing clothes, and I just spied a guy wearing some sort of feline pelt over his head rather than one from a giba.

But in spite of all that, there were a whole ton of gazes on Ai Fa, and most of them didn't seem all that friendly.

One old-timer scowled at her and then looked away. A girl looked positively frightened and hid behind a stall. A man grinned and whispered into the ear of the guy next to him. Some folks even seemed to get frightened and adjusted their paths to detour around us.

Apparently, in this place Ai Fa was even more abnormal than I was. Of course since I was right by her side I got some attention too, but it was more like I was picking up her leftovers than anything.

It really is like a single wolf being loose in a flock of sheep...

Despite all of this, Ai Fa just kept silently walking on ahead. She didn't look to be in a particularly bad mood, nor was she trying to intimidate anyone. No, she was just like a leopard out in the wild gracefully strolling along.

Naturally, when you were talking about a crowd of this size, there would be some who don't know their manners. It was only occasionally, but I spied scoundrels drinking in the middle of the day and laughing up a storm, scarred men in leather armor who looked to be conspiring, and folks loudly complaining at merchants. But even they didn't seem to be getting as many chilly glares as Ai Fa.

It can't be... Do people seriously have this much contempt for "giba eaters"?

That thought made me seriously irritated. No, scratch that, I could feel some rage really boiling up inside.

I had heard that the people of the forest's edge had come from the Southern Kingdom. So was everyone here a citizen of the Western Kingdom? But regardless, the people of the forest's edge had dedicated their souls to the Western god for 80 years now, so didn't that make them true and proper comrades?

As someone from another world, I just didn't get it. I didn't understand, but still, it definitely pissed me off.

While those thoughts were running through my head, Ai Fa stopped in front of a particular stall and said, "We're here."

It was a small wooden stand, with a curtain hung overhead to ward off the rain. There was a withered old person seated there, and I couldn't quite make out if they were a man or a woman. Despite the fact that it was pretty nice out, they had on a cloak with a hood pulled over their head, and they had all sorts of decorations on their fingers and wrists, which looked like they were meant for some sort of spell. Yeah, this was seriously one unusual old person. From what I could see under their hood their face frankly looked like it had collapsed, and that creepy toad-like visage soon broke out in a grin. They seemed to be blind in one eye as it had gone white, while the other was a pale green, which was fixed on us.

"Giba horns and tusks, is it? How many?"

I still couldn't tell their sex, even after hearing that voice.

And apparently, this place wasn't actually a shop where goods were sold. Aside from the countless different animal pelts dangling from a pillar behind the old-timer, there didn't look to be anything that could reasonably be for sale.

"Four giba worth," Ai Fa replied, pulling a jangling necklace from a hidden pocket inside her cloak as she did so.

Giba each had a set of horns and tusks, so that meant with four giba worth she was handing over 16 of the things in total. However, Ai Fa had hunted five giba in this half a month alone, plus she received nine blessings from the Ruu clan, so there were surely plenty of horns and tusks left in her cloak.

The elder took the necklace from Ai Fa and carefully examined each and every tusk and horn carefully with their one good green eye, running their trembling fingers over the smooth white surfaces, before eventually breaking out in an eerie grin.

"Looks like there are some rather big ones mixed in here, aren't there? Did you take them all down yourself?"

“That’s right.”

That must have meant that the nine blessings were still safely stowed inside her cloak. She probably was just moving through them in order of how old they were, but that news honestly made me a little happy to hear.

“That certainly is something. After all, strong hunters like you form the cornerstone of our lifestyles...” the elder said while leaning over behind the counter. There was a light jingling sound, and then the old-timer reappeared holding a small cloth bag and three little metal rods. They’d gone pretty black from oxidation, but they were probably made of copper. They were about 10 centimeters long, two wide, and they were crushed flat to a thickness of around five millimeters. There seemed to be some sort of insignia in the middle, but the elder’s fingers were in the way so I couldn’t see too well.

“This is just a little added tip from me. The rest is four whites and eight reds, which you can go ahead and count.”

Ai Fa took the bag and then dumped out the contents on the stand.

They were the same sort of rods the old-timer was holding... No, they were actually more like small planks than rods. Anyway, those little metal planks spread about with a jingle. With that I could finally see the insignia clearly, but it was just a sort of spiral symbol that didn’t mean anything to me.

Ai Fa’s graceful fingertips moved over the metal planks, checking them.

Four of them were a dull silver color, while eight were a sort of black-brown color.

“...Yes, this all seems to be in order.”

“Well then, take this too, alright?” the elder said, adding the three brown planks they were holding on top.

“Much obliged...” Ai Fa quietly muttered, and then put everything back into the bag.

“It seems to have gotten rough around these parts lately, so make sure nobody snatches that from you. Geez, those folks in the castle only seem to think about exploiting us. Don’t they know the saying that you can’t get eggs

from a dead kimyuus?”

Sorry, but I don’t know it, either.

“Well then...” Ai Fa said, and turned around.

As I went to follow her, a hoarse voice called out from behind, “You’re from town, but you’re dressed like a giba eater, aren’t you? I’ve never seen anyone like that before. Did that pretty-faced hunter girl violate you or something?”

So even someone who did business with the people of the forest’s edge like this old-timer was a racist, huh?

I was pretty damn annoyed, but I let my natural sociability take over and gave a thumbs up.

“Giba are crazy delicious. Make sure you try having some if you ever get a chance, alright? Well then, excuse me...”

With that I turned my back to the stall and found Ai Fa waiting for me two meters away.

“What are you doing? Don’t get separated from me. It’s like you have copper dangling around your neck, you know? No one would be foolish enough to steal horns and tusks at the forest’s edge, but this is a domain of the city of stone.”

“Yeah, there certainly do seem to be stones under our feet.”

I gave the path a kick, making a little clunk sound. Now that I thought of it, these shoes actually seemed to be getting pretty worn out...

“Next up is the aria and poitan,” Ai Fa said as she resumed walking.

It sure seemed like the traffic was slowing down for some reason. The stalls were also getting sparser, causing my field of view to open up a bit.

“Ah...”

Another unbelievable sight had come into view.

Beyond the greenery growing past the stalls on our left, a wall made of gray stone was now clearly visible. It should still be pretty far off, but even so, the gaps in the trees were completely filled with that gray color.

“That’s the stone wall around the Genos castle town,” Ai Fa said in a voice

devoid of emotion, sparing little more than a glance in that direction. “The nobles control this land of Genos from inside those walls.”

“Hmm...”

It wasn’t as if I had any sort of premonition. I just had a bit of a negative feeling towards the place, knowing that the folks who lived there pushed the current social hierarchy on the people of the forest’s edge. They were forbidden from gathering the blessings of the forest or farming, and could only hunt giba. And then, they were looked down on as “giba eaters” on top of all that.

The people of the forest’s edge were tasked with protecting the Genos fields from giba, so they were undoubtedly responsible for part of the town’s prosperity. So why was it that the townsfolk looked coldly on them? But the people of the forest’s edge had no complaints and instead took great pride in that fact, but I just plain couldn’t accept that.

The nobles in the city of stone, huh...? I hope I never have to go anywhere near them, I thought to myself while walking down the highway alongside Ai Fa.

As I was no god, there was no way I could have known... I was thrust into this other world and carved out a little place for myself at the forest’s edge, but in the not too distant future, I would end up facing off against those who held the greatest power in the Genos domain, inside those very stone walls.

3

“Ooh, a customer from the forest’s edge, huh?” the old-timer said with a tight smile as he turned to face us.

The shop was a small produce vendor near the northernmost tip of the bazaar. It was a rather plain store, consisting just of vegetables laid out atop a cloth on the ground, as well as the unstable-looking framework of a roof. However, there was also a large wagon behind that man running the shop, full of a mountain of sacks that looked full to bursting.

“This is a big help. If you folks don’t come by at least once every three days, my aria will go bad.”

The old-timer had a white cloth like mine wrapped around his head, a loincloth, and sandals on, but that was it, and he looked to be a bit past his 40s. His eyes, hair, and stubble were all a dark brown, and his skin was a yellowish brown. He had a rather large physique but looked pretty well in shape, and seemed like he was probably pretty damn strong. Faced with Ai Fa, though, the look in the man's eyes was downright cute, like that of a pomeranian.

"So, you want aria and poitan today, too? The price is the same as always, so how much do you want?"

"Two whites worth of poitan, and two whites plus four reds worth of aria."

"Ooh, that's quite a lot! I wonder if I can close down with that...?" he said with the sort of flattery you'd expect from a shopkeep, but his smile remained just as taut as always. It seemed that when it came to dealing with the people of the forest's edge, his fear won out over his contempt.

"Two white and four red worth... Alright, go ahead and check it," he said, thumping down a sack that looked like it was made of hemp on the grass next to his stall. Just when I was thinking that was a lot, he brought out another similarly sized sack. They were big enough that, well, it wouldn't look for Santa Claus to have one slung over his shoulder.

"H-hey, Ai Fa, just how many days of food did you just buy?"

"20," she replied while sitting down in front of the bags.

It seemed important to check the numbers here, too.

Earlier, Ai Fa had exchanged four giba's worth of horns and tusks for currency. I had been told that one giba would allow you to get ten meals worth of food, so with two people, that meant 20 days worth would be 40 meals in total. The numbers all seemed to check out.

But still, you needed three aria and two poitan a day per person, so that would mean 60 aria and 40 poitan for 20 days, right? And then for two people, that meant it would be 120 and 80, yeah?

"Hey, hold on! Why did you buy that many? It'll take an hour to get back home from here, right?!" I yelled out, but then I recalled that they didn't have clocks at the forest's edge. I wonder if there are any here in this post town? I

got the feeling that they'd probably at least have a sundial.

That didn't matter at all, though. By my estimations, each aria and poitan weighed around 200 grams. That would mean 120 aria would total up to 24 kilograms, while 80 poitan would work out to 16 kilograms. I couldn't think of it as anything but reckless, carrying that much weight all the way from this post town back to the forest's edge.

"Just hurry up and count. If I keep sitting here forever, then nobody else will come close, right?" Ai Fa muttered while counting the poitan. The old-timer pretended he didn't hear that, and just went about reorganizing his display.

It was too late for me to talk about reducing the amount, both to the side who sold them and the one who did the buying.

I gave a sigh, and then took a seat next to Ai Fa.

"Alright. There's no issues with the poitan."

As Ai Fa stuffed the poitan back into the bag, I set to work splitting the aria into groups of ten on the grass.

However, when I hit the thirtieth one, I stopped.

"Hey, old-timer, this aria seems mushy."

The middle-aged man shot me a dubious look, but he didn't come any closer.

"There's no way that's right. I harvested those just the day before yesterday, after all. It'll be nice and crisp for another month."

"No, see, it's got a weird feel to it. You can't tell just by looking at it, but I'm certain it's rotten on the inside."

"P-please stop making such false accusations! You may be a person of the forest's edge, but you've still got to respect this post town's rules."

"The post town's rules...? Hey, Ai Fa, are you not supposed to lodge a complaint when someone tries to sell you something rotten like this?"

I made sure to check that with Ai Fa in a quiet voice just to be safe, and he was pretty far away, but apparently the old-timer still picked it up. He still didn't come any closer to us, but now he was clearly pissed.

“Hey! I-I worked hard to grow that aria! And I made sure to eat all the poor little ones that didn’t turn out right myself! I-If you have a problem with my aria, then never come to my shop again!” the old-timer shouted, a real do-or-die look on his face.

Ai Fa took the aria from my hand while furrowing her brows.

“Hmm... It does seem a little soft, I guess.”

“No, this thing is already unusable. Hey, old-timer, I’m going to split this open now, so if it’s rotten could you replace it with another one? And if there’s nothing wrong with it, I’ll be sure to apologize.”

“D-Do what you want!” he yelled back, so having his permission I went ahead and took out the knife that was a memento from Ai Fa’s father, then gave it a clean slice down the middle. Sure enough, the bottom half had turned all purple and soggy. There was no way that I could use that part of it.

“See, it’s rotten, right? Sorry, but could you grab us a fresh one?” I said, holding it out so he could see. The old-timer had been turning red, but now his broad face went completely pale.

“M-My apologies! I was in the wrong! I’m begging you, please forgive me! I-I’ll give your money back, too! Please, just spare my life!” the old guy said, bowing down on the ground and holding out the two colors of currency.

He seemed to be in a pretty unstable state mentally, there.

“Ai Fa, what should I do in a situation like this?”

“Who knows? But I won’t accept food that I haven’t paid for.”

“Yeah, right? Um, could you stop bowing, old-timer? We don’t want the money, just the aria. My teeth aren’t exactly tough enough to chew through something like that, after all.”

While thinking to myself that Donda Ruu could probably bite through it no problem, I placed my hand on the old guy’s shoulder.

“A-are you not a person of the forest’s edge...?”

“I wasn’t born one of them, but as you can see, the forest’s edge is looking after me nowadays.”

The old-timer was looking up at me like a pomeranian staring at a pitbull.

“You’ll forgive me...?”

“Yeah, as long as you switch this aria out for a fresh one.”

His hands trembling with fear, the man grabbed an aria from the ones lined out on top of the cloth, and then offered it to me.

“Right, thanks. Um, maybe it’s none of my business, but even if you have pride in your work, you should make sure to check it properly before getting mad, right? I mean, that’s just better for business.”

I think I heard him mutter, “I do when it’s not a person of the forest’s edge...” but it was so quiet that it was hard to say for sure.

There weren’t any problems with the rest of the aria, and the numbers checked out, so I placed them back in the bag. With that, Ai Fa pulled out a dried vine from inside of her pocket (probably that fibaha stuff) and tied the two bags firmly shut. Then she wrapped the excess vine around her hand and slung the bigger bag, the one with the aria, over her left shoulder.

“Let’s go.”

She was taking 1.5 times as much, so even a weak chef like me couldn’t exactly go complaining. And so, while sighing at the thought of just how I’d deal with the rope bridge, I played the part of an unseasonable Santa Claus.

“Well then, excuse us. We may be back in another 20 days, so we’ll be counting on you then.”

The old-timer shot a listless glance our way, but he didn’t respond. I still didn’t know if I should feel sorry for him, or indignant.

“Now then, considering the bonus the old woman from the exchange counter added, we have a good bit of excess to spend. Is there anything else you need, Asuta?” Ai Fa asked, stopping as she weaved between the stalls.

I immediately placed the bag by my feet and replied, “We need fruit wine.”

“Fruit wine can be bought for one red each, so we would still have five left even if we purchase two.”

“Hmm... I don’t have a feel for the currency rate at all. What about rock salt?”

“Rock salt costs three red pieces... Right, well, since we’re now using it for other things than drying meat, we should buy it sooner than later.”

It was a bit of a strange feeling, discussing shopping with Ai Fa in the midst of all these people. It wasn’t unpleasant in the least, of course.

“So, that leaves two red, huh? Well then, should we buy some of that tino and pula that we had at the Ruu house yesterday? I don’t know how much we could get, though.”

“I’m fine with anything. I leave it to you.”

Looks like it was left to me, then. As I tilted my head and wondered what to do, my stomach gave a cute little gurgle.

“Ah! How about a snack from a stall, Ai Fa?”

There were plenty of places around selling a variety of light snacks, not just smoked meat.

However, Ai Fa opened her eyes wide in amazement.

“If you’re hungry, then I brought along dried meat.”

“No, it’s just that this is the chance to eat something we usually can’t, because we’re here at this post town, right? Ah, or would that break one of the taboos of the forest’s edge or something?”

“We are free to use the money obtained from giba horns and tusks however we please. I can’t imagine any person of the forest’s edge ever using it in such a manner, though.”

I see. The idea of enjoying food was hardly a thing at the forest’s edge, so I suppose that much should have been obvious.

“Then I guess you’re not interested either, huh, Ai Fa? Well then, I’ll just behave myself and buy some tino, I guess.”

“I don’t especially care. I said I leave it up to you, didn’t I?”

“Hmm. But we bought all the aria and poitan with your savings, so I would feel awkward wasting it all on my own.”

“What are you saying? I’m your clan head, you know,” Ai Fa said, her eyes gently narrowing.

I felt bad not even paying one of the nine horns and tusks I had, but maybe it was all related to her dignity as head of the clan? And Ai Fa had been in a nice calm mood up till now, so I definitely didn’t want to wreck that.

“Well then, how about if I just use one of the plates for new vegetables, and then the other on a snack? To be honest, I’m really interested in the cuisine of this world.”

With that, Ai Fa’s brows unwrinkled and she said, “Do as you please.”

It was like I was playing her role of being the pampered one. Maybe that was the right sort of relationship between a clan head and the one who mans her stove, though. As a proud Japanese male, though, it hurt my pride a bit.

Still, seeing Ai Fa look satisfied sure did make me feel at ease.

4

“Well then, shall we get going? We’re short on time, so you should pick out what you want to buy as we walk.”

“Yeah. I’ll go ahead and grab whatever smells tastiest.”

We backtracked along the path that took us to the produce vendor, picking up rock salt and fruit wine along the way. The rock salt got thrown into my bag, while Ai Fa held the fruit wine from a dangling string.

When we passed another stall that sold vegetables, I stopped and gave it a careful look. It would be a bit risky to go with any ingredients that I wasn’t familiar with, so I just decided to stick with tino and pula. The girl running the place was looking everywhere except at me, but when I asked her she responded that I could get two tino or three pula for one coin. Apparently they were both significantly pricier than aria and poitan.

I looked up at Ai Fa to check if it was really alright to buy such extravagant goods, only to get back another, “Do as you please,” even though I hadn’t said anything.

And so, I decided to go with the tino. Tino had a texture like cabbage or lettuce, while pula had the bitterness of a bell pepper to it. Both of them would be great to have around, but the tino definitely seemed a lot more flexible.

Once I shoved the two tino into it, my bag ended up every bit as packed as Ai Fa's.

"Let's go," Ai Fa said, turning around, and I staggered along after her.

The bags may have been similarly stuffed, but the density of their contents was totally different. But even while carrying around 24 kilos, Ai Fa's stride didn't break in the least, just as I'd expect.

Her core strength must have seriously been something else. That strength surely came from being a hunter, running around out in the forest where footing was bad.

Now then, last up was my long-awaited snack...

"Ah, should we go with that?" I asked, stopping beside a stall that served smoked meat. Even just walking by, the smell seriously hit me. And there was a little girl waiting for something even now, so it seemed to be doing pretty well.

Ai Fa gave me a nod and strolled up to the stand without a hint of hesitation.

"How much does this cost?"

The one manning the shop was a middle-aged woman with black-brown hair, light brown eyes, and some definite meat on her bones. Her plump face twitched a little as she looked at Ai Fa.

"A small one costs one red, while a big one costs two."

"In that case, give me one small."

The woman looked down at her own hands, not even bothering to respond.

I peeked into the stall over the head of the girl who was in front of us. There was some sort of light brown paste simmering inside of a fairly large pot. I still didn't know what it was other than that it used bite sized chunks of meat and vegetables, but the smell was simply amazing even from this far away. It was a scent I hadn't smelled at the forest's edge, sort of like garlic.

There was also some ingredient that reminded me of baked poitan piled up beside the pot. They were lighter than poitan, though, and seemed fluffier, too. They looked to come in diameters of both 20 and 30 centimeters, but both were around five millimeters thick. The contents of the pot were then dumped onto one, and the woman squeezed the edges together on top, forming a sort of awkward pouch shape. If I had to compare it to something, well, it seemed pretty similar to a meat-filled manju.

“Here. It’s hot, so be careful.”

“Thank you!” the young girl, who looked to be about Rimee Ruu’s age, happily replied and held out both hands.

I made some space so she could easily pass by, and then the girl energetically turned around... only to stop in place when she saw Ai Fa. In the process, the manju she’d just bought slipped from her hands.

“Whoa there!” I said as I reflexively grabbed it, which was pretty lucky. I mean, if I hadn’t placed my luggage down by my feet, I wouldn’t have been able to even try. “Here. Be careful, alright?”

The girl looked pretty scared, but even so she made sure to give a bow before she took off running with her manju.

“One small, right?” the woman said without a hint of friendliness, and then she hurriedly got mine together. She certainly seemed skilled with her hands, but I couldn’t quite say the same for the way she handled customers.

After paying for it, the two of us walked over to an open space and had a seat.

“Hurry up and eat. Once you’re done, we’re leaving.”

“Right. Well then, thanks for the food!”

This was my first time encountering an unknown dish in this world since that first night with Ai Fa’s giba stew. Back then the smell was amazing, but then my expectations seriously got dashed. So this time I made sure not to let my guard down as I worked up my nerve and bit down into the manju.

This taste... Hmm...

“Is it good?” Ai Fa asked, despite not sounding especially interested.

The only response I could come up with is, “It’s okay.”

How should I put it...? It just seemed so incredibly safe. It wasn’t delicious, but it certainly wasn’t bad, either. It was just incredibly... okay.

Just as I’d figured from the smell, it was quite heavily spiced. It was like a blend of garlic and cilantro, which was a pretty strong flavor, but I didn’t exactly hate it. The meat was really white, and seemed to have the fat shaved off of it entirely. Its flavor was kind of light, like chicken tenderloin.

The red and green vegetable chunks were rather soft, like a heated aria. Actually, there may have been some aria in there, too.

The brown paste that brought everything together was probably made by boiling down vegetables. It was a little sweet but not overwhelmingly so, and none of the ingredients seemed to be clashing.

That white stuff that looked like baked poitan really was softer than the more familiar ingredient, just as I had guessed at a glance, but it had a denser feel like the naan you see in Indian cuisine rather than being like the outer layer of a manju.

Those ingredients came together in harmony, joined hands, and made for an incredibly well behaved flavor.

“Yeah, well, it made for a perfectly normal meal, and it was enough to satisfy my curiosity.”

It was the right size so that it wouldn’t be too much even to eat all of it, and it wasn’t the sort of food that would ever wreck your stomach either. Though if I had to say, it definitely cost too much considering you could get a container of fruit wine, two tino, or four poitan for the same price.

“Do you want a bite too, Ai Fa?” I asked, only to get an immediate, “I don’t need any,” back.

“Hmm, I just can’t accept the way that folks look down on the people of the forest’s edge as ‘giba eaters’ while being satisfied with such uninteresting food. I mean, giba meat is way tastier than this.”

“Have you forgotten the taste of that stew from your first night with me,

Asuta?”

Of course I hadn’t. That was just because the people of the forest’s edge didn’t know about stuff like bloodletting, though. But the people of Genos had lived here even longer than the people of the forest’s edge, and yet they never thought to try eating giba meat?

“It’s said that before the people of the forest’s edge moved here 80 years ago, giba overflowed from the forests and attacked peoples’ fields. At the time, giba were the most terrifying symbol of calamity imaginable to the people of the Genos domain.”

They were a symbol of calamity, so they didn’t warrant eating? What a waste.

“I’m not aware of the details, but I don’t believe there was any shortage of meat. Apparently there were plenty of those giant totos birds around to eat, too.”

“Gah, people eat those? Well, it doesn’t exactly seem like it would be all that disgusting, though...”

“At any rate, the townsfolk feared giba. And now, they fear the people of the forest’s edge, who kill and eat them. And nowadays the folks around here have half forgotten how frightening giba can be, and we have become the symbol of their terror... Or at least, that’s what Granny Jiba said.”

“What the heck? So it really is just unwarranted discrimination. Why don’t the people of the forest’s edge try to do anything about it?”

“Because there’s nothing inconvenient about being feared.”

Is that so? But I didn’t think it was exactly all that great, not taking the time to clear up the misunderstanding...

I wasn’t exactly happy having reached the conclusion that the people of the forest’s edge being given the cold shoulder was at least partially their own doing. I started to offer a rebuttal of, “But...” only to notice something strange out of the corner of my eye, causing me to abruptly stop.

It was the girl from before. She was seated at the edge of the highway on the other side, biting into the same sort of manju I had. If that was all I wouldn’t

have thought anything of it, but when I looked her way, she turned away quickly with a speed that made me think of a squirrel. Yet, a moment later she turned her head back towards me.

Since the stone highway was 10 meters across, I couldn't quite make out her expression in detail. She definitely seemed to be pretty interested in me, though.

"Someone with pale skin like you in the garb of the forest's edge makes for an unusual sight," Ai Fa said emotionlessly, having long since noticed the girl.

"I see," I replied, observing the child out of the corner of my eye.

She looked to be around Rimee Ruu's age, seven or eight years old at most. Her olive brown hair stretched down to her shoulders, and her skin was a yellowish brown. She wore what looked like an orange dress rather than clothing that wrapped around her, and leather sandals on her feet.

Her body and limbs were more slender than Rimee Ruu's, and she looked seriously adorable as her cheeks filled up with manju.

I went ahead and tried looking her way once again. Taken by surprise, the girl froze in place, not even able to avert her gaze. When I went ahead and broke out in a smile, the girl seemed to get a bit of manju stuck in her throat, but then I think I saw her weakly smile back.

"Just what are you doing?"

"Ah, I was just thinking what a cute girl she was."

"..."

"Huh? Ah, no! What's with that look? Just what sort of person do you think I am?!"

"How annoying. Stop getting bent out of shape. Do you like children...?" she suddenly asked out of nowhere, hitting me with a real emotional shoulder throw.

"I guess if you're asking, I'd have to say I'm fond of them, yeah. I mean, a lot of little kids used to come to my old man's place along with their families."

"I see..."

Huh? Did I read the flow of the conversation wrong?

I thought back on how she muttered last night that she didn't want me disappear, looking totally unlike her usual self, causing me to get a little flustered. Maybe it'd be best if I avoided talking about my old world for a while...

Feigning that I was calm, I said in a cheery voice, "Still, I sure do feel down when I think of carrying this heavy load all the way back. Don't you think 20 days' worth is a bit much?"

"I always buy this much. Or are you saying..." Ai Fa started, averting her eyes, "That you don't need food for 20 days?"

"Hey, Ai Fa..."

I fortunately stopped myself short of yelling out, "I have no idea what's going to happen to me in the future, you know!" I couldn't find anything else to say instead, though.

Ai Fa gently closed her eyes, as if she didn't want me to see what she was feeling.

"Ai Fa, I..." I started, deciding that I needed to at least say something. I went and opened my mouth, still not having gotten my thoughts in order, only to get cut off by a totally unexpected bellow.

"If you've got some sort of problem, then come out and say it! You're all proud citizens of the city of stone, aren't ya?!"

It was the voice of a young man who had clearly lost control of himself. Then, there was the violent sound of something being broken.

A ton of people screamed out, including the young girl from before.

"W-what the...? What's going on?"

I didn't quite understand what was happening. But at the very least, there were the remains of a busted wooden box and plenty of yellow fruit I didn't recognize scattered about the highway, with two men scuffling in the center. Everyone else seemed to be distancing themselves so as not to get wrapped up in it, but that girl was down on the ground, looking utterly terrified.

“H-hey, that’s...?!” I started to say, only for Ai Fa to slowly rise to her feet. She was glaring at the two men with an incredibly dangerous look in her eyes.

It was the middle of the day, and two men were fighting in the middle of the street... And one of them was clearly a young man from the forest’s edge.

5

I didn’t recognize the young man at all, but he was clearly a person of the forest’s edge. He had on a giba cloak, as well as a vest and loincloth with complex swirling patterns. There was a knife and blade dangling from his waist, as well as a necklace of giba horns and tusks around his neck. His loose and disheveled hair was blackish brown, he had darker skin, and his fiercely glowing eyes were blue. He wasn’t overly tall, but his body was covered in well-toned muscles, and he had a stern face like a lion dog statue.

The youth from the forest’s edge had picked up the rotund shopkeep by his collar, and was squeezing so tight that the man’s plump face was turning beet red.

“Asuta, you stay here,” Ai Fa said, then she steadily paced towards the crowd. For some reason, she still had the fruit wine dangling from her hand.

Still, I couldn’t just sit there and quietly watch. I may not have been suited for breaking up that fight, but I couldn’t just leave that poor girl to her fright, right?

Ai Fa was pushing her way forward straight through the crowd, but I went ahead and circled around and snuck my way towards the girl.

“Hey, why don’t you try saying that again? Who’s a ‘stinking giba eater,’ huh? You said it was ruining the taste of your food, didn’t you? Why don’t you say that all again clearly so I can hear, you high and mighty stone city dweller?”

It sure seemed that young man from the forest’s edge was good and drunk. He had a container with a familiar design in his hand, his face was red, and he was raising his voice, and I couldn’t imagine that was all just due to him being mad.

Guess there are folks out there who chug down wine in the middle of the day

like this, huh? But what about his work hunting giba? I thought to myself as I hurriedly approached the girl.

When I was about five meters from the goal, though, fresh screams of astonishment filled the air. This was accompanied by the ominous sound of something breaking with a crash.

The man from the forest's edge had thrown away his wine and drawn his knife. Well, I call it a knife, but it had a thicker blade like a hatchet, and looked about 20 centimeters long. It was a real dangerous tool meant for severing giba pelts and meat.

He went and drew it! That's just way too violent, no matter what!

There wasn't any more time for taking a relaxed detour, so I started full on running, pushing aside the onlookers.

The half-eaten manju fell from the girl's hands, and was soon trampled to paste under the feet of the scuffling men. That was just how close they were now.

Then, there was suddenly another new sound: Ai Fa hit the man in the back of the head with the fruit wine container she was holding. It shattered to bits, filling the street with even more of the sweet smell of fruit wine.

The man fell down, turning a somersault... And I fortunately somehow managed to scoop up the girl before he tumbled on top of her.

"If you like wine that much, then you can have mine too, you fool!" Ai Fa said with a voice like steel, cutting through the commotion in the air. "There's a strong taboo against causing a disturbance in the city of stone, you know. You bring shame to the forest's edge."

The man was squatted down and holding the back of his head, and he tilted his neck to look up at Ai Fa. Those dull eyes were swirling with such hatred and bad will that it was hard to look at them.

"You're that female hunter from the Fa clan, aren't you...? D-Do you think you'll get off lightly after treating me this way...?"

"Who exactly broke the laws of the forest's edge, here? I have nothing to be

ashamed of."

"Ooh... What a cool woman..." someone muttered, but it wasn't the man from the forest's edge. Rather, it had come from some guy I didn't recognize who had kneeled down beside me at some point.

"This is my first time seeing a female hunter. If that necklace is the real deal, then she sure seems to be good at it."

"W-What the...? Who are you?" I asked the man following me as I moved away from the center of commotion, so I wouldn't get in Ai Fa's way.

"Who, me? I'm just a passerby. I was planning on protecting that poor girl there, but you ended up beating me to it."

He seemed like an aloof, easy-going guy, somehow. His ivory-white skin hadn't been tanned much at all by the sun, his hair was a golden color that was rare both here in the post town and at the forest's edge, and his eyes had a bit of a violet color about them.

His long cloak wrapped around his body so I couldn't quite make out his physique, but he had a seriously long face, and he seemed rather tall, too. Right now he was stooped over, though, and looking me over.

His hair on both his head and his face had grown out in a way that made me suspect it was from pure laziness, and he had drooping eyes and a prominent nose. Those unusually colored eyes of his strangely seemed to have both a mature calm to them as well as a childish look of innocence, which made it really hard to guess how old he really was.

"Ooh, it looks like those lazy officials are finally on the move, huh?" the man said while pointing a lanky finger. I looked in that direction, and saw some men carrying long spears pushing their way through the crowd, looking seriously like they were caught flat-footed and scrambling to respond.

"You all, what are you doing in the middle of the street?!"

They had on leather helms and chest plates, and had yellowish brown skin and some rather sturdy looking physiques. From their imposing equipment, they seemed to be guards or something in charge of protecting the tranquility of this post town.

I gave a sigh of relief, but then I saw the tips of those spears pointed Ai Fa's way too, causing me to freeze in place from astonishment.

The girl started quivering in my arms.

"People of the forest's edge, huh...? Hey! You're supposed to be firmly forbidden from causing a disturbance here in the post town! Are you trying to trample all over your agreement with Duke Genos?!"

The guards didn't appear to have the same sort of excessive fear of the people of the forest's edge as everyone else. Looking at his eyes and face, though, the man sure didn't seem calm and composed in the least.

"...I was simply dealing with a fool who broke our taboos, in order to protect that agreement," Ai Fa emotionlessly stated while glaring at the tip of the spear thrust right up against her nose.

The guards' gazes turned towards the man now, who was still sprawled out on the ground. And with that, the man broke out in a truly repulsive sneer.

"Guards from the city of stone... I'm Doddo Suun of the Suun clan," he said, a voice like venom slipping through his wicked lips out onto the street. "You all are just petty officials, right? But I'm part of the Suun clan, which rules the forest's edge... Arrest this woman."

The guards all exchanged confused looks. Seeing that, the man calling himself Doddo Suun continued on, "This woman suddenly attacked me in the middle of the street! Can't you tell just by looking around? I didn't do anything wrong! This woman is the idiot who broke the taboos of the forest's edge and the agreement with Genos!"

"The Suun family, huh...?" one of the soldiers said, pulling back his spear and leaving me even more astounded.

The weapons pointed Ai Fa's way still hadn't been lowered.

"Woman, come with us to the station. Then, we'll carefully investigate your crimes. Son of the Suun clan, we have to ask that you accompany us as well. Will you comply?"

"Yeah, of course," Dodda Suun replied while licking his lips and getting up off

the ground.

I felt like I couldn't help myself any longer from yelling out, but someone beat me to the punch: the girl I was holding in my arms.

"That's not right! The one causing trouble at the start was that man, and the woman just stopped him!"

Silence descended over the street once again. There was an eerie feeling in the air, somehow.

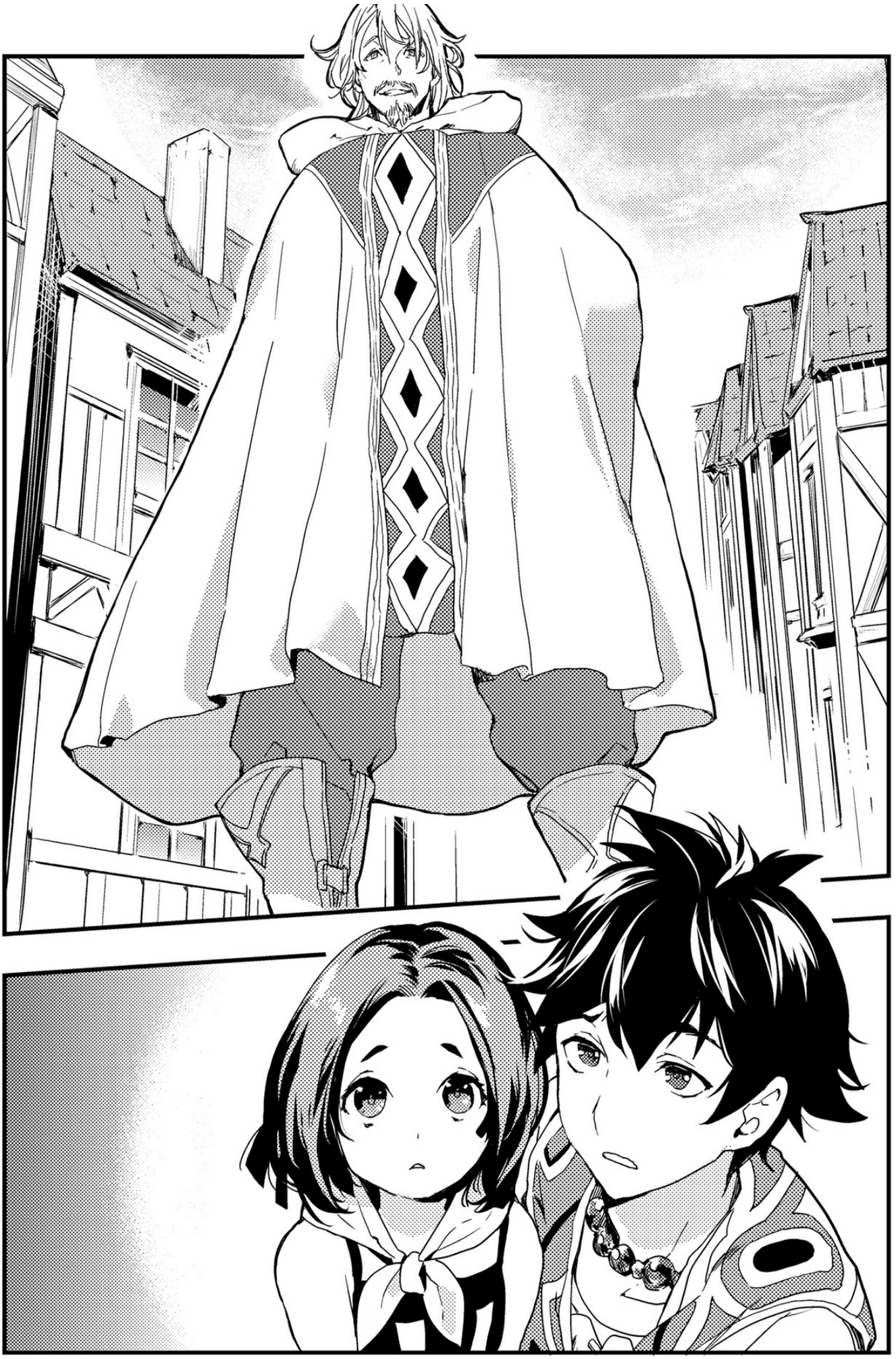
"What is this about, son of the Suun clan?" one of the guards asked Doddo Suun with a grim expression on his face. Doddo Suun just sneered again in response, though.

"That's just slander, naturally. I mean, you can go ahead and ask the folks all around us. It was such a commotion that I'm sure plenty of people saw the whole thing, right?"

And then, something unbelievable happened: The onlookers who had just been burning with curiosity all made faces like it was too much of a pain to deal with and started leaving.

"Oh, well this is no good at all," the man in the long cloak muttered in a nonchalant voice.

When he finally stood up straight, I saw that the man really was over half a head taller than me. In terms of height alone, he must have been around Donda Ruu's size. But he had a stooped back and sloping shoulders, plus he was pretty darn skinny after all, so he gave off more of the impression of a sort of lanky praying mantis.



All that didn’t matter at all right now, though.

“Damn, what the hell...? Ah, right, what about the old guy he was hassling?”

“That guy went and fled the moment that drunkard was sent flying, not even bothering to say thanks. It sure is a tough world, huh?”

I gritted my teeth, and then walked up towards the guards. At the same time, Doddo Suun’s dull eyes glanced my way. Then, a repulsive look of joy crossed his face.

“Guards of the city of stone... Apparently that kid there has been living at the forest’s edge, despite being a foreigner. He’s probably that fool’s comrade, so I bet he forced that girl there to say those ridiculous things about me, right?”

Now the tip of the spear that had been pointed at Doddo Suun was now facing my way.

“Hey, put that girl down.”

Instantly, the girl clung to my neck tight.

“No! My name is Tara, and this guy saved me! That man is the bad guy, so why won’t you believe me?!”

“That’s what we’re going to look into at the station. Now be a good girl and just head on home, alright?”

“I don’t want to!”

“Good grief. It’s thanks to all that red tape you throw up that you can’t earn respect from the people on the streets, right? I mean, I can’t exactly praise you all when you’re trying to avoid the hassle of chasing down the truth because it’s a pain dealing with the people of the forest’s edge.”

Naturally, that had come from the man in the long cloak butting in.

Thanks to everyone jumping in ahead of me, I actually hadn’t even had the chance to get a single word in, yet.

“And just who the heck are you? This has nothing to do with you, so you should butt out.”

“I may not have been involved, but I saw the whole thing from start to finish.

And wouldn't you say my testimony has more credibility and value precisely because I *wasn't* involved?" the man started in an arrogant tone, then continued on, "A man who was selling fruit here was together with a man who appeared to be another merchant and his friend. He pointed sneakily at that man from the forest's edge, and they laughed for one reason or another. With that, this man's face changed color and he grabbed that merchant-looking fellow, knocking down these boxes of fruit into the road as you can see. The fruit seller fled, and this man yelled out, 'If you've got some sort of problem, then come out and say it! You're all proud citizens of the city of stone, aren't ya?!'"

A giggle slipped out of the girl in my arms. I mean, that just went to show how little seriousness there was behind the man's voice.

"Huh? Was my impression of him bad? Well, whatever... So then, they started going back and forth. 'I-I didn't say anything!' 'You liar!' 'I mean it!' 'I heard you! The ears of the people of the forest's edge aren't like your rotten ones!' 'S-Somebody, save me!' 'Hey, why don't you try saying that again? Who's a "stinking giba eater," huh? You said it was ruining the taste of your food, didn't you? Why don't you say that all again clearly so I can hear, you high and mighty stone city dweller?' Anyway, I guess that's about how it went."

Amazingly, this lanky man seemed to have memorized that entire exchange.

The guards clearly looked to be at a loss, while Doddo Suun glared at the man with eyes like those of a wild dog. And Ai Fa... Ai Fa looked more puzzled than I had ever seen her.

"Then, this man tossed aside the container of wine he had been holding and drew the knife from his hip. Over there you can smell the sweet remains of that wine, and the knife fell over there, you see?"

Doddo Suun and the guards looked down by our feet, clearly taken aback. Sure enough, there was a knife without a guard lying there on the ground. And the empty leather sheath was still attached to Dodda Suun's waist.

"That was when that woman got involved. She smacked him in the back of the head with her own container of fruit wine like *bang!* Then, she calmly said, 'If you like wine that much, then you can have mine too, you fool!'"

The girl couldn't stifle her giggles any longer. Well, I could totally understand that, from the way he was mimicking everyone's voices.

Though Ai Fa had just looked puzzled before, she was now wearing a clear scowl.

"And then she continued on, 'There's a strong taboo against causing a disturbance in the city of stone, you know. You bring shame to the forest's edge.' Well, that should be enough, right? Does that help out with your investigation?"

The guards turned back towards Doddo Suun again, looking annoyed.

"Son of the Suun clan, that's what this man has to say, but—"

"It's all nonsense! This is clearly slander!" Dodda Suun yelled out in a shrill shriek, his blue eyes going red.

He was obviously out of his depth.

"Then you'll need to offer an explanation more consistent with the facts, right? I'm sure nobody here but you would deny what I said. If you're calling me a liar, then could you explain what the circumstances were behind this wooden box being broken, this fruit wine container shattering, and your knife lying there on the road?"

His words were biting, but his expression and tone were just as easy-going as always.

It wasn't like with Jiza Ruu, where I couldn't read how he was feeling. This man was simply staying calm and composed. He just said what he was thinking, not getting particularly worked up in the least.

"...Very well. We'll look into this more thoroughly at the station. You all will need to come with us."

"Huh? Well, that's going to be a problem. I mean, I've got an appointment with Duke Genos after this," the man said, nonchalantly throwing out an unbelievable statement. The guards' eyes opened so wide that it looked like they were about to pop out of their heads.

"I'm already past the arranged time, so being any later would be simply

inexcusable. If you need me there, could it wait until after I've explained the gist of the situation to Duke Genos?"

"Just who are you...? Uh, sir?"

"There's no need to be so tense. I'm just an upstanding member of the common townsfolk. A bodyguard who protects travelers, Kamyua Yoshu."

With that, he presented the necklace he had on from inside his long cloak. It was a stone with a complex coloration like agate dangling from a silver chain. It really did look quite chic.

"We just happened to have a bit of a relationship, so when Duke Genos needs a bodyguard for a trip to the capital, that favor falls my way. It's not like I have nobility, much less the crown, so there's no reason to be so afraid around me... Ah, this is a pass into the Genos castle town that Duke Marstein Genos awarded me."

Then, he pulled out a long silver plate-looking thing that shone far more radiantly than the coins from before. It was about the size of a credit card, and had an elegant design I didn't recognize finely carved into it, as if to prove its honored and proper lineage.

When the guards saw that plate, their faces turned ghostly pale and they froze in place.

As all sorts of different gazes fell upon his lanky body, the man named Kamyua Yoshu gave a relaxed, pleasant smile.

6

"Man, I'm just glad things got settled peacefully, right?"

For some reason, that oddball Kamyua Yoshu guy was still hanging out talking to us, even after the guards left with Doddo Suun. We were currently where we had decided to sit before, in the empty space between the stalls. Ai Fa was as deadpan as usual while I'm sure I looked seriously troubled, but of course Kamyua Yoshu was shooting us a relaxed smile.

"...Allow me to offer my thanks for saving me from that predicament," Ai Fa

reluctantly forced out, then she gave a similarly strained bow.

“Don’t be so formal,” the man responded with a chuckle. “And it’s not exactly like I saved you, there. I just reported what I happened to see. That’s the obvious course of action as a citizen serving the Western God Selva, right?”

We avoided getting dragged off to the guards’ station or whatever. Doddo Suun was the only one who got taken along, but it wasn’t exactly like he was going to be punished for his actions.

“Well, it’s all good, right? I mean, a man of the forest’s edge was acting outrageously, and a woman from the same place got him under control. It’s definitely bad that he drew a blade, but there’s no reason to make this a bigger deal than it has to be, right?”

With Kamyua Yoshu’s words, the curtain had been closed on the whole incident.

In fact, Doddo Suun was only taken away under the pretext of temporarily keeping an eye on him until he sobered up.

The guards’ eyes seemed to be firmly telling us, “At any rate, you should hurry up and go back to the forest’s edge.”

And yet we didn’t do that, and were instead still here talking to this suspicious character.

“Um... Didn’t you have some important business to take care of too?” I asked, only for Kamyua Yoshu to shake his head.

“Don’t think so,” he responded. “Oh wait, do you mean the thing about Duke Genos? That was a fib. I really do have an appointment with him, but it’s just that I was told to show up for dinner, so there’s no hurry there at all.”

He really was a crafty fellow.

As a shrewd smile broke out on his long face, Kamyua Yoshu suddenly glanced to the side.

“Still, that sure was quite a commotion. You’re not hurt anywhere, are you, little lady?”

“Nope! He saved me, so I’m fine!”

Naturally that had come from that Tara girl from before, and she was talking about me.

She smiled wide as she stuffed her cheeks further with the manju she was holding. Her first one had been trampled underfoot by Doddo Suun and that other guy, so Kamyua Yoshu had bought her this one as a replacement.

“Ah, right, there’s this, too...” he said, reaching inside of his long cloak. And then like magic, he produced a container of fruit wine.

He pulled out the stopper with his bony finger and took a swig, then placed the stopper back in and held it out towards Ai Fa.

“As you can see, it’s not poisoned. If you’d like, you can have it.”

“...I won’t accept your charity.”

“So stiff! I was moved by the way that you protected the order of this post town and the laws of the forest’s edge, not even thinking about what would happen to you! Isn’t that reason enough?”

Ai Fa was looking seriously annoyed.

Kamyua Yoshu, meanwhile, just kept on smiling wide as he gave Tara’s little head a pat.

“It’s the same for Tara here, too. I was deeply impressed by the way that she worked up the courage to try to help out her savior, so I felt like treating her to a kimyuus meat bun. Is it good, Tara?”

“Yeah! It’s really good, Mr. Kamyua!”

“Mister, huh...? Well, I guess I am almost 30, I guess.”

He still wasn’t 30? That actually shocked me a little. Still, if he just did something about that wild, unshaven face, he’d probably look pretty young... Or no, maybe he wouldn’t? I mean, that easy-going, aloof expression and way of doing things really made him feel like much more of an old-timer.

“So, how about it? Won’t you go ahead and take this fruit wine? Or are you upset because that scoundrel won’t be answering for his crimes? I just figured since he was part of the Suun clan, it was best not to let the matter get further out of hand.”

Those words seriously caught me off guard. Was this guy aware of the state of affairs at the forest's edge, too?

"Hmm? Did I say something strange? I may not have ever been to Morga's forest's edge, but I've at least heard the name of the clan that runs the place. And I'm quite fond of this post town, so I've seen plenty of people of the forest's edge... It's just, this is my first time talking to any of you like this," he said, the mouth under his long, slender nose breaking out into a big grin. "And that I get to do so with a beautiful female hunter like yourself brings me even more joy. I would really appreciate it if you'd accept this fruit wine, as a token of my admiration for that beauty."

I nervously glanced over at Ai Fa to see the expression on her face. Ah, yup, there were indignant wrinkles in her brow forming above her nose.

"Huh? Did I say something to upset you? I wasn't just praising your appearance. I was including your noble actions in that beauty I was complimenting, too."

Ai Fa didn't say anything.

"No good, huh? Then how about you?"

"W-What?"

"I'd like to show you my respect and admiration for the way that you saved Tara from danger quicker than me, Kamyua Yoshu, the Northern Whirlwind. Will you accept it?"

I couldn't exactly just say, "sure" and take it, considering the circumstances. Also, what the heck was that "Northern Whirlwind" thing about?

"Ah, that's a nickname my buddies use. I mean, this hair color is pretty rare here out west, you know? And I was born in the north."

Ai Fa's expression shifted a bit upon hearing that. She still had her usual stern wildcat-esque glare in her eyes, but now she looked straight at Kamyua Yoshu.

"You were born in the Northern Kingdom of Mahyudra, Kamyua Yoshu?"

"You can just call me Kamyua. Actually, now that I think of it, I still haven't heard your names. Could you tell them to me? I don't even care if you lie."

Man, speaking like that is just going to rub Ai Fa the wrong way. As Ai Fa's eyebrows raised, she stated, "I'm the head of the Fa clan, Ai Fa."

"Ah, and I'm attached to the Fa clan, too. My name's Asuta."

"Ai Fa and Asuta, huh? Those are nice names you've got there. Yeah, I was born up north... My mom came from Mahyudra, while my dad was from Selva. Relationships between those two countries have been seriously strained for over a hundred years now, but I have blood from both of them running in my veins. I spent my youth up north, and then when my mom died I came to live here in the west. Well, you can't exactly get proper work with a background like mine, so instead I live by selling my skill as a bodyguard."

Kamyua Yoshu had a somewhat slender but rather long blade just casually lying by his side.

"Now that I think of it, your hair looks a lot like mine, Ai Fa," he threw out there as he looked at Ai Fa, his purplish eyes lighting up and narrowing just a bit. "I'd heard that the people of the forest's edge were descended from folks who fled from the south to the west. I can't imagine there'd be much blood shared between the distant north and south, but is there some sort of reason behind that hair of yours?"

"Not especially so. People are occasionally born with this sort of hair color at the forest's edge, and my mother's was the same as mine."

"Is that so? My mom and I shared a hair color, too," Kamyua Yoshu responded with an easy-going grin, but Ai Fa looked away like she found that annoying.

Somehow, I caught on to the fact that she wasn't quite her usual self.

"Well, at any rate, I've been interested in the people of the forest's edge for a while now. I mean, there aren't many folks out there who change the god they offer their souls to during the course of their lives, you know? I feel a one-sided sort of kinship as a result. That's why I'm so glad that folks like you ended up being the first people of the forest's edge that I talked to."

Ai Fa remained silent.

"So, just what do you want with us, anyway?" I finally asked, since Ai Fa didn't seem likely to say anything. "I'm incredibly grateful to you for helping us out of

that tough spot, but we have work waiting for us back at the forest's edge. If you don't mind, we'd like to get going soon..."

"Is that so? That's a shame. Well then, shall I cut to the chase? The truth is, I've currently got a job to guard a caravan of Genos merchants on their trip to the eastern kingdom. I'd like to be allowed to pass through the settlement at the forest's edge along the way."

I was seriously caught off guard, but Ai Fa reacted calmly, bluntly stating, "Matters such as that are all handled by the Suun clan, as the leaders of our people."

"Yeah, I'm of course aware of that. But I don't exactly feel like asking them after today's unfortunate run-in with that boy from their clan. I mean, I just can't trust them," Kamyua Yoshu lightly threw out there, making a face like he wouldn't even hurt so much as a fly. "You see, I've actually been advising Duke Genos on the matter for a while now. Whenever there's a quarrel here in the post town, the Suun clan is always wrapped up in it. The people of the forest's edge are supposed to be stubborn, sticklers for the rules, and closed off, but the Suun clan keeps acting openly like scoundrels, which can't be good for the duke, either, so..."

"It was the people of the city of stone who caused the Suun clan's depravity," Ai Fa stated, cutting off Kamyua Yoshu. There was a blue flame burning lightly in her eyes. "The people from the capital granted the Suun clan riches. As a result, they tossed aside their pride as people of the forest's edge and don't even hunt giba. They revel in wine, laze about, and give themselves over to sensual pleasures. That's all the responsibility of the people from the capital."

"By 'fortune,' do you mean the reward money that's delivered once every three months? That's supposed to just be a trifling amount, though."

"That's why the Suun clan has kept it to themselves. They use it to live lives of idle amusement."

I was probably the most shocked of anyone present.

Tara just sat there with a blank look, having finished eating her manju, while Kamyua Yoshu gave a nod that seemed to say, "That stands to reason."

“Well, I figured it was something like that. So, even though it’s supposed to be a reward for protecting the Genos domain from the threat of the giba, none of that is making it to the folks who are working diligently, while the clan leading the people are living idly and lining their pockets, huh? I’m surprised that hasn’t led to a riot...”

“We don’t need charity from the city of stone. We hunt the giba so that we can keep on living.”

“How honest and full of integrity! But still, you really are overly rigid...” Kamyua Yoshu said with a bit of a strained smile this time around, then he rustled his unkempt blond hair. “If you perhaps want to restore order to the forest’s edge, I may be able to help you out, you know?”

Ai Fa didn’t respond.

“Of course, I’m not just talking about recklessly going after the Suun clan. After all, no matter what I may say, they’re still the ones leading the forest’s edge. And it would be a real serious issue if the people of the forest’s edge lost the ability to hunt giba after losing their leaders. The giba would come overflowing from Morga’s forest again and overrun a whole ton of fields... That’s why even if Duke Genos is vaguely aware of the Suun clan’s depravity, he hasn’t taken any drastic measures.”

My clan head still didn’t say a peep.

“And so, I’ve got a question for you. If the Suun clan were to happen to fall from power, is there another family that would be capable of taking charge of the forest’s edge?”

Naturally, the one clan who could stand up to the Suun, the Ruu, came to mind. However, Ai Fa still wasn’t so much as opening her mouth. And she was starting to get more and more of a hostile look in her eyes.

“At any rate, the only exchange between the capital and the forest’s edge has been through the Suun clan, so they naturally avoided bringing up any information that would be inconvenient for them. Besides, those folks from the castle hardly ever show their faces outside of the stone walls. Don’t you think that now that it’s come to this, me and you meeting may act as a new bridge between the capital and the forest’s edge, seeing how I’m someone down on

the streets who also has Duke Genos's favor while you also aren't exactly close to the Suun clan."

"What do you stand to gain from all that?" I asked, but Kamyua Yoshu just smiled back at me.

"What I gain, huh? I mean, we're all citizens serving the Western God Selva, right? That makes us comrades. It only makes sense to help each other out when someone needs a hand, right?"

Ai Fa offered nothing.

"Well, that's my official stance, at least. Just like I said before, I feel a sort of one-sided camaraderie with the people of the forest's edge. Anyway, ultimately, I certainly respect honest folks like you, but I can't say the same towards lazy slobs who drink in the middle of the day and don't even bother trying to hunt giba."

I didn't get it.

I wouldn't go so far as to say he was lying, but I just couldn't tell what this man playing the fool was thinking on the inside in the least. Meanwhile, Ai Fa's eyes were burning with clear refusal and violent emotion.

"Kamyua Yoshu, you're a citizen of the city of stone. Therefore, if you choose to try to make a move against any people of the forest's edge... that makes you the enemy of my people."

"Hmm... Even if it's the corrupt Suun clan?"

"If the Suun clan needs to be punished, then the people of the forest's edge will do so. The shame of the forest's edge should be purged there. And also... It is the people of the stone capital who caused the Suun to fall to such depravity," Ai Fa stated, her words like blows. "I can't trust... people from the city of stone."

Her gaze burned with her pride as a hunter. But even so, Kamyua Yoshu still just shot her back a relaxed smile.

"Honest, and full of integrity... You truly are beautiful, Ai Fa."

"...Are you mocking me?"

“Why would I be mocking you by calling you beautiful? Ah, look, now Tara’s all frightened, you see?”

I suddenly looked that way, only to see that sure enough, Tara was clinging to Kamyua Yoshu’s arm and trembling.

“There’s no helping it, I suppose. Let’s call it for today. If we’re careless, that son of the Suun clan may suddenly pop up again, after all.”

“...Today shall be the end of it. We won’t meet tomorrow or the day after, either.”

“I wonder about that... Opportunities are something you need to create, after all.”

With that, Kamyua Yoshu picked up his longsword in his right hand and took the young girl’s hand with his left, then he stood.

“Ai Fa and Asuta, I’m glad to have met you today. I’ll be leaving this fruit wine as my gratitude for this meeting, so if you have no need for it, feel free to simply return it to the earth. Well then, I’ll see you again...”

Chapter 2: Price and Determination

1

“Ah, I can see the place where I wash stuff. It finally feels like we’ve made it back home, now,” I muttered while breathing heavily. With that, Ai Fa turned towards me despite having been silent the whole way back.

“What’s with that voice of yours? You have the endurance of a ten year old child, Asuta.”

“Ooh, at least I don’t fall below Rimee Ruu... And hey, you finally said something to me, Ai Fa!”

Ai Fa immediately gave a “Hmph,” and turned back around, picking up the pace.

“Ah, hold up! At least let me drink some water! My throat’s been parched for a while now!”

I mean, I had walked for nearly an hour through the mountains carrying over 16 kilos of luggage. It felt like the skin had worn away on my shoulder where the vine met it, and my legs and back were trembling. I may have been even more exhausted than back when we built the stoves.

By the way, as for the rope bridge of terror, Ai Fa not only took two trips in order to carry my portion too, she also led me across by hand. Well, I’m sure it was due to not wanting her panicked clan member to suddenly hug her from behind again, but at any rate, it was super embarrassing and I didn’t want Rimee Ruu or anyone to find out.

Anyway, I was granted my chance to rehydrate.

“You really are pathetic...” Ai Fa said, her words stabbing at my heart as I gathered up the water trickling from the rocks and drank it.

Ah, it was like sweet nectar.

And having talked to me for the first time in a while already, Ai Fa shifted her tone a little and then continued on, “...You haven’t asked me anything, Asuta.”

“Hmm? You mean about what that old-timer was saying before? Well, there’s all sorts of stuff that I’d love to ask, but I always talk to you about this world at nighttime.”

While placing my hands on my knees and getting my breathing back in order, I looked up at Ai Fa’s face.

“You’ve been using your own judgment to decide what order to tell me stuff, right? And I don’t want to nitpick your choices. I mean, this world is still overflowing with stuff I know nothing about.”

Ai Fa didn’t say a word.

“But if you’re in a better mood now, then there is one thing I’d like to chat about... What did you think of that guy?” I asked, looking down at my own feet as I did so. The bag full of poitan and tino was sitting there, as well as a container of fruit wine.

Ai Fa left without it, but I figured the fruit wine didn’t do anything wrong, so I carried it along with me. Plus the design was a bit different, so I couldn’t help but be curious about what type of wine was inside.

“He was an unbelievably fishy old-timer, but I didn’t think he was a real villain or anything. I was just a bit curious as to how you felt about a guy like him.”

“...I have nothing to say.”

“Wait, are we getting moving again already? Hey, hold on a second!”

I had no other option here, so I slung the bag back over my shoulder and took off after Ai Fa, huffing and puffing all the while.

Even though she was carrying more than me, Ai Fa was walking along totally smoothly.

“If you don’t want to talk then I won’t try to force it out of you, but you seemed pretty on edge back there. Are you bad at dealing with guys like that?”

“...I have no words for anyone from the city of stone.”

“You talked a good bit, though... And wait, aren’t I even more of an outsider than that old-timer? If you try talking to someone, you may find you get along with them better than you expected, you know.”

“...Are you saying we get along?”

“Ahaha! I sort of expected as such, but your mood still hasn’t recovered at all! I’ve been prodding at an open wound all this time!”

“That’s not what I meant to say...”

With that, Ai Fa’s gaze become a bit darker again.

“What’s so strange about me right now?”

“Strange, huh...? It’s just, it seemed like you were thinking about something seriously, I guess? You’ve had a real grave look on your face all the way back from the post town.”

“I don’t know. I think that may have been the first time I’ve talked with a resident of the capital like that, so I’m all mixed up.”

She looked at me with a dark gloom in her eyes, like a lost child.

“What’s so strange about me?”

“No, you’re not strange...” I said. “It’s only natural to feel mixed up after having that sort of a conversation, so you’re not strange at all. I only understood about half of what was being said, but I’m sure it’ll have a big effect on your future... On the future of the whole forest’s edge, right?”

Ai Fa didn’t respond.

“I think I said it already a while back, but that sort of heavy responsibility isn’t yours to bear. If it’s beyond your control, then you should just forget about it.”

Did I go a bit too far, there? But that was half of how I really felt, though.

If what that Kamyua Yoshu guy had said was the truth, then it was possible the Suun clan could lose power while the Ruu clan took charge of the forest’s edge, bringing everything to a peaceful conclusion. But it was also possible it wouldn’t go that way, too.

We still weren’t even all that thoroughly aware of what sort of man Donda Ruu was. If that wild man took over in place of the Suun clan and started acting like even more of a tyrant than they did, I would feel really bad for Rimee Ruu and Granny Jiba, too.

And besides, I couldn't discard the possibility that he had been feeding us nothing but nonsense, either. He knew a bit about the state of affairs at the forest's edge, but it was also possible he was just teasing us on a whim, so I probably shouldn't go believing him so lightly.

That was only half of how I felt, though. The other half of me wanted to believe what Kamyua Yoshu had said. I wanted to tear away the right to lead the forest's edge from the Suun clan. If that happened, there'd be no need to worry about Diga Suun's sneaky, cowardly actions, and besides, we'd ended up with even more bad blood with the Suun clan after today.

That man who called himself Doddo Suun... It would be a close match as to whether he or Diga Suun was more of a petty jerk, but guys who knew so little shame were actually kind of scary. He was drinking in the middle of the day, and then caused a commotion in the post town. I honestly never would have imagined that someone so vulgar existed at the forest's edge.

Those guys had no right to lead the people of the forest's edge... At the very least, I was certain of that much.

Darmu Ruu from the Ruu clan is definitely trouble too, but nowhere near as much as that guy. And if Darmu Ruu's a wolf, then that guy's just a stray dog... Actually, I guess that's pretty rude to stray dogs.

I mean, he was undoubtedly a human being. One who had been afflicted by the poison known as culture, at that.

"...You've been keeping rather silent, haven't you?" a woman's voice suddenly asked. Naturally, it had come from Ai Fa. "You told me not to forget my surroundings, but then you became lost in thought yourself, Asuta."

Every now and again, Ai Fa would make a face that made her look younger than she really was. And every time that happened, I couldn't help but be shaken... So right now, I was seriously thrown off guard.

"No, I wasn't thinking about anything all that difficult. I was just wondering if animals known as dogs existed in this world."

"Dogs? Are you talking about how varb wolves came down to human settlements, and their children got along with man? That's nothing but a legend

of the western kingdom, and could be true or an utter fabrication," Ai Fa said with a frown. "If you want to eat those dogs or whatever, then go to the city of stone. I don't know anything about them," she continued on, looking to the side in a huff. A real, good and proper huff. I felt all jumbled up inside, no longer able to tell if I was more annoyed or just finding her adorable.

"Alright, alright already! Let's switch to a more enjoyable topic, then! Listen, now that the showdown with Donda Ruu is over, I was thinking of tackling a new dish. I mean, my jaw feels like it's going to fall off after so many nights of doing nothing but testing out steaks."

Ai Fa stayed facing away from me, but she glanced over at me out of the corner of her eye.



“...Will it be tastier than hamburgers?”

“I won’t know until I try making it. And hey wait, wasn’t the steak good too?”

“That’s true, but... I really do love hamburgers best.”

“Huh?! Didn’t you say the steak was equally tasty? That’s why I decided it was ready for taking on Donda Ruu, you know!”

“They’re equally tasty... But I love hamburgers more.”

I was prepared to start arguing with her, but I was so caught off guard that I forgot what I was going to say. I mean, I think this was probably the first time I had ever heard Ai Fa say the word “love.” At first she said, “When it comes to food, there is no good or bad taste,” but now she had not only said something was “tasty,” but that she “loves” it, too.

It was such a drastic change that I was frankly left feeling astonished.

“You said your teeth could grow weak if you eat nothing but soft meat, but I chew dried meat too, so there should be no worry, right?” Ai Fa asked, looking down a bit with her head tilted to the side. It was seriously unfair the way that she was pouting and shooting me upturned eyes from the side, too.

It was made all the worse by the fact that she totally wasn’t doing it intentionally, either.

“In that case, I really do love hamburgers.”

“I-I get it. Then we’ll go with hamburgers tomorrow. Just let me take on this new dish for tonight.”

Ai Fa looked down even further, and appeared to be holding back a smile. All I could think was thank god my hands were both occupied with luggage.

Well, we had only just finished that showdown with Donda Ruu. We may have something new to worry about, but there was still nothing wrong with taking it easy for today, at least. We’d recharge our spirits thoroughly, and then we could worry about the thing with Kamyua Yoshu tomorrow.

As that thought passed through my head, we finally reached the front of our house, only to find a new cause for concern waiting for us there, in the form of

a man and woman who really suited one another.

It was Gazraan Rutim and Ama Min, who were set to be married in six days.

2

“We’ve been awaiting your return, Asuta and Fa Clan Head Ai Fa.”

Gazraan Rutim deeply bowed his head. He had a bit of a square face, as well as some rather large facial features. He wasn’t particularly handsome, but he had a real sincere, solemn look about him.

“I’m glad we were able to meet with you. It was about time that we would have had to return to the Rutim house.”

Ama Min gave a bow, too. Her black-brown hair was done up in a rather beautiful manner, and despite her rather calm appearance she also seemed pretty intelligent and energetic, too.

“Gazraan Rutim and Ama Min, just what did you come here for?” Ai Fa asked with a look of concern, still not having fully gotten into clan head mode, only for the pair to smile wide in sync.

“We came here to make a request of the two of you.”

To be honest, I was getting nothing but a nasty premonition from that.

If it was about manning the stove at their wedding, then we already firmly turned them down through Donda Ruu when we were leaving this morning. But even so, I still had a bad feeling.

“At any rate, we’ll be conspicuous out here. Come inside the house. Asuta, take charge of his steel,” Ai Fa said, grabbing the poitan bag from me with the hand that had fruit wine dangling from it, and then she hurried on inside the house.

While feeling more than a little flustered, I accepted the blades that Gazraan Rutim was holding out.

“A-After you.”

These were our first guests since Rimee Ruu had visited a good while back.

And honestly, I had no idea how I was supposed to handle them.

Ai Fa came back out of the pantry pretty soon and seated herself near the middle of the main hall, then our two guests sat down in front of her an appropriate distance away. Feeling lost, I ultimately decided to sit down next to Ai Fa, still holding the blades I had been handed.

Nobody complained, so I guess I didn't break any of the forest's edge's etiquette.

"First off, I would like to offer my thanks. I'm truly grateful for last night's splendid banquet, Ai Fa and Asuta of the Fa clan."

"Yes, it really was an amazing meal. You made our precious celebration into a night of joy that we will never forget."

Having such an earnest and sincere pair offer me their thanks like this was making me want to bow right on back at them.

And actually, having just returned from the hustle and bustle of the post town, I was seeing these two in a whole new light compared to last night, like a symbol of honest rustic simplicity.

Did Gazraan Rutim always have such an unwavering gaze? And did Ama Min always have such a refreshing expression on her face?

I don't know if it was down to lineage or just personal differences, but the Ruu clan had a lot of folks who were absolutely overflowing with energy and life, while I felt more of a quiet dignity from these two, with strength like that of a large tree that had taken root in the earth.

Ai Fa sat with one knee up in the air and stared at the pair, having finally regained her usual harsh expression as head of the clan.

"We were glad to have fulfilled our responsibility, manning the stove in the place of the Ruu clan... But what is it that you want to request of us? If it's in regards to the banquet for your wedding, we already turned that down through Donda Ruu," Ai Fa said, showing no intention of beating around the bush.

The pair replied, "Right," and then bowed their heads together. "That's exactly what we wish to discuss. My father Dan Rutim made that request even

though it goes against the customs of the forest's edge, but when we heard about it..."

"We thought it was an amazing idea, too. Just how wonderful a night would it be if that came to pass?"

They weren't married yet, but these two were already perfectly in sync.

I could see an incredibly earnest excitement and joy in their expressions and gazes. Plus, they just seemed honestly concerned that their thoughts and feelings may not get across.

This was a different matter entirely, though.

The Rutim clan held the greatest power of all the families under the Ruu clan, and Gazraan Rutim was the heir to the main house. It was just too great of a responsibility, manning the stove for his wedding.

I just had to rely on Ai Fa's decisive personality to take care of this.

"But it would make no sense for a member of the Fa clan to handle such a task, when we have such weak ties to the Rutim and Min clans. A clan's happiness should be shared amongst its members... Asuta said as much last night, too."

Yes, that's exactly right. I went ahead and gave a nod to show my agreement.

And then, Gazraan Rutim's unshaking gaze fell firmly on me.

"Asuta. You may belong to this Fa house, but I heard that you come from another country entirely, rather than this forest's edge. And that you made your living as a chef."

"Right. I was just a trainee helping my old man out with his work, but that's correct."

"I don't know much about exactly what kind of work that may be. But it's something akin to those folks who sell meals in the post town, is it not?"

"That's right. I don't think there's anything wrong with that assumption."

"Well then... Will you sell that cooking of yours to us?"

"...What?"

I didn’t quite get what he was saying. Sell my cooking...? How, here at the forest’s edge?

“What I’m saying is, we would like you to man the stove for the banquet not out of good will, affection, or duty, but rather in exchange for an appropriate price. We would like to buy your cooking-related techniques, knowledge, and labor for just one night. That is our request.”

I was just... so shocked that I couldn’t speak.

“As you are part of another clan, Asuta, we won’t ask you to celebrate our union. And we only just met, so it would be even more ridiculous to try to force you to grant us this favor out of kindness and good will. As such, we thought the only path towards gaining your aid would be to pay you for it.”

“T-That’s... But...”

“I intend to offer as much of a payment as I can. That’s how much value the food you make is worth. We want to share the happiness that we all experienced last night with the rest of our family, as well as the clans related to us. And for that, we need your aid, Asuta.”

As he said that, Gazraan Rutim removed the necklace of horns and tusks around his thick neck. There were far more there than there were even on Ai Fa’s. Ama Min gave a gentle smile and removed hers as well. It had the usual three horns and tusks that were given to girls by their fathers.

They were offering me those necklaces, the proof of their pride as a hunter, and the love of their parents.

“At the banquet, it will not just be the Rutim, but over 100 guests from those under the Ruu clan. This alone would obviously not be enough to pay for all of their meals. However, I will get one horn or tusk from each person there, as a blessing. Added together with Ama Min’s that would make 200 in total. And if that still isn’t enough, I’ll be sure to hunt down enough giba to make up the difference, so—”

“Hold on! I can’t accept this!” I yelled out, gripped by something practically akin to fear. “I-I’m nothing but a half-baked chef in training. I’m not suited to such a big job... Plus, I mean, I’m an outsider. I still don’t even properly

understand the ways of the forest's edge, so entrusting me with something so important is—"

"You've already shown us your strength. We don't have any unease about this matter."

"S-Strength...? Do you mean the steak from last night? Like I said yesterday, that was made by the strength of their family alone. I could teach you how to cook it right away, so—"

"But to create a taste like that, you need to start when the giba is captured, right? You said as such last night."

"I'll teach you! How to bloodlet, and dissect it, too! I've still only prepared three giba myself. And you've been skinning their pelts to start with, so it shouldn't take long for you to pick it up."

"You also repeatedly mentioned that 'hamburger' dish last night, too..."

"You're better off not knowing that taste. If you become obsessed with it, it could become a poison to you."

"I'd like to think that we're not so foolish," Gazraan Rutim said with a smile. It was a powerful grin, overflowing with manly confidence and gravity. "If I was told something was a poison to hunters, I would never put it in my mouth. However, you mentioned that it would be perfectly fine eating it a thousand or even two thousand times, didn't you, Asuta?"

"T-That was just speculation. I don't really know. But I definitely don't think it's wrong to say that if you eat nothing but soft foods, your teeth and jaw will grow weaker."

"If someone were to corrode their own soul after hearing those words, it would simply be down to their own weakness. That's nothing for you to worry about. That's why you told us so, isn't it?"

Gazraan Rutim placed one fist gently on the ground, and then leaned forward. I couldn't spot any changes in the steadfast expression on his face. Maybe this young man had been quietly growing, too.

"I am a hunter. And so, I can't explain it as well as you likely could, but... At

any rate, I would like to share this feeling with everyone. If your joy in living is heightened, then the strength of your wish to keep on doing so grows in turn. The joy that you brought us has given Ama Min and I strength. And I want to convey that strength to everyone else. Not just the Rutim, but also the Ruu, the Min, the Rei, the Maam, the Ririn, and the Muufa... Because we are in a time like this, we must become stronger, and carry out our duty as hunters."

By a time like this... was he talking about how corrupt the Suun clan had become? I didn't exactly feel like I could wrap my head around all that at the moment.

"L-Like I said, I'll teach you all my techniques. Bloodletting, dissecting, baking poitan, and making the steaks from last night should all be plenty manageable in six days. And I already taught the women of the Ruu clan some of this..."

"What about that 'hamburger' dish?"

"There's no reason you need to force yourselves to learn how to make that one. It takes too much effort to prepare, so it's not a fitting dish for the people of the forest's edge, right?"

"My apologies, but it's up to we people of the forest's edge to decide whether or not it's suited to us. No... You're a member of the Fa clan and one of our comrades, so I shouldn't be talking down to you like that. But still, it's up to us to decide which path we wish to take."

"No matter how much effort it may take, if it can grant us even greater happiness, then that's what we wish to do," Ama Min chimed in, speaking up for the first time in a while. "What should we do to live? Gather firewood, dry pico leaves, and skin pelts? Our ancestors thought on what they should do to live more full lives back when they decided to live here at the forest's edge 80 years ago, and passed that down to us through our parents. One day, I will give birth to Gazraan's child... and I want to show that child how to live an even happier life."

"No one would dare let their other work fall short while taking extra time cooking. But if someone wants to take that extra effort, then that's because they believe there is worth and value in doing so. People who see that much meaning in hamburgers will put in that effort, and those who don't will not.

That’s all there is to it.”

“No, but why are you so insistent about the hamburgers when you’ve never even eaten them?”

“It’s not like we’re fixated solely on them. I just want you to wield the whole of your strength,” Gazraan Rutim stated. “That’s why we’re making this request to you. Not to someone who learned your skills, but to you personally. We would like you to show us the whole of your strength, just for one night. That’s why we want to pay you.”

“Hold on, I...”

I didn’t have any further words. It seemed that I was more confused and shaken than I had thought.

And then, Ai Fa quietly spoke up, having been silent up until now.

“It would seem that Asuta is tired. He apparently has no more stamina than a ten year old child. He used up all of his energy just by carrying luggage back from the post town... My apologies, but could you wait until tomorrow to hear his response?”

“Yes, of course. Well then, Asuta, may I say just one more thing?”

“...Alright.”

“Last night, you said that you wanted to be medicine rather than poison. I think the same from the depths of my heart, that this power must not be poison. But if it can be a medicine, then this power may lead the people of the forest’s edge to greater joy in life, bonds, and strength. It was such thoughts that caused us to hasten here. I hope that if you wish it, our paths shall overlap. Well then, excuse us.”

3

Currently, it was the middle of the evening. We had our chance encounter with Kamyua Yoshu this morning in the post town, and then Gazraan Rutim and Ama Min were waiting for us upon our return, leaving me seriously overloaded. And so, I threw myself into my cooking to temporarily avoid reality.

However, today's menu was super simple. Excluding the baked poitan, it took less than an hour to finish.

In the metal pot, I simmered aria and tino. Then, I sat some extra aria and tino atop a pseudo-rubber tree leaf, for adding in later. I cut the aria into slices and wedges, and the cabbage-like tino into bite-sized pieces. Beside it I placed giba meat, with the three varieties of rib meat, roast, and shoulder meat. I tried to make the cuts around five millimeters thick, which was as thin as I could manage, and then arranged them in a neat circular shape.

Atop a wooden plate was a reddish, sticky liquid. It was a dipping sauce I had made using a fruit wine base. I heated up the fruit wine until the alcohol burned off, and then I fine tuned the flavor using salt and pico leaf. It had a nice, sweet flavor to it that I'm sure Donda Ruu would complain about.

"Alright! It's finished, Ai Fa!"

Ai Fa looked back at me with a face that said, "What is?"

Well, I'm sure from the point of view of the people of the forest's edge, it would look like I had just lined up some raw meat.

"This is called shabu-shabu. You use that boiling water to cook the meat, and then you eat it."

The question mark floating above Ai Fa's head still didn't disappear.

Well, I guess it was simpler to have her experience it firsthand rather than trying to explain it. And so, I pulled out the secret weapon I had prepared for this day.

I had shaved down a nearly scentless grigee branch, making a pair of chopsticks.

"First, you put the meat into the pot like this."

I heard a strange "Wha...!" sound, and when I turned around to look, for some reason Ai Fa's face had turned red and she was covering her mouth.

"What? What is it? I don't think I did anything embarrassing..."

"S-Shut up! What is with that gross way you're moving?!"

“Hmm? This is just how you use chopsticks,” I said, clacking my chopsticks together, only for Ai Fa to go “Wha! Wha!” as her face grew all the more red... Apparently she was just embarrassed by the way she couldn’t suppress her own surprise.

“Moving on... You place the meat in the water like this and then slowly move it side to side, until all of the red is gone. Shabu-shabu. Shabu-shabu.”

“...What is that strange chant?”

“It’s a good luck charm, so that the meat will cook nice and tasty.”

Then, when the rib looked nice and properly cooked, I placed it atop Ai Fa’s wooden plate. And I grabbed some of the aria and tino flickering about inside the pot, too.

“The issue is, it’d be a little tricky to eat the three aria you need a day. Ah, anyway, eat up. If you’re not fond of it, we could switch over to a regular stew.”

She then muttered something inside her mouth. No wait, I knew what it was now: a chant of thanks for the forest’s blessings and towards me. Even then, Ai Fa still looked at the wooden plate with a bit of doubt.

Using her wooden spoon, she scooped up the meat and aria soaked in sauce and chucked it into her mouth.

“Shabu-shabu. Shabu-shabu... Well, how’s the taste?”

“...It’s soft.”

“Well, that makes sense, since it’s rib meat. Here, try out some leg meat next.”

“...It’s harder than it is in the soup.”

“Shabu-shabu. Shabu-shabu.” That was probably enough of that. “Lastly, there’s the roast.”

“...It’s soft.”

“No, um, now that the showdown with Donda Ruu is over, I’m not especially concerned with firmness. If it’s not to your taste, I could switch it over to a soup. What do you think?”

Ai Fa was deep in thought, a serious look on her face. In the meantime, I went, “Shabu-shabu” while boiling my own rib meat.

“You don’t have to worry about it so much. Why not just throw your thoughts out there?”

She still didn’t respond, so I went ahead and tossed my cooked rib meat into my mouth.

Ah, this is *good*.

After more than 10 days of nothing but steak and hamburgers, this sort of boiled meat felt entirely fresh, and I just couldn’t get enough of it.

We had eaten a meat soup at the Ruu house, but there really is a subtle difference between just heating something up and boiling it. Plus, this was shabu-shabu. The aria and tino flavored the soup slightly, then I threw in a bit of rock salt, and there was the fruit wine sauce, but those were the only bits of flavoring, so there was no deception here. But then, there was no need for that, as the giba meat was just that powerful. It was such a rich, direct meat flavor, flowing out more and more as I chewed, leaving me hesitating as to when I should even swallow.

It really was a bit quirky, and I got the feeling it was a bit tougher than pork, but since I cut it so thin there was no issue there. Even when I tried the toughest cut, the leg meat, it wasn’t too chewy at all, instead having a perfect texture.

“Man, this is delicious! Well, that’s what I think, but what about you?”

She still looked to be a little lost in thought, but Ai Fa still responded, “It’s good. It’s just... it feels a little slow, only being able to eat a bit at a time.”

“Ah, yeah, I can understand how you feel. I frequently get pretty tired of it in the back half, too, and just want to chuck it all in. Especially with pork... No wait, giba, which needs to be heated thoroughly till all the red is gone.”

“So why don’t you just do that from the start?”

“Eh? Hmm...No, well, that is one way to eat it. The benefit to doing it this way is that each and every bit comes out nice and piping hot, I guess. To be honest, I

haven’t eaten this dish all that much myself.”

“Is that so?”

“Yeah. I mean, we didn’t serve shabu-shabu at the shop, after all. And we didn’t eat out much, but my mom...” I said, suddenly hesitating without thinking, but now that I’d come this far, I had to finish my statement. “...When my mom was alive, she’d make it now and again.”

Based on what happened back at the post town I figured it was best to not talk too concretely about my old world, but was that really the case?

Ai Fa’s eyes narrowed just a bit, and she looked down at the boiling pot.

As I scratched my head, I threw a bit of firewood into the stove.

“...How old were you when your mother lost her life?”

“Hmm? I was seven. What about it?”

“So young...?” Ai Fa said. As she looked up, I could see the surprise clearly on her face. “So then, you haven’t eaten this dish ever since?”

“Ah, well yeah, probably. When it was just me and my old man, hot pots just seemed too lonely... Ah, no, but it doesn’t feel lonely with us two now, though, right?”

“...?”

“Gah! I dug my own grave there! No, you see, going with a hot pot is kind of a staple for family cooking, I guess... So when my family went from three to two, it just felt a bit lonely to me! Sorry for the gloomy subject!”

Ai Fa blinked in surprise, looking like she didn’t quite get it.

“I can’t say I fully understand. So you don’t find it unpleasant to eat this meal together with just me?”

“If I did, then I wouldn’t have made it, right?”

“I see. I’m glad... Now I don’t need to hit you.”

“That really is good!”

“...Hand me that,” Ai Fa said, sticking out her right hand.

“Eh? You mean the chopsticks? Didn’t you call them gross?”

“You made extras, though, didn’t you?”

She noticed, huh?

I had prepared an extra pair of chopsticks, hidden behind the ladle and plate meant for scooping scum.

“Well, I mean, I thought maybe you could use them, so I made them, but these are pretty tricky, you know?”

“It wouldn’t make sense for me to be unable to use them when you can,” Ai Fa said, her frown growing deeper.

And so, I gave a hurried lecture on how to handle chopsticks while making sure the aria and tino didn’t get overcooked.

“Oh, this is simple,” Ai Fa said while successfully grabbing a wedge of aria just three minutes later.

Hmm... Well, she’s got a good grip on it, so it’s fine, but she definitely didn’t have the proper form down. She had her first chopstick between her thumb and index finger, while the second was between her middle finger and ring finger, but she was handling them even more skillfully than I was.

It wouldn’t look perfect as a silhouette, but well, I guess I should just drop the matter for now.

“Right, then let’s get back to it! Be sure to keep eating the aria, alright? Well, if there’s extra though, we can just sauté it with the meat at the end.”

I saw Ai Fa nodding “Yeah,” out of the corner of my eye, then I added some more firewood and bit into some baked poitan.

“Asuta, where is this meat from?”

“That’s the roast. It comes from the back.”

“I see,” Ai Fa said, putting the meat in the pot, and then... “Shabu-shabu, shabu-shabu,” she started chanting.

I unwittingly spit out the poitan I was chewing and started choking.

“What are you doing? Don’t waste food,” she said while glaring at me, then

continued on, “Shabu-shabu, shabu-shabu.”

While desperately holding back my laughter I told her, “If it’s too much of a hassle, you can just do it in your head.” Even so, I hoped from the depths of my heart that I could enjoy this sight just a little while longer.

4

And so, our carefree dinner came to a close.

After finishing the usual tasks of cleaning up after the meal and closing the lid on one of the candles, the time came to face the trouble at hand.

“There’s something I want to say first, Asuta,” Ai Fa quietly stated while doing up her golden hair with both hands. “All of Gazraan Rutim’s words from before were directed towards you. Of course, as the clan head I will offer my opinion and advice, but it is up to you to make the final decision.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“And furthermore, you don’t need to consider the Fa house’s standing in this matter.”

“Huh?”

“This is a legitimate transaction. Nobody will face punishment if you happen to fail, and the relationship between the Fa and the Rutim won’t grow any stronger if you succeed. There is nothing to gain or lose here other than your fee.”

Her done-up hair fluttered gently in the dim light. As a general rule unwed women didn’t cut their hair, so Ai Fa’s was very long.

“Then what about those two? If I screw up, what happens to them?”

“Nothing at all. They would lose the trust of their family and face ridicule, but that’s all. They would just say the Rutim heir ruined his own wedding, tossing aside his own pride as a hunter in such a ridiculous manner.”

“Ah, I really do appreciate the way that you come out and say things at times like this... Ugh! Seriously, what should I do?!”

“Don’t be so loud. What exactly are you worrying yourself about? From how I see it, this would be a perfectly safe battle for you, with no concern about what happens if you lose,” Ai Fa said, tilting her head a bit as she leaned back against the wall. “What Gazraan Rutim and Ama Min seek is the food that you have made up until now. There’s no need to seek to display originality. Steak, hamburger, soup, and baked poitan... Those alone would be enough to surprise most everyone at the banquet and have a real impact.”

“That may be so, but... But normally, you spare no expense for a banquet and throw all sorts of vegetables in the pot, right? That’s what Mia Lea told me yesterday. That’s why I made the off the cuff decision to use tino and poitan.”

Ai Fa’s hair was still swaying. Maybe the animal fat candle was a bit off, but for some reason it was harder to see her face than usual.

“And so, no matter what unique cooking method I may employ, I’d hardly be using all the different vegetables you normally would, so some folks may feel dissatisfied, or uncomfortable, or even angry, right? Plus, if my cooking doesn’t suit someone’s tastes, it’d ruin this special banquet for them, wouldn’t it?”

Ai Fa didn’t say anything.

“Plus, this time it’s the actual wedding ceremony. There could be hard-headed oldtimers there or even guys more stubborn than Donda Ruu, and they may insist that the old way of stew with poitan heated up in it is better. 100 people means 100 different tastes, obviously, and I had my pride as a chef hurt just from Donda Ruu’s disparaging remarks alone. And I can’t keep holding onto the pipe dream that everyone will accept my cooking unconditionally, right?”

“Asuta, you... What are you so afraid of?” Ai Fa asked, sounding puzzled. “Gazraan Rutim said he wishes for you to man the stove, even so. It is the most important banquet of his life, and that is the life force that will be presented to his irreplaceable family and related clans. And he wishes to entrust all that to you. Is that not a great honor?”

“It is. It’s *too* much of an honor, which is exactly why I’m so intimidated. Gazraan Rutim and Ama Min have complete and utter trust in me, and want to leave this incredibly important work to me. To be honest... that makes me scared.”

“...I just don’t get it,” Ai Fa said, her shadowy silhouette shrugging its shoulders.

I stood up and then sat down right in front of Ai Fa.

“What is it...?” she asked, shooting me a doubtful expression. Her brows were a bit furrowed, but she had a much calmer look about her overall than I had expected.

“Sorry. I couldn’t see the expression on your face, and it was making me nervous. If it’s irritating having me up so close, then could I at least relight the other candle?”

Ai Fa slowly shook her head, then she said, “Asuta, you even carried out your agreement with Donda Ruu, so why are you so uneasy now? This is the first time I’ve ever seen you act so timid in regards to your cooking.”

“...It’s because my own desires and feelings were all mixed up in it up till now. I wanted to help Rimee Ruu and Granny Jiba, and I also wanted to satisfy Donda Ruu, which were strong feelings inside me that caused me to take on some pretty reckless challenges. But this time, it’s different.” While staring into Ai Fa’s beautiful blue eyes, I continued on, “I have no ties or debts to Gazraan Rutim or Ama Min. And what they said may have very well been right. It may be for the best for me to get involved. But I...”

“You’re not from this world?” Ai Fa butted in, looking a bit displeased. “It would seem your eyes have grown a little clouded at the moment, Asuta. You were able to find the right path when facing Donda Ruu, but now it would appear you can’t see anything at all.”

“W-What?”

“Do you not understand? You don’t need ties or debts. It doesn’t matter if it’s what’s proper or not. Gazraan Rutim already mentioned that’s not for you to decide, did he not? Those two simply want you to lend them your power.”

Suddenly, she grabbed my arm. We were already close, and now Ai Fa had drawn her face so close that our noses were almost touching. And her scent drew nearer too, cutting through the lingering smell from dinner.

“You aren’t the one who decides your own value, here. That’s for Gazraan

Rutim and Ama Min to do. Obligations, bonds, good will, and kindness have nothing to do with it and aren't necessary. They recognized your strength, and asked you to sell it to them for one night. That's what it means to pay a price."

"That's..."

"Whether or not what you receive is as good as you thought it would be is the concern of the buyers, not for the seller to worry about. Asuta, you..." Ai Fa started, but then looked lost in thought for a moment before continuing, "Today, you bought food from the post town, didn't you?"

"Yeah. It wasn't great, but it wasn't bad, either."

"And why did you spend money on something like that?"

"Huh? That's because... it just smelled good, and didn't look bad, either."

"Was the taste worthy of the cost?"

"No, I think it was pretty high considering it cost as much as a container of fruit wine."

"And yet you didn't complain and demand your money back?"

I... felt like something just became clear to me.

"You saw value in that dish, and you paid the price for it. Gazraan Rutim and Ama Min have seen value in your cooking too, and said they wish to pay for it. After making a purchase the buyer can think whatever they please, but they won't complain even if they're dissatisfied."

"Ai Fa..."

"And besides, they already know how your cooking tastes. That taste is precisely why they said they wish to pay you. You said that you made food and sold it to make a living back in your homeland, so why do you reject that? I simply cannot understand it."

"I know... I get it, Ai Fa. I finally understand what I'm afraid of."

Gazraan Rutim and Ama Min really were just customers. We didn't have any bonds or debts between us. There was nothing tying us together at all. If I were to refuse this request, there wouldn't even be any reason for them to complain.

And if anyone were to complain about my cooking, I wouldn't need to feel responsible.

And that... was precisely why I was scared.

Having a price attached to my cooking, and serving it as a product... That scared me more than anything.

"It's... not as if I had my own shop. The place belonged to my old man, and all I ever did was just help out."

In order to sort out all the thoughts floating through my mind, I went ahead and voiced them.

Meanwhile, Ai Fa silently listened.

"It was my old man's food that the customers paid money for. I boiled rice, cooked meat, and chopped up vegetables, but even so... Ultimately, that wasn't my cooking. It was my old man's. At least, that's what I think."

"Right."

"And then, I came to this world. I met you, and I started cooking for the two of us. Then I met Rimee Ruu, and Granny Jiba, and Donda Ruu. As a result, I ended up serving my cooking to a good number of people... but I wasn't doing business. I was just feeding folks what I thought they'd like to eat."

"Right."

"That's why I didn't raise a hand in the bet against Donda Ruu last night. I wasn't needed as a chef. And so, I thought what would satisfy him was home cooking from his family."

"Right."

"But this time, it's the exact opposite... I'm being sought out as a chef."

I felt a chill run down my spine. Even though it was cooler than mid-day, it was still warm enough outside to be in such light clothing... and yet, my knees had started trembling.

"To me at least... that's frightening."

Ai Fa said nothing to that.

“This is completely different from the blessings from the Ruu clan. I don’t know if the cooking of a half-baked chef like me is worth having a price on it or not. And having folks without any bonds or debts to me impartially and calmly judge that... Frankly, I think I’m afraid of that.”

“You may say that, but...” Ai Fa started, moving her face closer after having temporarily moved back. “Your eyes were so dark and gloomy before, but now the light has come back to them.”

“Yeah... I mean, this is the first time in my life that someone’s really counted on my skills as a chef. I’m incredibly scared... but I’m also incredibly proud.”

“Then you’ll accept?”

“...I’d like to,” I squeezed out.

My stomach was tying itself up in a knot, and it felt like I was about to throw up the meat and poitan I had only just eaten.

“Those two are counting on me... so I’d like to work hard enough to earn that price. I want to do a job good enough that I won’t feel ashamed in the least as a chef.”

The trembling wasn’t stopping, and I really did feel like I was on the verge of vomiting. I was seriously surprised by how much of a coward I was.

And then... Ai Fa’s hand touched my cheek so gently that it was almost like she wasn’t even making contact. Her eyes were staring at me from super close up.

“...I’m proud of you, too,” Ai Fa quietly muttered.

As I looked back at her, before long my trembling suddenly stopped.

Chapter 3: The Preparations of a Half-baked Chef

1

The following morning, Ama Min came to the Fa house on her own. She showed up about when I was done washing and taking care of my knife, and was about to check in on the pantry. The timing reminded me of when Rimee Ruu came to visit.

“I was thinking of accepting the offer we discussed yesterday, assuming I can confirm a few things first,” I started off.

We were seated in the same positions as yesterday.

“Confirm...” Ama Min quietly repeated. “Just what is it that you would like to confirm?”

“Right. There are too many vague points right now, so I’d like to start by asking about them. We also need to talk about the nature and volume of the cooking too, right? I mean, cooking for 100 people is an awful big job.” I looked over at Ai Fa, then went ahead and threw out what I had thought about last night in order. “First off, you said you were fine with the cooking I’ve made up until now, but I can’t wipe away my concern that that may not be enough to satisfy so many people. There are only five days left until the banquet, today included, but I’d still like to try to improve on whatever I can.”

“Right.”

“And so, if you’re going to be buying my skill, then I’d like you to think of it as being not just for one night, but for all five days up until the banquet.”

“Right... So what specifically would you like us to do, then?”

“Specifically, huh? I’d like you to offer me a place and ingredients to experiment with. With as many stoves, ingredients, and firewood as possible. And plenty of folks to sample the final results... Ah, you’re not expecting me to do all the cooking on the night of the banquet by myself, right?”

“That’s correct. As is customary, over ten women shall be assisting with the preparations.”

“That’s a load off my mind. In that case, I’d like to have them do the taste testing. And I’d also like them to assist with these five days of experimentation and also learn as much of my cooking techniques as they can, but only so much so that it doesn’t interfere with their other work.”

“Right. That should be possible, and I understand that it will be necessary.”

“Thank you. And then there’s the giba meat. I’ll need enough for these five days, as well as the banquet, of course. I’d have trouble preparing it all on my own, so I would like to have the Rutim men help out. And besides, if the Rutim clan wants to eat delicious meat from here on out, there’s a certain skill they’ll need to pick up anyway.”

“Yes. That is something we would have wanted to request of you, regardless,” Ama Min replied with a rather joyful-looking smile.

Glad to see that, I gave a nod.

“Then does this all sound acceptable? The ingredients for these five days and the banquet... If you provide those as well as an appropriate price for my services, that would be fine by me.”

“Yes, of course. What we want are your techniques and knowledge. We had already intended to prepare the necessary ingredients for that from the very start.”

It was surely a sign of the girl’s sincerity that she began with “Of course,” just there.

And then, Ama Min sat up perfectly straight and looked directly at me.

“So what price will you sell your strength for, Asuta of the Fa clan?”

“Right... I was thinking I’d like to go with 20 giba worth of horns and tusks.”

In that instant, Ama Min’s previously bright cheery expression grew cloudy for the first time.

“20 giba worth means 80 horns and tusks, yes? We most certainly aren’t qualified to place a price on your strength, but... That feels a little insufficient as

a fee. As we said yesterday, we will be receiving a blessing from each person at the wedding, so if we gather those up...”

“I couldn’t accept 200 horns and tusks. I mean, I’m clearly just a half-baked chef in training,” I responded, scratching my head. “To be honest, I worried about it quite a bit. I mean, even if I asked someone what the appropriate price for this sort of job would be, nobody would know.”

“That’s true. I don’t think I’ve heard of anyone at the forest’s edge manning the stove for the wedding of someone they’re not related to by blood,” Ama Min said with a smile.

It seemed she really wasn’t just all neat and relaxed. I revised my impression of her to make note of that graceful toughness she had about her, too.

“To be honest, there’s something I kind of want to buy in the post town right now. That would cost 20 giba’s worth of horns and tusks, so I just went ahead and set the price at that... But still, that sounds like plenty enough of a reward to me. I definitely won’t try to cut corners or anything,” I said while looking straight back into Ama Min’s eyes, which were still fixed firmly on me. “I swear to you that for this price, I’ll offer up every ounce of strength I have to that banquet. So, do you want to pay it to buy my skills?”

“It’s precisely because you’re that sort of person that we wanted so badly to obtain your aid,” Ama Min said with a gentle smile. Her smile was just so full of kindness that I couldn’t help but doubt if she really was the same age as Ai Fa, Reina Ruu, and me.

“Well then, for the price of 20 giba’s worth of horns and tusks, we will—”

“Ah, hold on a second! There’s just one more thing I wanted to confirm!”

As I said that, I stole a glance over at Ai Fa, who was seated by my side. She was seated silently with one knee up in the air, and a real solemn look on her face.

“I man the stove for the Fa clan. As such, I don’t want to neglect that work, either. And so... For the next five days, I would like to participate in the dinners that will also serve as taste tests along with Ai Fa. I won’t impose so much as to ask that you let us stay over, too, but could I at least ask that you prepare a

space for me and the head of my clan at dinner?”

“I see. That makes perfect sense...” Ama Min said, then put a finger to her cheek and tilted her head a bit while going, “Hmm...” as she thought.

Ah, I noticed that her looks and personality had this cute disconnect between them that was causing some strange feelings in me... Naturally, I maintained a perfectly serious expression, though.

“I... don’t think there should be a problem. I mean, considering the relationship between the Ruu and Rutim...”

“Huh? What does the Ruu clan have to do with this?”

“The wedding banquet will take place in the central plaza between the Ruu homes.”

Gah.

“And on the day of the banquet, it will be the task of the Ruu women to man the stoves.”

Gaaaah.

“Rather, I should say that the Rutim and Min will be busy with other preparations and won’t be able to help man the stove. You said you wanted to start experimenting with your cooking starting today, yes? I intended to ask if the Ruu women would help you, and if you could be loaned the stoves of the main Ruu house.”

Agaaaaah.

“B-But you all are under the Ruu clan, right? Is it really alright to be asking them for stuff like that?”

“It’s precisely because we’re under them that it makes sense. It’s a parent’s job to look after their children, is it not?”

Well, that may be so, but still... I was really hoping to handle this work in a place I had as few ties to as possible.

“And so, you’ll need the consent of the Ruu clan head Donda Ruu in order to dine with them, but since the Fa clan has ties with them to start with, I’m sure it

will be fine.”

Well, we do have ties I guess, but it may just be in a bad way...

And man, this sure was an awkward development here, considering I just said all that stuff about the importance of home cooking...

“I mean, yes, isn’t this an amazing opportunity, to be involved in the preparation of such wonderful cooking? I’m actually jealous of the Ruu women. I’m sure that a great many people will come visit the Ruu clan later on to learn the ways of their cooking.”

I see. Thinking of it like that, maybe it’d be good for Granny Jiba and Rimee Ruu. I mean, Reina Ruu was a really quick learner, and Granny Tito Min and Mia Lea Ruu didn’t fall short at all either. I’m sure they would all do a great job of picking up cooking techniques over these next five days.

And besides, this way I would have a chance to teach the Ruu clan bloodletting and proper dissecting directly. In a way, this was the best possible situation I could hope for, right?

But what about Donda Ruu, Jiza Ruu, and Darmu Ruu? Eating dinner with those oppressive faces staring at me for five days in a row... The thought alone was enough to make me feel all gloomy.

Ah, how fun last night’s shabu-shabu was!

Still, this is part of my job...

Plus, thinking in terms of efficiency, it would be just plain stupid to directly teach the women of the Ruu clan who would be helping to man the stove, and then head back to the Fa house at night to experiment. And so for the sake of my work, I should go ahead and directly tackle dining at the Ruu house. Besides, it’d be the women’s task to handle everything but the test dishes... Ah, was that a sign that I was still being a bit of a coward, that I was thinking like that?

Yeah, that’s right. I want to make a menu that’ll satisfy as many people as possible, so when it comes to testing stuff out, someone as stubborn and unaccommodating as Donda Ruu is perfect. Plus, Jiza Ruu is so straight-laced, and Darmu Ruu has a bad impression of me... I’m going to really need to go at it in order to satisfy that group.

“Um... Is something the matter, Asuta?” Ama Min asked, leaning forward with a worried look about her.

“I’m fine. Well then, you’ll still ultimately need to get the Ruu clan’s consent, but... do you want to buy my skills under those conditions? For the price of 20 giba worth of horns and tusks, that is.”

“Yes, we would like to buy your aid, Asuta of the Fa clan,” Ama Min said with a bright smile, bringing our negotiations to a close.

2

With that, my work began.

The first task was giving a lecture on bloodletting, explaining how it was done to the men of the Ruu and Rutim clans.

The men would head off into the forest by the time the sun hit its zenith, so I had to take care of that first, before I started experimenting with my cooking.

It was as if God was telling me, “It’s going to be a rough task, so why not get the hard stuff out of the way so it’ll be easier later on?”

If the day ever came when I was invited into heaven, I’d love to slug God one in the face. As for why, I found myself suddenly dealing not just with Gazraan Rutim (who brought this matter to me) and the men of his clan, but also those of the Ruu clan, too. Geez, it was enough to make my stomach ache.

“Hey, Asuta. Looks like everyone’s gathered now, right?” Ludo Ruu, the one soothing presence in the group, nonchalantly called out.

The group standing before me now was made up of over 20 rugged hunters of the forest’s edge, including 17 of those Ruu men I saw a few days prior. They were standing in the plaza outside of the Ruu homes, giving off a real animalistic stench. There were young and old men mixed into the group, but they all seemed like robust, brawny hunters.

And since they were just about to head out into the forest, there was some serious bloodlust coming off all of them.

“...I’d like to start with introductions.”

With that, Gazraan Rutim stepped up beside me.

“I’m the eldest son of the main Rutim house, Gazraan Rutim. You should have already heard the details, but I have gathered you all here for the sake of helping with the preparations for my wedding to Ama Min in five days. I would like to begin by offering my gratitude to the head of the Ruu main house, Donda Ruu, and his family for graciously accepting this request from the Rutim.”

Donda Ruu was off to the right edge of the group, motionless with his arms crossed. Honestly, I was really shocked that he went and gave his permission for all this. Was it down to the fact that a “parent” couldn’t so easily deny a request from his “child”?

“I have asked Asuta of the Fa clan here to man the stove for the wedding. As the Fa clan has no ties to the Rutim, we will be paying Asuta in order to buy his aid for that night. As for why I am doing such a thing despite it going against the customs of the forest’s edge, it isn’t something that would be so easily explained, so I won’t prattle on about that matter. Just let me state that I have made up my mind on the matter, as the eldest son of the main Rutim house.”

The men didn’t make so much as a peep, so I couldn’t tell whether or not they were disgruntled about this. In fact, all I could see was a calm shine in their eyes, like those fierce animals about to be unleashed.

Apparently Donda Ruu’s younger brother and his children were part of the group. Plus his uncle (his father’s younger brother) and his family were supposedly here, too. That thought had me a little worried, but looking at it another way, they were all descended from Granny Jiba and were Rimee Ruu’s relatives, too.

“Now then, as for the preparations for the banquet... The giba meat that Asuta will be presenting for the meal will use techniques from his home country, requiring special preparation. That has to be performed before the giba’s life is completely severed, and Asuta will now explain it.”

It was finally my turn, so I gave a single nod and then stepped forward.

“I’m Asuta of the Fa clan. Thank you for assisting with this request. To jump right into the explanation, what I’d like you all to perform is something called ‘bloodletting.’ It involves capturing a giba and then draining it of its blood

before finishing it off. To be honest, that's all it is. The spot you're looking for is between the chest and the neck, a bit closer to the chest. There's a thick vein above the heart, so you cut that with a blade and then have the blood flow out through there. If you do it right, you'll know because a whole lot of blood will come spurting out. Please take care not to cut the heart or the throat and kill the giba immediately."

They remained silent and motionless.

"Um... The crucial point is making sure that you don't kill it. Even if you shatter its skull, its body will still live on for a while. And as long as you sever a thick vein near the heart while it's still pumping, the blood will drain out quickly."

"Hey, I've got a question!" Ludo Ruu said, raising his hand.

Feeling a good bit calmer through his interruption, I asked, "What is it?"

"So it's no good to slit the giba's throat? That's how I always finish them off, and a lot of blood always comes pouring out."

"You'll end up killing it before the blood all flows out pretty often that way. If you're lucky you'll sever the carotid artery without ruining its ability to breath, but otherwise there will still be blood left lingering in the capillary vessels."

"I don't really get what you're saying. In other words, it's no good, huh? Hmm... If the throat and the heart are out, then it'd be pretty hard to take one down."

"That's true. Still, please be sure not to push yourselves too hard. We can manage for the banquet with just a few of the beasts, and anyway, it would be foolish to lose your life for the sake of preparing meat."

"You're the only one who would risk his life over something like that, Asuta. And hey, why are you talking to me like that? It's gross. Do you want me to kick you?"

"Please don't... Then you just need to bring the giba back and there will be some extra processing after the pelt is peeled, but I'll explain that later. Well then, that's all from me."

None of the men other than Ludo Ruu said anything, and most of them just turned their backs to me. They didn't say goodbye or anything, or even raise a battle cry like they did five days prior.

With Donda Ruu and Jiza Ruu at their head, the 17 men of the Ruu clan silently left the plaza.

"See you around. I'll be waiting for a delicious meal from you, Asuta," Ludo Ruu said before leaving too, a beastly flame burning in his eyes. He was a rather cute little kid, but in an instant, his face shifted to that of a full-fledged hunter. Whenever I saw that it caused a chill to run through me, and it strangely tugged at my heartstrings.

"Thank you. That was a very easy to understand explanation," Gazraan Rutim said with a smile.

There were only five men left here, him included, all of them belonging to the Rutim clan. The Rutim settlement was a bit far away, so apparently they had sent an elite group to hear my explanation of the process in person.

"Um, it's probably not my place to be concerned about it, but will things be alright with the Ruu clan? This won't sour the relationship between your clans, will it?"

"Sour? I don't quite understand. As a member of the Rutim, I asked the Ruu for their assistance. The clan head Donda Ruu gave his consent, and the men are abiding by that. There shouldn't be any problems there."

"Right. But you don't know what each person is feeling inside, right?"

"Personal feelings are ultimately just personal matters. They have nothing to do with the clan's intentions. It's the job of members of the clan to abide by their clan head's decisions. I'm sure they'll properly carry out their task. The Ruu clan is powerful, so I have no worries about that."

"I see..."

"More importantly, there's something I want to discuss with you, Asuta," Gazraan Rutim said, his always earnest looking face taking on an even more earnest expression. "Today, I heard from Ludo Ruu how the Ruu and Fa clans were related for the first time. You were invited to the Ruu house to save Jiba

Ruu, who was eating less and less. And then, you did a splendid job of saving her soul... Is that the truth?”

“Yeah, well, at the very least, she seemed to enjoy my cooking.”

“I see. It’s true that Jiba Ruu seemed a good bit more energetic than I had heard on that night... Thank you, Asuta. Please allow me to offer my gratitude for that matter, too.”

“Huh? But why?”

“Did you not know? The Rutim and Ruu formed a bond by Jiba Ruu’s daughter marrying into our clan. We have the strongest ties with them of all six clans under the Ruu.”

Is that so? Hey wait, did that mean as the heir to the main house, Gazraan Rutim was Granny Jiba’s great-grandson?

“Yes, my father Dan Rutim is the son of Jiba Ruu’s daughter. Jiba Ruu’s blood runs just as thickly through my veins as those of Jiza and Ludo Ruu.”

“Oh, I see...”

Bringing personal feelings into work was off-limits. But still, since this young man had inherited Granny Jiba’s blood, I really did want to bless his wedding from the depths of my heart.

“I said we had no debts or bonds between us, but it seems that I owe you a debt after all. I really am truly grateful that I’ve had the chance to be involved with you in this manner.”

As he said that, Gazraan Rutim started fishing around inside of his cloak. Then, he held out an even bigger necklace of tusks and horns in front of me than last night.

“Asuta, please accept this. It’s 10 giba worth of horns and tusks, half of your payment. I’ll give you the other half after the banquet.”

“No, you can just give me the whole payment once I’m done with the job. I mean, I may be... Yeah, it’s possible I could end up getting burned to death in the middle of the cooking.”

I couldn’t tell him that I could get yanked back to my old world at any

moment, so I made a joke of it instead, but the same serious look remained fixed on Gazraan Rutim's face.

"You say that, but I could lose my life in the forest at any time, too. Therefore, I'm giving this to you now. It's proof of my trust in you, now that you have accepted my request. Please, accept it."

I regretted joking around, now. I couldn't tell him the truth thanks to my own circumstances, and I took a joking attitude to hide it. That was no sort of way to treat this serious young man at least, though.

"Alright, I'll accept it. I'll strive to live up to that trust you've shown me."

Gazraan Rutim gave a wide grin and handed me the necklace.

Even if it had 40 giba horns and tusks on it, it didn't really weigh all that much... but as it jangled in my hand, it felt a whole lot heavier than it really was.

3

After the men headed off into the forest as the sun hit its peak and I said farewell to Gazraan Rutim, it was finally time to start my experimentation. I headed around the back of the house towards the kitchen, and found two women waiting for me: The eldest son Jiza Ruu's wife Sati Lea Ruu and the third daughter, Lala Ruu.

"We've been waiting for you, Asuta. The two of us will be assisting you today," the slender, neat, and tidy young wife said to me with a gentle smile. She had somewhat short brown hair and blackish eyes.

"Whoa, what's with all those horns and tusks? Did you steal them from somewhere?" Lala Ruu asked, disparaging me as always. The 12 year old girl had her red hair done up in what looked like a ponytail.

"This is the advance payment for this job. Um, should I put it down somewhere?"

"If you wish, we can hold onto it for you at the house. It would be quite a mess if it were to happen to fall into the stove or something."

With that, Sati Lea Ruu took the necklace from me and left the kitchen.

She was very tactful with her actions, but as a result I ended up left alone with a young girl who wasn't especially fond of me.

Sure enough, it didn't take long for Lala Ruu to start coming after me again.

"Hmph! I thought the heir to the Rutim had his act together more than their clan head, but seeing how he's entrusting the stove to you on his precious wedding night, he certainly doesn't seem especially sane! Now the Rutim are going to be the laughingstock of the forest's edge. And since they're under us, that's a real pain for the Ruu clan, too!"

"Is that so? Then I'll have to expend all of my meager ability to silence even a few more of those laughing voices, right?"

I wasn't going to curse at a girl five years younger than me or get angry, so instead I just decided to give that lighthearted response.

Plus, well, I was more than a little indebted to the four daughters of the Ruu clan, so there was no helping the fact that she hated me. But would I have to keep on bearing that cross for the rest of my life...?

"At any rate, here's to working with you. Are you alright on your other work, though...? I'm the one who asked for help, but I wasn't expecting to have the two of you sent my way this early in the day."

"Mama Mia Lea decided it, so there's no helping it! It's not like I wanted to see your face, either!" shouted Lala Ruu with a stern look on her face and furrowed eyebrows. And then, she stomped on over towards me. "Those horns and tusks..."

"Huh?"

"You went from having eight to nine. Did Gazraan Rutim or Ama Min give you a blessing?"

"Ah, um... Is it alright to say...? No, I better not..."

"What the heck is that about?! If you won't tell me, then I'll tell papa Donda about what happened that morning!"

"T-That'd be a real issue. You see, this... it was given to me by your 'papa Donda.'"

In an instant, Lala Ruu came flying at me in a thunderous rage with a boyish look on her face.

“There’s no way that’s true! Papa Donda seriously hates you, so there’s no way he’d give you a blessing! Give it up and tell me the truth already, or I’ll expose you to everyone!”

“N-No, that really is the truth. It’s not like he forbid me from saying anything, either, so I’ll tell it to you straight. Donda Ruu gave me this blessing after I manned the stove for the celebratory banquet.”

The rage remained clear on her face for a while afterwards, but then the anger steadily shifted to astonishment.

“Are you being serious...? If you keep on trying to trick me, then I really will check with papa Donda. And if it’s a lie, then I’ll tell him all about what happened that day.”

“Agh, then I guess I’ll just have to pray that Donda Ruu answers you truthfully. I’ll have to really hope that he’s not the sort of scum who would lie to protect his own pride!”

“Wait... Is it actually true?”

I nodded and said, “Yeah,” only for Lala Ruu to explode again.

“What the heck?! I can’t believe it! I didn’t give a blessing because I was thinking of papa Donda’s feelings, so what was he thinking, giving you one on his own?! It makes me look like an idiot! Damn it, what the heck?! Geez!”

“Ah, um, please calm down... I’m sure your papa had his own thoughts and feelings behind it.”

“Don’t you say ‘papa’! It’s gross!”

“Sorry... But stuff like this is rooted in personal feelings, right? Just because Donda Ruu gave a blessing, it doesn’t mean that you have to do the same.”

“What the heck is that?! Are you saying you won’t accept my blessing?!”

No matter what I said, the girl exploded into a ball of anger.

Just when I gave a sigh, thinking I just must not be fated to get along with this

girl, a hand was suddenly thrust in front of my face. And seated atop it was a single giba tusk... or was it a horn?

"...That last dinner was seriously delicious. And you saved Granny Jiba before that, too. So I, Lala Ruu, offer Asuta of the Fa clan my blessing."

Did it seriously make sense for someone to be giving a blessing with such blatant displeasure on their face? Well, anyway, I gratefully went ahead and picked up that pure white blessing.

"Thank you. It really makes me happy."

"Hmph!" Lala Ruu loudly snorted and turned away.

She seriously must not have been able to stomach me at all. But still, I felt every bit as happy having someone like her acknowledge me as I did getting a blessing from someone who adored me.

With this, I had received ten blessings in total from the Ruu clan. Excluding the infant Kota Ruu, that just left Jiza and Darmu Ruu.

Just as I thought to myself how that would never happen in my whole life, Sati Lea Ruu finally returned.

"Sorry for the wait. Oh, my, you still haven't started?"

"Yeah. We'll get rolling now, though. Do you mind if I start by taking a look at the vegetables in your pantry?"

"Not at all. By the way, where is Ai Fa? She was with you when you arrived, wasn't she?"

"Yup. I still hadn't fully memorized the path to the Ruu house, so Ai Fa showed me the way. She should be out hunting giba in the forest around now."

She couldn't exactly shirk off her giba hunting for these five days. Or at least, that's what Ai Fa said before leaving. We still had plenty of meat, plus horns and tusks to spare, but a hunter had to keep on hunting giba as long as they had the strength to do so.

If the hunters of the forest's edge neglected their work, the giba would overflow from the forest and attack the western kingdom's fields. It was the duty of the people of the forest's edge to prevent that... or at least, that's what

most of them thought. The clan that led them seemed to have completely forgotten that, though.

Kamyua Yoshu... I really need another chance to meet with that aloof old-timer and really hear what he has to say.

I was slated to spend these next five days here at the Ruu settlement, devoting myself to experimenting. That meant that Ai Fa had to handle not only her hunting, but also managing the pantry and gathering pico leaves. And so, though we ate dinner together at the main Ruu house and spent the night together in the vacant house, we were operating completely separately during the day.

Diga Suun hadn't tried to retaliate against Ai Fa directly since he was thrown into the river, so the Suun clan probably weren't able to get up to anything too atrocious. But when I remember Doddo Suun's eyes like those of a wild dog... I couldn't help but feel uneasy.

Of course, I normally stayed home at the Fa house while Ai Fa went out hunting in the forest, so it technically wasn't all that much of a difference. But I still felt like things couldn't keep on going like this forever.

"Is something the matter, Asuta?" Sati Lea Ruu asked, calling me back to the real world in a bit of a fluster.

"It's nothing. Shall we head to the pantry?"

Regardless of anything else, right now, I was working.

Naturally, the reward I'd get from this job would become part of the shared fortune of the Fa house. So for Ai Fa's sake too, I had to succeed.

Accompanied by the two women, I stepped foot into the pantry. Just as I remembered, there were doorless shelves crammed full of different vegetables. I'd seen a whole lot of them yesterday at the post town, too, so I was steadily starting to get pretty familiar with them.

Now then, which of them were going to play nice with me...?

"Let me start off by telling you my plan," I said to the women behind me as I inspected the different types of vegetables one by one. "My goal is to conquer

the poitan.”

“Poitan...?”

“Right. Is there some way to make it tasty while heating it up like you guys have been up till now? That’s what I want to experiment with first.”

“But why? The baked poitan is delicious. I feel like I could even keep on just eating that on its own, even without any meat or vegetables.”

Ooh, sounds like Sati Lea Ruu was seriously charmed by the baked poitan, huh? Well, it’s not as if I didn’t get how she felt, but this experimentation was of the utmost importance to me.

“But there are going to be some older people at the banquet too, right? If I present nothing but unusual dishes, those folks may end up avoiding them. I’d like to present the baked poitan too, but I won’t be able to help wondering if there isn’t another cooking method that would satisfy everyone, young and old, so I’d like to try to find that first.”

All that Sati Lea Ruu had to say in response was, “Oh, my...” She didn’t sound all that astonished or disgusted with the idea, though, so I guess it was fine.

“Ultimately I think we’re just going to have to try putting all sorts of things together, but are there any ingredients you would recommend? Or on the other hand, are there any you don’t especially like?”

“Pula” a voice bluntly stated. Naturally, that had been Lala Ruu speaking up first.

“Um... Now that I think of it, I believe I’d heard that you didn’t like pula somewhere before. Are you not fond of bitter foods, perhaps?”

“Shut up! Why are you complaining when I went and answered your question?!”

“Ah, sorry! Please, let me hear your candid opinion.”

“Lilo, tarapa, zozo... I don’t like any of them.”

“Yup, got it. Lilo is that herb used when smoking meat, right? What sort of ingredients are tarapa and zozo?”

“Tarapa is that large red fruit, while zozo is the light brown lump down beneath it.”

I looked where Sati Lea Ruu pointed and saw that the tarapa was a fruit that looked sort of like a pumpkin or a big lumpy tomato, while the zozo coiled like a snake and had the texture of a beehive. Both of them left a real strong visual impression, so I definitely remembered them.

“Hmm... And what do you think of tarapa and zozo, Sati Lea Ruu?”

“Let me see... Tarapa is very sour, and zozo has a very powerful smell. I don’t especially dislike either of them, but... I think tarapa would taste better in a stew without poitan.”

“Oh, I see.”

“Tarapa really is sour, so I think it would be better in a stew without poitan, as it would pass more smoothly down your throat and be easier to eat. As for zozo, whether or not there’s any poitan, I think it would wipe out all the rest of the scents in a dish that didn’t include meat with a stench, which would worsen the flavor.”

“Amazing! How precise!”

“It’s because you taught me what a delicious meal really was, Asuta. Up until then, I didn’t pay any attention to how tarapa and zozo tasted different,” Sati Lea Ruu said with a smile.

Next to her, Lala Ruu was making a face that made it look like she was about to start stamping her feet again or something.

“What the heck?! If that’s how things are going to be, you don’t even need me! You and Sati Lea are getting along just fine on your own!”

“Lala, just because you’re having trouble getting your words out, it doesn’t mean you should have such a short temper,” Sati Lea Ruu said, gently placing a hand on her sister-in-law’s shoulder. “You’re skilled at picking up on a great many things, but you’re not very good with your words. On the other hand, I’m fairly skilled when it comes to speaking, but I don’t have very strong emotions. I’m sure we’ll be of much greater help to Asuta working together than by trying to handle things on our own.”

I'd probably had the least interaction with Sati Lea Ruu out of the entire main Ruu house, but those words alone were enough to tell me that she was more than just some calm, neat, and tidy young woman. I thought to myself, *Just what you'd expect from Jiza Ruu's partner,* and then felt a little bit of a chill run down my spine. With those two as parents, just exactly what sort of person would Kota Ruu turn out to be?

"Huh? Now that I think of it, is Kota Ruu a boy or a girl?" I asked, realizing I hadn't actually been firmly told, only for the two of them to shoot me back blank stares.

"You can tell just from the name, can't you? Of course he's a boy."

I see. Well, I had gotten that feeling, anyway.

"Right. He's a little on the small side, but he's a boy. We had quite a bit of trouble being blessed with a child, so I really am glad that our first one turned out to be a boy."

I really could see the pride and joy on Sati Lea Ruu's face as she said that.

So that meant that once Jiza Ruu someday inherited the position of clan head from Donda Ruu, Kota Ruu would eventually be next in line, huh? I was a little late in noticing, but the thought really moved me, somehow.

"Ah, right, this zozo has a really tremendous smell to it, doesn't it? It smells more like medicine than food. I can definitely see how it would wipe out all the other flavors if you threw it into a stew," I said, dragging myself back to reality.

"Right? If we start eating giba meat without any stench regularly, then we may not even have a use for it anymore. After all, we add lilo and zozo to a stew in order to wipe out the stench."

"I see. In that case, we'll remove those two from the list of candidates. So, what about this tarapa? We had a vegetable called a tomato back in my country that was the same color, and it could be used in a whole ton of different ways."

"Is that so? It doesn't have a bad smell to it, and I certainly don't dislike the sour taste it has, but I think it would be better in a stew without poitan than in one with it."

“Yeah, that may be so, huh...?”

Just imagining the taste of that flour water-esque poitan broth with tomato thrown in was seriously disheartening. It may well be super versatile, but it still might not have a chance to shine this time around.

“Well then, let’s say the tarapa is out of the running too, at least for now. Are there any vegetables you would recommend, though?”

In response to that question, the two went “Hmm...” and seriously thought on the matter.

“I’ve got some ideas when it comes to a stew without poitan, but for heating up together with poitan...”

“Yeah. I mean, if we thought something was tasty like that, we’d be throwing it in each and every day. But no matter what vegetable we add...” Lala Ruu said, only to suddenly hesitate.

“What is it?” Sati Lea Ruu gently asked.

“No... I mean, it doesn’t especially change what I was saying, but... There is one that I think I may like best.”

“Oh, my. Which vegetable is it?”

“No, never mind, it’s nothing! I don’t even know why I like it! The taste is hardly any different anyway!”

“See, that’s got me super interested now. If you don’t mind, could you tell me which ingredient you’re talking about?”

Perhaps I’d jumped the gun there, as Lala Ruu had a bit of a worried look on her face that you wouldn’t expect from such a tomboy.

However, her slender finger slowly lifted up and pointed towards the very back of the pantry.

Huh, this thing? I thought, my eyes going wide.

That ingredient had been quietly waiting in the dark corner of the pantry for my eyes to fall upon it. It was like a massive two meter long great burdock, standing out even amongst such impactful ingredients as the zozo and tarapa. It

was called the gigo.

4

Several hours later, when the sun was starting to shift from its peak, an unexpected disturbance suddenly popped up in the kitchen. Before I even noticed, a small silhouette had slipped in through the door that had been left open for ventilation.

“Hey there! How’s it going, chef?!”

“Gah, you scared me! L-Ludo Ruu, why do you look like that...?”

It was undoubtedly Ludo Ruu, who was supposed to have headed out into the forest. But they weren’t supposed to be back until around sunset, and besides... Ludo Ruu’s whole body was painted red with blood. His yellow-brown hair, giba cloak, slender face, arms, and legs were all crimson. And with his blood soaked face, the youth shot me a grin, his eyes still alight with the flames of a hunter.

“This all belongs to giba and other people. I don’t have even a scratch on me! Don’t go throwing away your concern on me, chef.”

“Other people...? Whose?”

“Ryada Ruu, from one of the branch families. He may be done for... A giba plunged its horn deep into his leg. Even if he lives, he won’t be heading out into the forest anymore.”

My face had probably gone completely pale. Seeing that, Ludo Ruu sneered like a beast.

“I told you, stop throwing away your concern already! That had nothing to do with the request you made! Normally giba don’t travel in packs, but three of them came at us all at once, which is when one of them got Ryada Ruu. My bow broke too and I thought I was about to die, so I slashed its throat with this. It died in an instant, so I wasn’t able to bloodlet it.”

“I see...” was all I could think to say in response.

When I glanced their way, I saw that the two women helping me out were looking at their family member with incredibly still expressions. That was

probably down to a mix of joy that Ludo Ruu was alright, but also pity for their relative's misfortune. But at any rate, they had far more resolution than me, and I could see the great strength of their people in their calmness.

With a disinterested, "Hmph!" Ludo Ruu wiped his bloody cheek with the back of his hand. "Well, thanks to that, we got ahold of plenty of tusks and horns. And we needed to carry Ryada Ruu and the giba back home, so five of us headed back early. I know it's the abundant part of the cycle right now, but there are just way too many giba! Asuta, the Fa house is a bit further north, right? How's the forest around there lately?"

It would seem that I had finally returned to being "Asuta" rather than "chef."

He must've been pretty worked up, but now his beastly hunter's eyes were steadily shifting back to those of his usual cheeky self.

"R-Right... Well, I don't really know how things are out in the forest, but I definitely get the feeling that Ai Fa has been catching them a lot more frequently. Um... In these past 10 days, she's already taken down four of them."

"Huh?"

"Eh?"

"The Fa clan doesn't have any other relatives or retainers, right? So what sort of joke are you trying to tell, claiming she took down four in 10 days?"

"Hmm? Did I mess up my calculations. We returned from the Ruu house on that day, and then the next day we started building the stoves... Yeah, maybe it was 12 or 13 days, actually. But it was four giba."

"What's the difference?!" Ludo quipped back with some serious force.

Still, she caught three in a row starting the day after we made that outdoor stove, and then a few days later she added another on top, so I couldn't have been all that far off.

"Asuta, are you being serious? You can't surround them all on your own, so the only option to hunt them would be waiting for one to fall into a trap, or running into angry ones like we did today, right? So there's no way she could ever catch four in ten days."

“No, it was more 12 or 13—”

“Like I said, what’s the difference?! She couldn’t be using sacrificial hunting, could she?”

The boy’s unusually heavy tone was causing me to feel really uneasy.

“L-Ludo Ruu, what’s that ‘sacrificial hunting’ thing? It’s not a taboo at the forest’s edge, is it?”

“No, it’s just an old way of doing things that nobody uses anymore. If you’re worried about it, you should ask your clan head directly.”

Got it. I’ll definitely do that, for sure.

It was then that Sati Lea Ruu called out, “Ludo Ruu,” in a calm voice. One of the young boy’s eyebrows raised up as he turned around.

“Oh, you’re back already? What happened to Ryada Ruu?”

Apparently at some point, a number of men had appeared on the other side of the doorway where Ludo Ruu was standing. The smallest, youngest looking of them stepped forward before Ludo Ruu.

“My father Ryada is just barely clinging to life. However, it would seem that the muscles in his leg have been severed. There’s no way he will ever set foot in the forest ever again.”

“Hmm. So from tomorrow on, you’re the head of your house, Shin Ruu?”

“Yes. I’ll take over for my father,” replied the boy who looked to be about Ludo Ruu’s age. In other words, he seemed like he was younger than I was.

His long hair was dark brown, nearly black, and his eyes were a deep brown too. The expression on his face was a bit more mature than Ludo Ruu, but there wasn’t much difference between them in terms of physique.

While looking like he was almost peering into the boy’s face from the side, Ludo Ruu said, “Hey, why are you looking so unconcerned? You’ve got to feed a family of five all on your own now, right? You’re teetering over the edge of a cliff, aren’t you?”

“It’s no problem. In another two years my younger brother will be grown...

But I'd like to ask you to lend me your strength until then."

"We're family till then and beyond, aren't we?" Ludo Ruu said, thrusting away his shoulders like he was angry. With that, an awkward smile crossed the boy named Shin Ruu's face.

"It's thanks to you that my father Ryada still has his life, Ludo Ruu. I take pride in the fact that we are kin."

"Hey, don't go saying crap like that! It's irritating!"

"More importantly, Asuta of the Fa clan..."

"Huh? Yes?"

"We have brought one giba. It was the only one of the three that we believe we successfully managed to bloodlet. Donda Ruu told us that we should follow your orders as to what to do next."

With that, Ludo Ruu suddenly leapt up.

"Hold on a minute! I can't keep on working looking like this! I'll go wash up first, so just hold on!" he said while cruelly pushing Shin Ruu out of the way and looking back towards me. "Listen, don't start without me! If you do, I'm going to send everyone here flying!"

With that, the bloodsoaked boy took off running. The remaining boy and men, meanwhile, stared at me from outside the building.

"Um, could I ask you to do the basic preparations for skinning the pelts, then? I'll hurry on over after I clean up here."

"...Understood."

"Well then, I'll show you the way," Sati Lea Ruu said.

Then, left all alone with me again, Lala Ruu let out a sigh after having been silent for so long.

"So Ryada Ruu got done in by a giba too, huh? Now Ryada's house just has women and kids, so Shin Ruu's going to have it really rough..."

"...How are those folks related to you, exactly?"

"Hmm? Ryada is Papa Donda's youngest brother. Aside from Shin there's his

mother and two older sisters, and then his tiny little brother, so he's the only one left in that house who can hunt giba," she replied in an earnest tone with a sort of meek look on her face. She must have really been concerned about what would become of that Shin Ruu boy.

"He would be smart to either have one of his sisters take a husband already, or to have the whole family be absorbed by another one. There's no way it'll be possible to take care of a family of five at 16 years old."

This didn't seem like the sort of problem an outsider like me should be butting in on. But still, I wanted to believe that if he had family like Ludo and Lala Ruu so nearby, that boy with the calm, quiet look on his face wouldn't end up crushed by some horrible fate.

"Well then, I'm going to start heading over. It may take a while, so could I have you bake the poitan for tonight or something in the meanwhile?"

"What about this stuff?"

The fruits of my two hours of experimentation were seated atop the log that served as my work station, some still steaming, some not. What Lala Ruu was pointing to was a poitan-based broth combining all sort of vegetables, with the gigo at the center.

To be honest... over half of the stuff I'd made wasn't exactly usable.

"Hmm. You should heat up and dry out anything that came out too nasty, and use it as the base for some baked poitan. I mean, we can't just chuck it."

The taste wouldn't change much in the baking process, but in my mind it'd be easier to eat when it was more solid like that.

"You sure are something. I've never seen anyone treat food like trash the way that you did before."

"I'll admit that I'm still half-baked, but don't say I'm treating it like trash! I swear that I'll swallow it down properly!"

I tried to keep any of the dangerous-looking combinations down to a size where it'd just amount to two bites for each of the three of us, so I hadn't expected to end up with excess. But the cause was Lala Ruu refusing to try it

when I looked like I was about to faint in agony, so I figured we were both at fault here. Should I try to introduce rock-paper-scissors to the forest's edge...?

"Still, thanks to you I've got the foundation down, so I just need one more push. I can keep on counting on you, right?"

"Hmph!" Lala Ruu snorted and looked away as I headed off to the giba dissection room next to the pantry. After greeting Sati Lea Ruu and switching places with her, I stepped inside.

"Ooh... This sure is a big one, isn't it?"

There was a 90 kilo class giba dangling from a ceiling beam. It must have been as long as an adult woman was tall. It had some splendidly curved horns and tusks, marking it as a male giba. They must have already washed it down, as its blackish brown fur was sopping wet.

I had only ever peered into this dissection room from outside before, but it was a barren space with nothing but blades large and small and rope made from vines hanging from the walls. Well, there was a single stove meant for heating up a small pot, but there wasn't even a single other furnishing of note to be found.

The four men standing there just quietly stared back at me. The group was made up of Shin Ruu, an older man, and two gentlemen in their prime. Aside from Shin Ruu they all looked solidly built, and they waited there silently for me to speak.

"Good work, everybody. Well then... Let's start by peeling the pelt. Ludo Ruu should make it back before long, and then we can set about the dissection."

One of the men nodded, then drew a thick knife from his hip.

"Hold on. Could you leave peeling the pelt to me?" Shin Ruu asked. "My father Ryada won't be able to move for a good long while. During that time, I will need take care of peeling the pelts all on my own. I of course know the process, but I would like to learn first-hand now how exhausting it is."

The man who had drawn his knife turned back to look at the older gentleman. The older fellow gave a single nod, and the man resheathed his blade.

“You have my thanks,” Shin Ruu said, drawing his own knife. “Asuta of the Fa clan, is it alright if I skin the pelt in the same manner as we have up until now?”

“Hmm... Could I ask you to try to leave as much of the fat attached to the meat as possible? I don’t mind if it’s just enough that you don’t injure the pelt, though.”

“Understood.”

The giba was dangling from a rope tied around its right hind leg.

Shin Ruu skillfully inserted his blade and slowly, carefully cut down from the groin to just below the neck. Then, he made paths down each of the legs and cut around the ankles right before the hooves. In terms of preparations, there wasn’t much difference from what I had done.

Seeing how he had hot water prepared to dissolve off the fat too, I realized that even if folks came from different cultures, they’d likely arrive at the same conclusions about how to skin an animal. And if it hadn’t been for the abnormal speed at which the giba multiplied, and they were just hunting them for meat, I’m sure the people of the forest’s edge would have thought up ways to make them taste good, too.

In the forest to the south where they once lived they only ate lizards and bugs, and here at Morga Forest they hunted for horns and tusks, and to protect the safety of the fields. Now, though, their meat cuisine was suddenly advancing. When I realized that resulted from some guy from another world bringing his opinion that “you’re happier eating tasty food” into the matter, though, a bit of a chill ran down my spine.

There wasn’t anybody out there who could tell me for certain that what I was doing was right, and that it was wonderful. Was it really alright for some pathetic little chef in training to be influencing the cuisine of a settlement numbering 500 strong?

If it isn’t, then just throw me back into that fire, alright?

Otherwise, I had no choice but to keep on living like this. If I had to kill my feelings and just slurp down that gross poitan stew while doing nothing but gathering herbs and firewood, well... That wouldn’t be me living my life at all. I

would live on in this world as myself, alongside Ai Fa, who told me that my cooking was delicious, that she loved it, and that she didn't want me to disappear.

As those thoughts ran through my head, Shin Ruu steadily peeled back the giba's pelt, revealing the glistening white underneath.

He may have been young, but he was still a man of the forest's edge. There was no way I could possibly match the speed at which he worked with my measly arm strength.

Before I realized it, Ludo Ruu was standing by my side, arms crossed as he watched over his family member working away.

He was almost done with the limbs, but the real work was still to come. After all, he was up against a 90 kilo monster. I'd be getting off light if I managed to finish that in 2-3 hours. And even with the arm strength of a man of the forest's edge, it would certainly be no light task.

Even so, we all sat there silently, nobody making a peep or trying to leave their seat, as the boy who would be the head of his house from tomorrow on sweated and worked away at the giba.

5

"Now then, normally this is where you would just cut off the legs and toss away the rest, right?" I started explaining the dissection process, standing with the stark naked giba behind me. "I'd like to use the torso meat in my cooking too, though, so we'll be dissecting the whole thing. The most important thing here is how you remove the organs."

Ludo Ruu, Shin Ruu, and the other three men were listening to me with such serious looks on their faces that it was almost scary.

It wasn't as if I could sense any animosity or hostility from them. In fact, I just plain couldn't tell what they were thinking. Still, it made it clear to me that there were folks out there who could hold themselves back from showing any unnecessary emotion while on the job. Even if they weren't exactly fond of me, this was still a task they were given directly by their clan head. And I'm certain

that nobody in the Ruu clan at least would let their personal feelings interfere with that. Or at least, I couldn't help but think that after seeing such serious expression from everyone present.

"Giba's organs are packed roughly the same inside as ours are. The heart, lungs, liver, pancreas, kidneys, stomach, large and small intestines, and the like... The ones that you need to be especially careful in how you handle them are the large intestine and bladder, plus the gallbladder under the liver. If those are injured then bile and excrement will flow out and give the meat a stench, making the bloodletting for naught."

"Asuta... I've only heard of the heart and stomach out of those."

"Right. The only option will be to have you see them in person and memorize them. Well then, let's open it up."

"Hold on. Please let me do it," Ludo Ruu said, grabbing a carving knife from the wall.

"Right. Then start with a slit up from the abdomen to the chest. Ah, it may be better to start from the core of the stomach rather than near the thigh. The large intestine is in the abdomen, so take care not to damage it. You just want to cut through the meat."

"Got it," Ludo Ruu replied, gently inserting the tip of his blade into the giba's stomach.

"Now open it up through the chest. Be careful around the abdomen."

Ludo Ruu's brow was sweating. There were windows and the door was open, but the room was seriously hot thanks to the stove being lit. And thanks to the overpowering stench of blood and fat, it felt hard to breathe.

As he held the giba's body wrapped in white fat steady with his other hand, Ludo Ruu carefully moved his blade.

"Right, that's good. Now cut the diaphragm, between the meat and the organs. That membrane there. If you cut it, it's pretty easy to get the innards out."

Ludo Ruu nodded, then plunged his arm and blade into the open abdominal

cavity. Apparently he wasn't the sort to have any concerns about reaching his hand into an animal.

He just had an almost frighteningly serious look on his face. More than his desire for delicious meat, it seemed to be due to his strong will in relation to his work.

"It's cut. What next?"

"Alright, then it's time to start taking them out. Let's start from the abdomen. This area is the large intestine, but it doesn't rupture easily, so you can just pull it out by hand. An organ called the bladder is a little further in, so take care not to touch that."

"Right."

With that, he pulled out a clump of intestines. Part of the way out it got caught on the stomach, so I cut it free with a knife. Then, Ludo Ruu gently placed the lump of guts down atop the pelt spread on the floor.

Next up was the heart, lungs, and then liver, which all went smoothly. Finally, we ended with the testicles and bladder.

"Phew. The bladder here breaks easiest, so be careful with it, please. If we had a small bag, it would probably be best to wrap it in that and then insert a blade."

The men silently nodded.

"Now then, let's move on to the dismembering. You already have it dangling, so let's start by cutting it in half. Ah, no wait, we need to cut off the head first, actually."

With far more skill than I had shown, Shin Ruu had removed the pelt even from the head. But even still, it was important to cut the head off first before splitting the spine.

"Use a blade to cut the neck meat, and then switch to a saw for the bone. And since the saws have probably been used to cut trees, please disinfect it by heating it in the pot first."

Well, I honestly just didn't have any clue what sorts of bacteria and viruses

may exist in this world. But I'd been trying to avoid overly raw or rotten meat, attempting to keep things as hygienic as possible considering the environment.

After the head was sliced cleanly off, we moved on to cutting down the spine vertically. Thanks to the people of the forest's edge having way more muscle than me, it was handled far more speedily and precisely. Then the legs were removed, it was cut horizontally at the waist, and the pelvis and the like were removed, which finished things off most of the way.

"Now all that's left is the head. We need to shave off the meat around the neck and the cheeks. Hmm... I'd really like to tackle the tongue at some point, too..."

"The tongue?"

"Yeah. It's pretty popular back in my old country. I'm sure there are ways of making even these various innards delicious, too. But I don't know how to handle them or how much pico leaves could preserve them, so I've just got to pass them by for now."

"Huh... So you even eat the innards? It's like you'll eat everything but the skin and bones."

"Ah, no, if you cook the fur off you can eat it along with the skin, and you can make stock out of the bones, too. So I guess you could say that you can cook every last part but the horns and tusks."

"Yeah, it'd be a problem if you started eating those too," Ludo Ruu said with a pleasant chuckle as we stood in a room where the stench of blood, meat, and entrails was so strong I was practically choking on it.

As I thought to myself what a nice smile he had, I started, "Now then..." for the umpteenth time. "That finishes us off for now. We won't know for sure how well the bloodletting went until we eat it, but the dissection work was absolutely perfect. In terms of raw amount of meat we should have plenty with two or three more, but I'd like to have enough ribs for everyone too, so I would need some more on top of that. And so, I hope you'll all continue working with me."

Naturally, the men just gave a silent nod.

“Alright, then I guess it’s time to bury it in pico leaves, huh? Shin Ruu, you guys should cut off the horns and tusks.”

“Got it.”

“Hey, Asuta... Will this meat really be tasty now?”

“Yeah, at least as long as the bloodletting went well,” I said with a nod as we transported the mountain of meat atop a plank into the pantry.

“We’ll be giving it a try at dinner tonight, so look forward to it.”

“I’m the one who bloodlet it...” Ludo Ruu said, this time with a bit of a bashful smile. “It’ll just be amazing if it turns out tasty, right?”

“Right. Still, you two really are siblings...”

“Huh?”

“That smile now looked just like Rimee Ruu’s.”

In an instant, Ludo Ruu’s face went beet red.

“What are you saying?! There’s no way I resemble that squirt! Stop messing around, you idiot!”

Now he was getting shaken just like Lala Ruu. Speaking of which, that caused the young girl herself to peek out of the neighboring kitchen.

“What are you causing a fuss about? Asuta, I baked the poitan for dinner.”

“Oh, really? Well then once I’m finished with this, I’ll hurry on back to—” I started to say, only for a new group to suddenly appear. It was Jiza Ruu and Darmu Ruu with a fresh 100 kilo class giba.

“Asuta, we took down three more, but this was the only one we successfully performed bloodletting on. What should we do now?”

“Huh? Ah, um, then could you start by removing the pelt? I’ll be over that way soon.”

“Understood.”

“Hey! What about me, Asuta? There’s still a whole mountain of poitan soup that’s pretty much trash!”

“Don’t call it trash! Once, I’m done here, I’ll hurry over to—”

“Asuta,” Gazraan Rutim now chimed in, having suddenly popped up. His burly arms were holding a young 50 kilo class giba.

“My work is done for the day as well, so I brought along a giba I believe I have successfully bloodlet.”

I was left speechless for a second.

“Alright! We’ll take care of the two of them together! We’re borrowing that dissection room, so could you prepare by skinning the pelt?!”

“Asuta!”

“I know! Um, ah, well... Just prepare a stew for dinner or something! I’ll guide you on the meat dishes!”

With that, I was finally able to make it to the pantry.

“Isn’t everyone coming back a little soon...? And hey, it’s been three of them in one day!”

“I don’t know about the Rutim, but the Ruu have taken down six today, with two of them being successful. We’re not exactly blockheads, you know.”

“Isn’t six in one day a lot? You don’t have sixty family members living here, do you?”

“With the main and branch families combined, there are 38 of us in total. So we can earn enough for the aria and poitan we need with four giba a day. Well, we’ll have time on our hands again once the busy period is over, but my dad and the rest are still out in the forest, y’know?”

I see. Well at any rate, it looked like we would secure the meat needed for the banquet in no time at all. Then the excess should be split amongst the branch families, so they can learn how delicious meat that has been bloodlet is. Then they could decide if they wanted to go through the extra effort of bloodletting and dissecting after the banquet.

This must have been what Gazraan Rutim meant about showing them the way. They were ultimately the ones to decide, and nobody would force them.

“What’s up? Are you regretting having taken on such a big job, Asuta?” Ludo Ruu asked, drawing his face in close. All the while, he made room in the black pico leaf filled meat storage space that was three times the size of the one at the Fa house.

“No, I was thinking I was glad that I did. It sure is a real undertaking, though.”

With that, Ludo Ruu grinned and nudged my arm with his elbow.

“Well I sure am glad. I’m seriously looking forward to both tonight and the banquet. Make sure you don’t betray my expectations, alright?”

“Got it. I’ll give it my all.”

Just like that, the sun steadily set on my first day of work.

6

And then, night arrived.

This was now my third time eating dinner at the Ruu house. The members of the house were already at their seats, and the plates of food were laid out. Roast and leg steak, aria and tino soup made from a shoulder meat stock, a mountain of baked poitan... and my experimental “poitan soup,” mark 1.

Granny Jiba was the last one to take her seat, and when she did, I said, “Um... This lower pot contains an experimental dish for the banquet. I ask that you not think of it as part of the dinner on offer, and just something for those of you with an interest to give a taste test. To be honest it’s still a work in progress, so the taste still isn’t perfected.”

Nobody said anything.

“Well, with that said, if nobody tastes it my experiment will never move forward, so I’d appreciate it if as many people as possible could give it a try. And if you could tell me your impressions, it would be a big help.”

“What are you prattling on about?” the clan head asked, making a face like he found this a real pain. “The Rutim asked us to lend them their aid. Lala, hand that out to everyone.”

“Huh?! Why me...?”

“You manned the stove, didn’t you? You’re the closest to it, so you should serve it.”

The displeasure was clearly showing on her face, but even so, Lala Ruu promptly started pouring the poitan soup into bowls.

“Chef of the Fa clan...”

“Yes? What is it?”

“You have entered into an agreement with the eldest son of the main Rutim house. Then, the Rutim put in a request to the Ruu. That’s all there is to it, so there’s no special connection here between you and our clan.”

“Yes, that’s exactly right.”

“...If you understand that, then just do your job.”

I’m sure he was just telling me not to worry about anything unnecessary, but with his usual intensity added on, it was a little frustrating to hear. Actually, maybe I still had some leftover hesitation and trouble dealing with the Ruu clan, and Donda Ruu saw through that.

That thought only made me more frustrated... Frustrated at my own lack of experience.

“We give thanks for the blessings of the forest...” Donda Ruu muttered, starting off that familiar chant. “We offer our gratitude to Mia Lea, Sati Lea, Lala, and Asuta, who manned the flame and gave us our life for this night...”

With that, the combined dinner/taste testing began.

After all that work from before, I ended up involved in dissecting those other two giba, so almost all of this dinner was made by members of the Ruu clan. I at least supervised the whole time they were handling the meat dishes, including the hamburger for Granny Jiba, but the women were the ones who actually made all that.

And so, I spent the whole time handling just this initial test dish.

Rimee Ruu was the first one to speak up.

“Huh? We just get one bowl each?” she asked in surprise, peering into the lower pot where the flame had already been cut off.

“Yeah, since this is still ultimately just a test product, after all. I’d guess it makes up about two of the three poitan each person needs to eat.”

“Hmm, I see...” she said, not sounding all that disappointed as she put down her empty bowl.

“How was the taste?”

“Huh? Um... I don’t really know.”

I see. Well if she doesn’t really know, then there’s no helping that.

Perhaps because of the understanding that poitan stew tasted even worse if you let it cool, everyone in the family had chosen to gulp down my test dish first, it seemed. As I stole glances at everyone’s faces, I wasn’t exactly feeling all that confident. Granny Tito Min wore a look of doubt, Vina was expressionless, Reina Ruu looked troubled, and Ludo Ruu had a clear frown on his face...

By the way, the reaction from the three of us who manned the stove and thus got to taste it in advance was, “It’s missing something...”

I lacked the skill to tell what the rest of the men were feeling right now. And Ai Fa was amongst that same group, silently continuing on with her meal and placing down her bowl. From what I could see, she had already finished the test dish completely.

“Ah, Ai Fa, about the taste of that dish—”

“It was bad.”

Huh? She seemed like she was in an especially bad mood for some reason. But I was holed up in the kitchen all day, so this was my first time talking to her since this morning. Did something happen while I wasn’t around?

“So, what’s the deal with this poitan stew?” Granny Tito Min asked after about half an hour had passed and the majority of the folks present had finished eating.

“Right. I’ve been experimenting with a poitan soup that would be easier to eat, and for this time, I only added in gigo, tino, and salt.”

“Oh, so there’s gigo in it? I didn’t realize at all.”

I still couldn’t quite identify the gigo. In terms of texture, though, it seemed closest to a Japanese yam.

It crumbled when you boiled it, making for a real viscous gigo stew. It wasn’t bad, eating it just like that, but it lacked any defining flavor. Plus, since I didn’t scrape it all down, that meant a bit of fiber remained.

So next, I tried boiling it together with poitan so that floury nature and viscosity canceled each other out, which made for a rather mellow dish.

Then, I tried pairing it with a number of vegetables and ultimately went with the tino since it seemed safest, then seasoned it with salt.

I was still only at the point where I’d built a foundation, but everyone’s reactions were as follows.

Mia Lea: “I don’t exactly dislike it, but...”

Sati Lea Ruu: “It doesn’t really seem like a food dish, does it?”

Vina Ruu: “I don’t really know...”

Reina Ruu: “It goes down smoothly.”

Lala Ruu: “Seems like a work in progress, still.”

Rimee Ruu: “I just don’t have a clue, either...”

No, well, I mean, it was still just the foundations of a work in progress. I guess it really was difficult to come up with impressions on something that was neither gross nor tasty. I mean, with that manju from the post town, all I could think to say was it tasted “normal.”

“I don’t get why I’ve gotta eat something like this. Don’t go making such boring crap. You’re betraying my expectations, here,” Ludo Ruu said, looking the most dissatisfied of all of them. But then before long, he continued on with a brazen smile, “On the other hand, these baked poitan are crazy tasty. I ate three of them before I even realized it.”

“Ah, yeah! They were yummy! They were all fluffy and bouncy, so I ate lots too!” chimed in Rimee Ruu, who had just been moving all around and looking

bored.



“Yeah, we mixed gigo into those, too. They were made by baking up the failures, but they ended up with a rather nice texture, didn’t they?”

Now that I thought of it, I think I’ve heard that if you mix Japanese yam into okonomiyaki it gets all soft and fluffy. At any rate, this was a happy accident... but my main focus was on making a hot poitan stew.

Then everyone switched over to praising the baked poitan and meat dishes, so apparently the opinions about my test dish had come to a dead end.

Meanwhile, Ai Fa was currently helping Granny Jiba eat her meal. Once Mia Lea Ruu, who had been handling that task up till now, and Granny Jiba herself finished eating, the dinner would be over.

“It may have been a test dish, but my apologies for feeding you all something so dull. I would be grateful if you would continue to help me out from tomorrow on in spite of that.”

I’d intended for that to be the end of things, but after staying perfectly silent up till now, Jiza Ruu said, “Asuta. Our clan head Donda agreed to assist the Rutim, so there’s no need for you to worry yourself over the matter any more than necessary. However... would it be alright if I offered my opinion on the poitan soup from before?”

“Yes, of course.”

“I do not really know what makes a taste good or bad. But I believe that eating the previous sort of stew that we have had up until now would be preferable to this... I had no such thoughts when it came to the baked poitan or the other dishes.”

“I see...”

It seemed like the reaction wasn’t good. Had I made a mistake in the path I chose?

With that, silence fell over the room, and Ai Fa stood up as Granny Jiba had finished her meal. It was then that a voice suddenly resounded through the air, “...Why did you not put in any meat?”

That had come from Donda Ruu.

I was so surprised that I was at a loss for a moment before responding.

“Th-This is ultimately just a test dish, so I decided not to add any as I thought it best to solidify the foundation before starting to consider what sorts of meat would have an affinity with it.”

“Did you really think we’d have nice things to say after you fed us such a half-baked dish?” His tone didn’t exactly make it sound like he was attacking me, but he sounded just as displeased as always. “We heat everything together in the pot, because it’s simplest that way. When we boil meat, we do it together with vegetables. We may eat meat on its own, but it’s unheard of to eat a stew with just vegetables... Never feed us crap like that ever again.”

With that, Donda Ruu slowly got to his feet.

“The dinner is over now. I’m going to sleep.”

That was the signal to disperse.

Those of us who manned the stove cleaned everything up, while everyone else went back to their personal rooms. As I gathered up dishes with a real half-hearted feeling settling over me, Ai Fa returned, a look of displeasure no less than Donda Ruu’s on her face. Then, she told me nothing but, “Granny Jiba is calling for you,” snatched up the giba cloak she had left on the floor, and then exited the house.

Well, Ai Fa didn’t man the stove tonight, but didn’t she feel any obligation thanks to the night’s stay and meal? Or could it be that it was actually rude to try to help out when you were a guest? At any rate, I headed towards Granny Jiba while thinking to myself that I’d have to ask Ai Fa why she was in such a bad mood once I made it back to the vacant house.

“Asuta, thank you for the delicious meal today, too... The food you make really is good...”

“No, you see, Mia Lea Ruu made the hamburger for you tonight. Plus Ludo Ruu is the one who prepared the meat. I may have been giving instructions all the while, but I can definitely say that I didn’t lift a finger there.”

“Is that so? Mia Lea didn’t mention that at all...”

“I’m sure she was just feeling shy about it, right?”

Or maybe she just wasn’t the type to brag about her own achievements. Either way, it was just like her.

“So I’m sure you’ll be just fine from tomorrow on. Please, eat your fill of delicious meat and live a nice long life, Jiba Ruu.”

“I’m glad. Truly, truly glad, Asuta...”

With that, Granny Jiba’s hand, like a shriveled branch yet still warm, took hold of mine. Reina Ruu was by her side, apparently tasked with escorting her back to her bedroom, and her eyes started watering up a bit.

“You’ve brought light to our Ruu clan. All of us have started to enjoy life so much more, not just me. Your blessings have grown to ten in total, and I’m sure one of those came from Donda, yes...?”

“...Yes,” I replied with a nod, only for Reina Ruu’s eyes to open wide in shock.

“Even that headstrong Donda couldn’t help but acknowledge your strength... You truly are a splendid man, Asuta...”

“That’s not true at all. Even now, I’m still just a half-baked chef in training.”

Suddenly, Granny Jiba’s slender back started to tremble.

“What’s the matter? Are you in pain?” Reina Ruu asked in a panic, clinging to Granny Jiba’s back. However, to me, it seemed clear that she was laughing.

“But it’s up to the ones around you to decide that, right, Asuta? Yes, you should live the way that you find proper... Just keep on living in your own way, Asuta...”

“Thank you,” I said, bowing my head.

I felt bad being so overestimated, but I couldn’t help also feeling a little overwhelmed hearing such words from Granny Jiba.

“So, about what Donda said...”

“Huh?”

“To us, a giba stew with all the ingredients heated together is like a symbol of our life force... Young folks like Reina may not understand, but to us obtaining

life force and eating that stew made from giba meat and the blessings granted from their tusks and horns are one and the same. And so, it seems that a stew without giba meat just feels lacking to us, after all...”

“...Right.”

“So if your goal is to come up with a delicious stew for old folks like myself, it may be good to keep that point well in mind...”

“Got it. Thank you... ma’am.”

It was like there was something squirming around in the back of my mind.

Meat. It has to be meat, huh?

Maybe the people of the forest’s edge don’t even want something that goes down so easy in the first place...

But more important is the meat. It’s that meat that makes it a giba stew.

A giba stew, with the meat and vegetables in harmony...

If I leave that core part for later, I may not make it in the four days left to me.

“Well then, Asuta...”

“Right. Goodnight, Jiba Ruu.”

I parted ways with Granny Jiba and Reina Ruu, and then got back to cleaning up.

Meat... Meat, meat, meat, huh...?

I was finally paying attention to vegetables for the first time in a while, but here I was getting dragged right back to giba meat.

Still, giba meat was definitely an ingredient worth taking on. It was a food packed with potential, which also gave it some major versatility.

But man, I never thought I’d get a hint from something Donda Ruu said...

It was a complicated feeling, both vexing and yet somehow pleasant at the same time.

Still, aside from the fact that Darmu Ruu stayed silent from start to finish, I felt it was a rather fruitful test dinner. At this rate, I’d be able to keep on

running full sprint for the next few days. With such thoughts in mind, I felt a little uplifted as I finished up cleaning and left the main Ruu house behind.

After lighting up a borrowed candle, I made my way through the now silent nighttime plaza by my lonesome.

Now that I think of it, Ai Fa headed back without even visiting Granny Jiba in her bedroom...

As that thought ran through my head, I made it back to the vacant house where Ai Fa was waiting. However, when I opened the door, I found that the room inside was pitch-black.

“Huh? Are you here, Ai Fa?”

As I held the candlestick in my hand forward, I lit up the room. Ai Fa was there, lying down in front of a wall with windows. Her back was to me, as per usual. Was she not feeling well, maybe? But she was like a big bundle of vitality, wasn’t she?

While feeling seriously worried, I latched the bolt in a hurry, and then ran over to Ai Fa.

“Ai Fa... are you asleep?”

She didn’t respond.

Still, the elegant contours of her back weren’t moving all that much. From my experience, when someone was sleeping they took much larger breaths, but who knows if that was the case here...

At any rate, I was just so overcome with worry that even if I was hesitant to do so, I decided to try to wake her.

“Hey, Ai Fa—” I said, touching her exposed shoulder. In that instant, her hand came flying at an incredible speed and smacked mine away. “Ow! Are you awake? Then you should’ve responded!”

“I’m sleeping...”

“No, you’re clearly awake! Hey, what’s going on? Are you feeling bad or something?”

Well, I'd at least heard Ai Fa's voice, so I was feeling halfway relieved.

I realized now that my back was sweating so hard that my t-shirt was downright plastered to my body. I must have been panicking a lot more than I thought. But that made sense, seeing how outside of the norm Ai Fa was acting.

I took a seat beside her, figuring if she was just sulking for some stupid reason she would probably say something.

"Hey, if you're not feeling bad, then get up and look at me already. You've been acting strange today. What in the world is up with you?"

"I told you that I'm sleeping..."

"No, you're totally awake! Hey, if you don't give it a rest already, I'll get mad too, y'know?"

"Mad...?"

Huh? Was I just imagining things, thinking I could see an angry aura coming off of the beautiful contours of Ai Fa's back, which was at the same time both womanly yet taut like a leather whip? Yeah, of course that was it, even if I could practically hear that familiar sound effect of menacing anger crashing over me. I mean, it's not like I was in a manga or something.

"Did you say just now that you were mad with me...?"

Gyah.

She lifted the upper half of her body so smoothly that it called to mind a wild leopard.

Her long hair was already undone, so it was sensually spilling over her shoulders and down her back.

I was so frightened that I couldn't even speak.

"...I'm the one who's mad."

She glanced at me over her shoulder, her blue eyes shining. Ah, thank god, that wasn't the look of a hunter in her glare. But still, she was seriously pissed.

"W-Why are you so angry? We were acting separately all day today, right? And you weren't mad when we parted in the morning, right?"

My thoughts were racing, thinking maybe when Ai Fa came back in the evening, she peeked into the kitchen or something. But still, I couldn't think of even a single screw up that would have earned me her anger. I mean, nothing happened between me and the three women there with me. Mia Lea joined in later and was the same as always, and I got the feeling that Sati Lea and Lala Ruu were only just barely starting to open up to me.

"Yeah, I really didn't do anything shady! If you're mad, then at least tell me why!"

"..." A mumble under her breath.

"Hmm? What was that?"

"...Hamburgers."

"Hamburgers? What about hamburgers?"

"...You said we would have hamburgers for dinner tonight."

Huh?

Looking closely, I noticed that Ai Fa's lips had twisted into a childish frown. Her eyes were super angry, but her lips made her look like a little kid.

"H-Hold on! Did I promise that? But Ama Min came this morning, so—"

"...You did, on the way back yesterday."

Ah, now I remember.

It was on the way home from the post town. Around when we were passing the washing place and just about back to our familiar home, I had said, "Then we'll go with hamburgers tomorrow." I mean, she had been begging me with this same sort of childish face back then, after all.

"Y-You're right. I'm sorry! I ended up forgetting completely when I immersed myself in experimenting. Plus I had to explain the dissection process to the men, too, so today was really busy!"

"I have no words for a fool who would break an agreement..."

With that, Ai Fa laid back down.

"An agreement?! You're overblowing this thing! Hey, don't get so sulky over

something like that! Ow...!”

I tried to place my hand on her shoulder again, only for it to once more get slapped away.

“Hey, I’m sorry, already! Tomorrow! Tomorrow, for sure! I absolutely won’t forget! Ai Fa! Ai Fa-san!”

That was how it went, bringing a rather peaceful close to my first day of work in the lead-up to the banquet.

Intermission: An Unexpected Reunion The remaining four days before the banquet flew by at an incredible speed.

While trying to develop my new menu all the while, I had to instruct the men on bloodletting and dissecting and the women on cooking techniques, and also work out the procedure for the day of the banquet. That made for some completely and utterly exhausting days.

But still, the men and women of the forest's edge really were diligent and quick learners. I couldn't just sum it up by saying they were highly skilled or good at swimming with the tide, but at any rate, they were all very serious about things. That must have been down to their work ethic, or perhaps their feelings towards their family.

At any rate, they were hard workers. For the sake of their families and to keep living on, they worked away without any complaints or grumbling. Rather than being cold like machines, it felt more like they were naturally giving their all to work as if it was the same as breathing, yet their emotions like joy and pain were still clearly present.

Should I just say that they were simply earnest, the way that the hunters of the forest's edge saw working and living as directly tied together?

At any rate, it was a very favorable situation for me, and I thought of them as the perfect partners.

The women in particular warranted special mention.

From the second day of preparing onwards, several from the Ruu branch families hastened to join in, too. But even so, they were still incredibly busy. While the men were taking care of the hunting, a wooden stage and simple stoves needed to be constructed for the banquet, and the wood and stone for that needed to be collected, too. And by and large, that was all considered women's work.

Their exhaustion had to be far beyond the norm, seeing how they had to fit in

the lessons on cooking they had never seen before in the midst of all that backbreaking work. And traditionally, they would be done once they finished preparing the usual giba stew and grilled meat, as well as the basic meal preparations and securing of the firewood and ingredients, so I'm sure plenty of them must have thought I was just being a pain and needlessly increasing their workload.

But even so, once they tried out the steak and hamburgers, joy and surprise flashed over their faces, and afterwards they gleefully helped out.

We were able to dissect two or three bloodlet giba a day, so we got ahold of enough meat for the banquet in no time at all. And when we split up the excess meat to send to the five branch families afterwards, those girls shed tears of joy.

I already saw as much with the main Ruu house, but it seemed that women really did appreciate delicious food more than men.

Well, that wasn't so strange, though. After all, it sure was a happy thing, bringing deeper joy and peace of mind to your family through your work. Just being able to share in those thoughts and feelings was enough to make it worth having accepted this job. I was getting a sense of satisfaction here which eclipsed the fear and dread I had, that a heretic like me being involved with the food culture of the forest's edge may have been having a negative effect.

My path and Gazraan Rutim's probably overlapped.

Gaining a greater happiness, and deepening bonds with family... I felt a bit embarrassed despite having been the one to say all that, but he was making his wedding into a manifestation of those ideals.

The men hunted the giba, bloodlet them, skinned their pelts, and dissected them.

The women gathered firewood and herbs, stoked the flames, and cooked the meat.

If either of them were missing, it would be impossible to make a delicious meal. It was only possible to accomplish with the whole family coming together and combining their strengths.

And that young hunter must have been thinking that he would share this greater happiness with 100 of those folks related to him, in turn deeping their bonds and gaining a greater strength amongst them.

I was giving all my strength in order to respond to that desire.

I felt a strong desire to carry out my work so that it could make even one person feel more happy in this harsh environment.

Amongst all of this, there was a bit of an incident two days before the banquet, at noon on my third day of staying at the Ruu settlement.

◇

“A-A-Asuta! It’s awful! Hurry up and come here! It’s the men, and it’s just *awful!*” Rimee Ruu yelled out to me, letting me know of the uproar.

I was holed up in the kitchen all morning on that day too, and around noon I was teaching a group of women how to prepare hamburgers.

“What’s wrong with the men? They’re only just heading out to hunt, right?”

There were five women with me in the kitchen. That included Reina and Tito Min Ruu, and the rest were from the branch families. When Rimee Ruu came flying into the mix, she looked like she was about to break out sobbing.

“Some strange guy showed up! It’s all about to break out with the men! Darmu even drew his blade! Anyway, it’s just awful!”

I could feel a tension running through my chest.

“A strange guy? It isn’t one of the Suun men, is it?”

“No! It’s a guy from the city of stone!”

“...What?”

“It’s a man with pretty hair like Ai Fa’s! He was asking where the Fa house was!”

I stood there dumbfounded.

A blond haired man from the city of stone... That was undoubtedly Kamyua Yoshu. I couldn’t imagine it being anyone else.

But what was that guy doing here, at the forest's edge?

"...Sorry. I'm going to go check it out. You'll have to handle things here as far as you know how to, but could you explain in my place, Tito Min Ruu?"

"I don't mind, but you-"

"It's too dangerous, Asuta!" Reina Ruu yelled, clinging to me.

She looked even more like she was about to cry than even Rimee Ruu did.

I got my breathing back in order a bit, then gently pushed her shoulders away.

"It's alright. I won't do anything dangerous. Just wait for me here, and don't worry."

I went flying out of the kitchen together with Rimee Ruu.

We slipped around the side of the house and into the central plaza, and I soon saw the sight that had Rimee Ruu so flustered: There was a crowd of people at the entrance to the plaza.

It was around the time that the men headed out into the forest. And so, the full group of Ruu hunters was gathered there, now numbering 16 since Ryada Ruu had retired.

And sure enough, I could see the colors of a familiar long cloak amidst the brawny group of men.

"Hold on! Just hold on, please!" I yelled as I ran. However, nobody turned around to look. But I sort of did get the feeling Donda Ruu shot me a sideways glance from his particularly high vantage point above everyone else.

"...Leave this place! This is no place for people from the city!"

Finally, I had heard a voice belonging to someone I recognized: the second son of the main Ruu house, Darmu Ruu.

Darmu Ruu was standing face to face with the man, brandishing his savage blade.

As for the man... He was about as tall as Donda Ruu, but he had a lanky figure. He wore a long leather cloak, and had a strange sort of gaze that made him look both like an old and young man at the same time. Yeah, it was Kamyua Yoshu

standing right there.

“Hey. Looks like I finally found you, Asuta of the Fa clan,” he said in the same aloof tone of voice as always, despite the tip of the blade practically touching his nose.

If Darmu Ruu took just one step closer he would be close enough to cut the man’s head off. And yet, Kamyua Yoshu gave a relaxed look back, not even bothering to so much as open up his cloak.

“I just tried to ask where you lived, and this is how things ended up. But I’m seriously glad I met you. Umm, what has it been, four days now?”

“Silence! I’m the one talking to you here!” Darmu Ruu bellowed. His eyes looked like flames, and his face that reminded me of a wild wolf was pulled taut with rage. He was like a big, seething kettle of bloodlust.

I detoured around the group of men, and stood right beside the two who were squaring off.

Suddenly, Rimee Ruu clung to my left arm. Wait, she followed me this far? At any rate, I leaned over and tried to cover her tiny body at least a little.

“Asuta, won’t you tell him, too? I most certainly don’t mean any harm. I just came here to talk with you as part of my preliminary inspection before my job as a bodyguard.”

“Can you please just be quiet for a second! This seems like it’s already turning into a real complicated mess!”

My thoughts were seriously jumbled at the moment, but even so I wasn’t foolish enough to address Darmu Ruu directly, so I instead glanced up at Donda Ruu’s massive frame.

“Donda Ruu, he’s an acquaintance of mine! We met him when we went to the post town for shopping, four days ago! I don’t know if he’s a good person or not just yet, but... At the very least, I don’t think he’s the sort to cause any trouble!”

“Hey, come on, can’t you pick up on my innate goodness?”

“Enough already! You need to be quiet!”

While looking my way out of the corner of his eye, Donda Ruu walked up

beside his son.

“You, from the city. You said before that you came to this settlement at the forest’s edge for work, didn’t you?”

“That’s right. I’m tasked with guarding a merchant convoy heading from the Genos domain to the eastern kingdom. They’re scheduled to pass through this settlement along the way.”

He was still acting like this, despite facing the usual pressure coming off of Donda Ruu.

They may have been the same height, but their widths and depths were completely and utterly different. It honestly felt like a brown bear and a praying mantis facing off.

“It’s been about a decade since we’ve had such eccentrics pass through. And those folks from ten years back got attacked by giba along the way and all ended up dead, from what I heard.”

“Yes. Apparently starving giba will even attack travelers for their rations... Well, it’s not known for certain that it was giba that got them, though.”

Donda Ruu’s eyes narrowed. I couldn’t spy any other changes in his expression or demeanor, but it felt like his gaze only grew denser and more powerful as his eyebrows lowered.

Suddenly, I got poked in the head from behind with a, “Hey, what are you idiots doing?” When I turned around, I saw Ludo Ruu, with his eyes halfway hardened into the glare of a hunter. He grabbed onto our arms.

“Stand back a bit further. You shouldn’t get so close to someone with a drawn blade... No wait, seriously, what are you doing here, Rimee, you runt?!”

“S-Shut up!”

Kamyua Yoshu must have overheard their conversation, since he broke out into a bit of a smile. And as a result, the look on Darmu Ruu’s face grew even more dangerous as Donda Ruu’s eyes narrowed further.

“...All work related to people from the city is supposed to be managed entirely by the Suun clan, who lead our people. Why are you wandering around

in a place like this all on your own, not even accompanied by one of them?”

“Ah, well, there was a request to have someone show me around. But you see, I told them I was fine on my own for today as I was just doing a preliminary inspection, so they told me to do as I please. They didn’t contact you?”

Donda Ruu muttered a “Those scum...” towards nobody present at the moment, and his eyes blazed with rage for a moment.

“Well then, what’s this about you having business with the Fa clan? Just what sort of relationship do you have?”

That question was directed towards me.

This was the decisive moment.

Should I make up a harmless and inoffensive lie, or come out and tell the truth...? Which would be the best path for Ai Fa’s sake?

“Asuta, why not just tell the tale in a manner that’s most convenient to you?” Kamyua Yoshu asked in a somber tone. Naturally, everyone around us could hear him clearly.

As I thought to myself, *Damn it, maybe it’d be quicker to just let Darmu Ruu cut him down...* I made up my mind.

“...Ai Fa ended up in a fight with someone from the Suun clan in the post town. It looked like we were going to end up getting taken away by the guards, but then this man, Kamyua Yoshu, intervened.”

In an instant, Donda Ruu’s eyes exploded in blue flames. But his expression remained firm even so, and he asked in a low voice, “What was the name of that member of the Suun clan?”

“He gave the name Doddo Suun. He was a young man with a square face, and wasn’t all that tall but seemed well built.”

“Doddo Suun... The second son of the main house, is it?”

Donda Ruu’s beastly gaze moved from me to Kamyua Yoshu, only for the man to shoot back a satisfied smile.

“I don’t know if I should call it modest or what, but isn’t that explanation a

little lacking, Asuta? I mean, you didn't even clarify whether it was Ai Fa or that Doddo Suun man who was at fault. Ahem... That Doddo Suun fellow was intoxicated in the middle of the day, and pointed his blade at a citizen of the post town. And then, Ai Fa stopped him by force, which is the truth of the matter. Well, the townsperson was also at fault for speaking ill of him behind his back, but he didn't have a weapon. And an action such as that is forbidden by Genos laws, too."

Everyone was silent.

"And so, that man tried to use his privileges as a member of the Suun clan to trick the guards into believing Ai Fa was at fault. That was when I stepped in and offered my testimony, having seen the events in full, bringing things to a close without incident. That's how it happened."

"So, what business do you have with the Fa clan...?"

"Well you see, Ai Fa and Asuta just both seemed like such nice folks that I wanted to meet them again and talk. Ah...! I forgot to mention how you saved Tara at the risk of your own life, Asuta! You know, she wanted to see you, too."

I ground my teeth, seriously wanting to just tell him to shut up already. He hadn't told a single lie, but everything this guy said just sounded flimsy.

"...This kid here has a job. He doesn't have free time to spend talking to a guy like you."

"Ah, is that so? How unfortunate."

"Leave."

"I see. In that case, I'll give up for today... Will I be permitted to try to visit the Fa house some other day?"

"...It should be singularly obvious that residents of the city of stone should not rashly set foot in the forest's edge."

"Is that so? Then I suppose I'll have to fabricate a more serious job."

"You bastard...!" Darmu Ruu growled, grinding his teeth. The whole time this conversation had been unfolding, his blade had remained up against Kamyua Yoshu's nose.

However, Kamyua Yoshu’s expression was perfectly composed, and he went ahead and shot me a smile.

“Asuta, when will your work be finished?”

“I-I’ll finish up the day after tomorrow, but...”

“Then expect me again three days from now.”

Kamyua Yoshu then turned his unusual purple eyes towards Donda Ruu.

“I am a citizen of the west, Kamyua Yoshu the bodyguard. May I ask your name, hunter of the forest’s edge?”

“...The head of the Ruu clan, Donda Ruu.”

“Donda Ruu of the Ruu clan... Thank you. I do believe I’d like to drink together with you someday.”

With that, Kamyua Yoshu suddenly moved to leave.

Darmu Ruu looked like he was about to hurry after the man, only for Donda Ruu to place his thick hand on his son’s shoulder.

“Well then, take care,” Kamyua Yoshu said as he left, causing a real stir not just in me, but in the Ruu men as well.

Chapter 4: The Rutim Banquet (Part 1)

1

Dawn broke, and the day arrived at last.

That is, the day of my first job, handling Gazraan Rutim and Ama Min's wedding banquet.

"Hey... What, you're up already?"

When I awoke in the vacant Ruu house, Ai Fa was sitting cross-legged in the middle of the room, doing up her long blonde hair with both hands.

"So you're up as well? It's still too early to start working. You can go ahead and sleep longer."

"No, I'm the type that can't go back to sleep once I'm up. And I don't seem to be feeling tired at all, anyway," I said while giving a stretch.

Sure seemed like a nice morning. And I was feeling great, too.

"The banquet will last till midnight. You won't have any time to rest between midday and then, so you should sleep a little more now."

Huh? She's being unusually kind there, isn't she? Was she worrying about me, because I took on this huge job?

At any rate, I sure was having a happy start to my day.

"It's fine. It'll be nothing compared to these last five days. After all, now I just need to put all the work I've done up till now into motion... Well, that may not be so simple to pull off, though."

"In that case, you should save your strength. Just rest."

Hmm? It was starting to feel a bit less like she was just worrying about me, somehow.

"Now that I think of it, aren't you going to be helping me out today? So in that case, shouldn't you not have anything to do if I'm not awake?"

Ai Fa didn’t say a word.

“Just where were you planning on heading this early in the morning?”

“...I intended to borrow their bath and cleanse myself before work,” she said, glaring at me with her wildcat-like eyes. “So you just stay asleep.”

“Um... Now that you’ve said that, there won’t be any more unfortunate accidents, right? And hey, do I really look like the sort of guy to repeat that sort of mistake again and again?”

No response.

“Do I?! That sure is disappointing! Alright... If I do something unforgivable and break that taboo again, then you can just follow the customs and take my eyes.”

“What use do I have for those...?”

I refrained from quipping back, “Then do you want me to marry you?” and just silently exited the house alongside Ai Fa.

Now that I thought of it, Ai Fa had intended to leave the Ruu settlement this morning and spend the time till tomorrow morning in her own house. She had said, “As a member of the Fa clan, I am not qualified to participate in a Rutim banquet,” or some such. But I responded, “That’s just ridiculous!” and had her assigned as one of my cooking assistants so that she stayed here.

I couldn’t even stand imagining Ai Fa all alone sipping her handmade giba stew, while Granny Jiba and Rimee Ruu were participating in the banquet.

When I asked Gazraan Rutim about the matter, he just said, “Do as you please, Asuta.” Actually, he had a bit of a dubious look on his face, as if to say he figured that had been the plan from the start. Gazraan Rutim was an innovator who planned to have someone who wasn’t even related to him man the stove for his wedding, so compared to him it was no surprise that Ai Fa would be quite a bit more stubborn and inflexible.

At first Ai Fa was hesitant, but when I passionately insisted, “Please, let me carry out my duty today too, as the one who mans the Fa clan’s stove,” she relented in the end.

And so, that was how we ended up walking side by side to the main Ruu house like this. We just leisurely strolled along through the main plaza, seeing how it was now completely set up for the banquet.

There were now 10 stoves in total set up in the plaza. They were just put together out of white stones, and seemed rather simple in their construction. With the way they were built, heat would escape here and there, so I wouldn't be able to satisfactorily use different flame strengths, like I had practiced. And so, all the cooking was going to be done in advance in the kitchens of the various houses, and these stoves would just be used to keep everything warm.

There was already a massive wooden stage in front of the main Ruu house that was meant for the bride and groom, and the logs for the ceremonial fire were assembled in the center of the plaza. All of this had been set up by the Ruu women over the last few days.

The plaza was about half the size of a school's grounds, but once there were 100 people here, it was sure to be plenty bustling and lively. I got excited just thinking about it, and that feeling was only growing stronger.

That many people would be eating my cooking. The thought made me feel proud... and also frightened.

I felt strange and my pulse started to race for a moment, but then I looked over at Ai Fa's face and calmed back down.

Ai Fa's expression was the same as always, never changing.

"Hmm... Is it alright if I say something a little weird?"

"I firmly refuse."

"It really makes me feel at ease, being able to be with you all the time from the morning onward."

"...Are you saying you want to follow me even to the bath?"

"No! Can we please just get away from that topic already?!"

Ai Fa shrugged her shoulders, which was rather unlike her.

"These five days have been special. Once tomorrow comes, we shall return to our former lifestyle."

“Yeah. And I mean, I’m plenty happy about that, too.”

As Ai Fa glared at me, her face went ever so slightly red. Honestly, I was feeling pretty embarrassed too, but I still somehow felt like I won.

“But tomorrow that Kamyua Yoshu man shall be coming to visit, right?”

“Ah, now that you mention it, that’s right. Still, just what sort of nerves must that old guy have, to be willing to charge into the forest’s edge all on his own? Seriously, if he screwed up even slightly, Darmu Ruu would’ve cut him down.”

Ai Fa looked like she was thinking something.

“Hmm?”

“Darmu Ruu couldn’t defeat that man.”

Our conversation had somehow taken a rather violent turn so early in the morning.

As we were having this discussion, we detoured around the massive two meter high stage and arrived at the main Ruu house, where we ran into Granny Tito Min coming out of the entrance holding an axe.

“Oh, my, you’re rather early, Asuta and Ai Fa. The girls are all bathing, so feel free to join in if you like, Ai Fa.”

Ai Fa’s glare was drilling a hole through my cheek. I was about to insist, “I swear, I won’t come anywhere near you!” but Granny Tito Min was right there, so I couldn’t.

“You’re heading for the kitchen, right, Asuta? I’m heading out back too, so I’ll lead you there.”

“Thank you. So you’re chopping firewood this early in the day? Ah, sorry... It’s thanks to me burning up so much, isn’t it?”

“That’s for sure. It’s the first time we’ve ever had the firewood run out anywhere near this fast. I chop, and I chop, but I just can’t keep up.”

“I really am sorry.”

“I’m just kidding. It’s all for the sake of your delicious cooking, right?” she said with a wide, gentle grin.

My old man didn't get along with his family, and my mom's parents passed away young, so I didn't have any memories of my grandparents. She was always bright and cheerful, but also had an incredibly composed dignity about her, so I thought that Granny Tito Min really must have been a splendid grandmother.

Granny Tito Min married Granny Jiba's son and they had Donda Ruu, who then married Mia Lea and they had seven children, and then their eldest son, Jiza Ruu, married Sati Lea Ruu and Kota Ruu was born... In that way, the Ruu bloodline had carried on unbroken.

If the other six get married, I'd sure like to man the stove for their weddings like I am today.

Well, I was certain that dream would never become reality as long as Donda Ruu was clan head and Jiza Ruu was his heir. But over the past five days, I had grown close enough to the members of the Ruu clan that I couldn't help but hold that dream.

"Well then, I shall borrow your bath," Ai Fa said while shooting me one last glare, then walked away down the path surrounded by greenery.

I swore in my heart that that was no preface or omen, and I wouldn't go anywhere near the bath until the women returned.

Knowing nothing of those thoughts of mine, Granny Tito Min said, "Go ahead and use them freely, as you please," and opened up the doors to the kitchen, pantry, and dissection room.

The custom was a bit of a pain, but I needed to have someone from the house open up each of the doors first thing in the morning. That was how they did things in this settlement, as they didn't use any locks.

Now then...

The banquet would start in the early evening. That meant I needed to finish all of the cooking before then, but there was only one task I needed to take care of at the moment: the preparations for the new dish I had perfected for today, giba meat and tarapa stew.

I had asked myself how to make poitan delicious as a liquid, and this was the answer I had reached. What I ultimately chose as my partner wasn't the

Japanese yam-esque gigo, but the tomato-like tarapa.

This dish took a good bit longer to cook than my others, so it wasn't a bad idea to start early. Once I finished it I could just heat it back up for the main event, making it the most fitting dish to take care of first.

To start with, I carried the bag of aria I had set aside yesterday out of the pantry, then diced all of them. Of course, I intended to use them as a sort of pot herb, but it certainly wasn't normal to be using this many at this step. But since there were going to be 100 people, that meant I needed to use fifty of them.

Even if it was just a wooden plate's worth per person, I wanted everyone there to eat it. So with that thought in mind, I decided I needed to make four pots filled to the brim with the stuff.

And so, I single-mindedly did nothing but chop away at those pseudo-onions, the aria. I chopped and chopped and kept on chopping. If these had been real onions, I would've been crying up a storm by now. But aria didn't sting the eyes, so I just kept chopping.

10 minutes later I had finished dicing them all, but then I realized something: I didn't have any pots!

I see. The women were also cleaning up after last night's dinner while they were bathing. I'd doubt my own sanity if I just said "Oh, so that was it!" and headed off towards the bath, though. But fortunately, I didn't have to get anywhere near causing such a tragedy, as Reina Ruu soon showed up looking flustered, with wet hair and holding a pot.



“S-Sorry! When I heard that you were already cooking, I hurried up and washed a pot for you to use!”

“Thanks. You really saved me, Reina Ruu.”

Perhaps because she had been in the middle of her bath, her long black hair ran down her back rather than being done up in its usual braids, causing her to look sort of like a different person entirely and catching me off guard. And she was also in a single piece outfit like her mother, which was certainly fresh.

“Ah, s-sorry! I’ve let you see me in such an improper state...” Reina Ruu said, her face turning red even though she was actually showing less skin than usual.

“Um, once we’re done washing them all, we’ll get the rest to you soon, so...”

“Don’t worry. I won’t go anywhere near the bath, no matter what.”

Reina Ruu breathed a sigh of relief, then said, “Well then, excuse me,” and took off running.

I felt a little hurt to see how worried she had been, but at any rate, I lit the stove, heated up the pot, dropped in some giba fat, and then threw in the diced aria. Naturally, since I used fifty of them there was an awful lot, so it took five goes before I had them all fried up. I heated them up till they turned a yellowish brown, then added some fruit wine for flavoring at the end, and finally transferred them to a wooden plate once all the alcohol burned off.

Once I had repeated that process five times, it was time to move on to the meat.

I had 15 kilos each of both shoulder and thigh meat, adding up to 30 kilos in total. That was quite the quantity to handle, too. Anyway, I cut it all up into bite-sized pieces.

Around when I finished with that, another pot came tottering in, held by Rimee Ruu.

“Sorry for the wait! Everyone will bring the other two later!”

“Right, thanks.”

It looked like she had properly finished bathing. Her reddish brown hair

looked nice and soft, but she was wearing her usual attire.

“You’re already preparing the stew? I’ll help out, too!”

“Ah, really? In that case, could you go get the tarapa? I believe there should have been eight fresh ones bought just yesterday.”

“Tarapa, right? Got it! Tehehe...”

“Hmm? What is it?”

“Nothing. I was just thinking how glad I am that you’re not a bad person.”

With that, Rimee Ruu took off running into the pantry.

Hmm?

Was she saying that because I was working away this early in the morning?

While thinking it’d be nice if that was what she meant, I started cooking the giba meat.

Just grilling it till it got a bit of color was plenty. I took advantage of the size of the pan and fried up chunks one after another, then secured them on wooden plates once they were done.

It was easy to say, but it was still 30 whole kilos of meat. In no time at all, the whole kitchen was filled with the overwhelming scent of meat and fat.

At any rate, next up was aria, this time meant as a proper ingredient rather than just flavoring. I used fifty for that too, and I just single-mindedly chopped away at them.

In the meantime, thanks to Rimee Ruu’s efforts I ended up with eight tarapa sitting on the stand next to me.

They were like tomatoes that were the size of pumpkins. It had a ribbed shape too, so it really was a lot like a pumpkin. But the color and taste were just like those of a tomato.

At any rate, this vegetable I had previously benched was being tasked with serving as the base for the dish’s flavor.

“That’s a whole lot of aria! Should I cut some too?”

“Ah, before that, I’d like to have you bring out the tino and chatchi. All the ones in bags, if you don’t mind.”

“Got it!”

It may have been early in the morning, but Rimee Ruu was already bursting with energy, earnestness, and adorableness. If she were my daughter or little sister or something, I’m sure she’d be the apple of my eye.

As that thought was running through my head, the remaining sisters and Ai Fa made it to the kitchen, carrying the other pots and utensils. It would seem that I made it through this ordeal without needing to have my eyeballs scooped out.

“Here, we brought them! Geez, my heart started pounding when I heard you had started cooking,” Lala Ruu whispered into my ear.

I gave Reina Ruu an ambiguous smile, since she really had dispatched everyone.

“So you didn’t come visit us today...?” Vina whispered into my ear. She would be beet red if it really happened, so seriously, what was she saying?

“We need to take turns with our mother and the rest, but once that’s over, we’ll come help you out.”

“Thank you, Lala Ruu.”

“They’ll be bathing next. You understand what I’m telling you, right?”

I do, from the depths of my heart.

And hey wait, just what sort of person do you think I am, exactly?

It was then that Rimee Ruu returned with a, “Gah, this is heavy!”

Tino were like slightly larger heads of lettuce, and there were six of them packed in the bag, but Rimee Ruu had managed to carry a metal pot on her own, so it really shouldn’t have been too heavy of a burden for her. It must have just been that it was too bulky and unwieldy to manage with her tiny body.

And man, did she ever look adorable.

“Asuta, sorry for the wait! All that’s left is the chatchi, right?”

“I’ll go get that. How about you help with the cutting, Rimee Ruu?” Ai Fa offered.

“Yeah!”

Ai Fa speedily headed into the pantry, while Rimee Ruu grabbed a knife meant for preparing vegetables from the wall.

The people of the forest’s edge sure were diligent learners. As soon as they grasped the process, things started moving forward incredibly smoothly.

“In that case, shall I leave the tino up to you, Rimee Ruu? You know how big they should be, right?”

“Yeah, bite sized!”

Rimee Ruu happily chopped away with her kitchen knife.

The three older girls put away the utensils and dishes, then exited out the door only for Ai Fa to return with the bag of chatchi in their place.

“This is the chatchi, right? What should I do now?”

“Ah, could you peel the skin off of those, then? You can just do it with your hands.”

Chatchi was a fruit that was like a yellow-skinned orange. When you peeled the skin, though, a slippery white sphere popped out. And so, when Ai Fa put some force into her efforts, sure enough, that slippery little sphere went flying.

After letting out a surprised, “Wah!” Ai Fa then proceeded to kick me in the leg.

“Why are you kicking me?!”

“Oh shut up...”

“Ahaha,” Rimee Ruu laughed.

Before I had even realized it, we were down to just the trio of me, Ai Fa, and Rimee Ruu. There was a nice calm feeling in the air, so I decided to let that unwarranted kick just slide on by.

“Once you’ve finished peeling them, please wash them in water until the sliminess is all gone.”

The chatchi was a new addition I had discovered in the pantry. It clearly looked to be a citrus fruit on the outside, but on the inside it was strikingly similar to a potato. And unlike the poitan which looked just like a potato, this had the exact same sort of taste and texture, too.

After Ai Fa washed them, I split them down the middle, and then chopped them up into roughly three-centimeter sized chunks.

With that, the preparations were finally complete.

Fifty aria, diced up and fried to use for flavoring.

Another fifty aria, cut into wedges.

30 chatchi and six tino, chopped into bite-sized pieces.

30 kilos of giba shoulder and thigh meat, with the surface grilled.

Finally, eight massive tomatoes, the tarapa.

I had to cook all this up before laying hands on that accursed poitan... Or put another way, I needed to use all of these different ingredients in order to conquer it.

This is the best I can manage, as I am now.

Poitan broth was sticky like flour dissolved in water, and was hard to get down.

Seriously, why was poitan such a pain?

My hypothesis was that it was down to a result of lack of seasonings to add flavor.

At the forest's edge, people only used rock salt, pico leaves, and at most sometimes fruit wine for seasoning. And so, no matter what it just had a bland, mild flavor. I could make a fine stock out of meat and vegetables, but it would be difficult to neutralize the poitan's peculiar taste with that alone.

It was then that the thought of a stew came to mind. After all, a stew often made use of the stickiness provided by flour.

With the ingredients on hand at the forest's edge, though, a beef stew or cream stew would just be way too hard to make.

It was then that my attention turned to the strong vegetable taste of the tarapa.

The tarapa was more acidic than the tomatoes I was familiar with, but by using the aria as a pot herb, the fruit wine, and the black pepper-esque pico leaves, I was able to create a flavor that called to mind italian tomato sauce. And so, I decided to use this as a base to create a unique stew all my own.

To be honest, it was like an original combination of the Tsurumi Restaurant's popular beef stew and tomato simmered hamburger dishes.

"Alright. Please light the remaining stoves, you two. Make it a strong flame, but not too strong."

As I said that, I eyeballed it out and added about a fourth of the ingredients into each of the heated pots.

Aria in place of onion. Tino in place of cabbage. Chatchi in place of potato. Those were my three main tools.

Once the aria were nice and soft I added in the giba meat and a bottle of fruit wine, filling the kitchen with a sweet aroma. Once it was nice and boiling I scooped away the scum, then poured in plenty of water with a ladle.

I'd estimate that it filled about 80% of the pot.

After I added the water, I regulated it down to a low flame.

It needed two whole hours just to heat half of the total amount we needed.

There wasn't any bouillon around, so my plan was to get a nice broth out of the ingredients themselves.

I managed to copy the same steps over three of the pots, but then I stopped at the last one.

"Ah, Rimee Ruu, I'm using this fruit wine for a different dish. Sorry, but could you swap it out for a different bottle?"

"Hmm? Huh? Now that you mention it, the container is sort of different."

That was the container of fruit wine I had received from Kamyua Yoshu a few days ago. I thought I may have a use for it so I had Ai Fa bring it from the house

three days ago, but its time to shine was still to come.

When I added in the fruit wine that Rimee Ruu brought me and finished up the final pot, we finally hit our first lull when we could take break.

We all wiped away some sweat, then walked over to the door to cool off.

I still had to scoop scum and occasionally add in some firewood, though, so I couldn't go far.

"This is amazing. Now you're using the poitan and even the tarapa. I've never seen a giba stew that uses so many vegetables at once before!"

"Yeah, I can see that. Well, today is a celebration, so it's something special."

A mulligan stew using all sorts of ingredients, with the giba meat and vegetables that were said to be like a symbol of the life force they obtained from it... And the aria and poitan in particular were said to be indispensable in living a healthy life.

I'm sure that custom was born solely out of them being so cheap, but still... There was no need to pointlessly bend a tradition that had existed for 80 years now. Even if those ingredients were hard to stomach, you just had to cook them in a way that made them easy to eat.

I had also thought up the idea of heating the poitan up and then grilling it rather than boiling it, but it was possible that there were folks out there who would only eat it as a liquid, and would see it as nothing but an oddity when it was in solid form. I racked my brains over what to do for those people, but then Granny Jiba and Donda Ruu's words that heating everything together was like a symbol of their life force gave me the revelation I needed to arrive at this giba meat and tarapa stew.

Currently, I was heating the meat and vegetables up according to the basic outline used for beef stew. Afterwards, I would use boiled tarapa's flavor as a base to make a tarapa sauce. Then when I added the poitan, it would have the basic appearance of a stew.

Normally I would have fried flour up with butter to make a brown roux, but I couldn't exactly pull that off here. I mean, I didn't have any ingredients like butter to start with, and when I tried frying the floury poitan with giba fat, it

just sputtered and burned and ended up totally useless.

But still, I was able to achieve that sticky texture just by throwing a raw poitan in, anyway. And that way was more in agreement with the concept of heating everything together.

I couldn't help but worry if that was too simple of a method, but it turned out well. As long as I didn't screw up the amount of poitan I added, it really did come out like a proper stew.

This was the result I had arrived at after wringing out every ounce of my ability for five days straight.

And it would serve as what we call the hors d'oeuvre. I'd set up the schedule with the familiar dish first to try to ease the doubts of the guests, even if it might only calm a few of them, before I brought out the more unusual dishes like hamburgers, spare ribs, and baked poitan afterwards.

God only knows what the result would be, though.

"Well, it's not exactly my usual way of doing things, throwing around such expensive vegetables and making such an elaborate dish... But I decided it was alright because it's such an important occasion."

"It should be fine! I mean, it was super yummy! I think this stew may be my favorite out of all the stuff you taught me about, Asuta."

"I see. Then I guess you'll have to make it when your big sisters get married."

"Huh?! You won't be making it?!"

Rimee Ruu seemed to have taken a great enough blow that it was like I could see the word "stunned" floating over her head.

"No, but I mean, there's no way that I'll be allowed to man the stove for a Ruu wedding, right? You've really got to consider your dad's disposition here."

"Huh?! It's fine! I mean..." Rimee Ruu started, her innocent little face brimming with the sort of mischief that was rare for her. "Didn't you see papa Donda's face after he ate that stew the day before yesterday? He went all 'guh.' 'Guh!'"

"He sure did. I thought he was going to flip over the pot."

“No, that was the sound of him being surprised at how tasty it was! I’m sure it was him almost letting ‘So good!’ slip out!”

“Really? I never even imagined that.”

“I’m super sure! I just know! So... when I get married, you’ve gotta make it, alright?”

That left me at a loss for words.

I stole a sideways glance, and saw that Ai Fa was just silently staring at the flickering flames of the stove.

As Rimee Ruu looked up at me with expectation sparkling in her eyes, I placed my hand on her little head and said, “Right... When that time comes, I’d definitely like to make it.”

At least if I remained in this world till that day came...

2

The three of us shared some light conversation while adding firewood now and again, and before too long, Lala and Reina Ruu returned.

“Hey, we brought pots!”

Just as Lala Ruu had said, they were each carrying a pot. They must have borrowed them from one of the branch families.

Unsurprisingly, this main house had the largest kitchen of the seven in the settlement, so I went ahead and designated it as my headquarters. However, they still only had four of the crucial pots and they were all soon taken up by my stew, so I decided to amass some of the pots and personnel from the branch families here.

Up until now I had been having the women of the branch families assist me in shifts, but for today the plan was to have them all help out. Actually, they should already have started baking poitan and chopping vegetables around now...

Which houses would prepare which dishes? How many pots and people

would each house need to do that? Working backwards from those questions to create a schedule and assign shifts was the most bothersome part for me.

“What should we do with these pots? Were they for the tarapa going into the stew?”

“Ah, right, since we have enough people around now, should we go ahead and take care of that? Once we’re done with this, we’ll have it pretty easy until the sun hits its peak.”

I left the boiling to Ai Fa and Rimee Ruu, and then went outside with Lala Ruu to prepare the tomato, er, tarapa sauce.

We needed a tremendous amount of this stuff, too, but it was very simple to prepare. All I needed to do was take the diced aria I had fried first and then heat them up together with some thick slices of tarapa and fruit wine, and then finally conclude things by fine-tuning the taste with salt and pico leaves.

If I were being greedy, I would love having some garlic and basil on hand, but this sauce still earned passing marks. It took some time and effort to make it into a stew, but I’d also like to try pouring it over meat and heating it together with vegetables, and if those turned out well I could definitely see myself using them.

“How weird. To think that sour tarapa could turn into something this easy to eat...” Lala Ruu muttered while stirring the deep red, simmering tarapa so that it wouldn’t burn.

“It’s thanks to the sweetness from the fruit wine and the aria. I should have thought of it sooner...”

Lala Ruu seemed to have become a whole lot gentler over these past five days. The rough way she spoke was just down to her personality, but as long as she wasn’t getting hotheaded, she was actually a pretty earnest and adorable young girl.

“Ah, right, you hated tarapa, didn’t you, Lala Ruu?”

“Yeah. But now, I love it.”

That’s what I like to hear.

I had thought this girl seriously hated my guts, but now I was able to have such a nice, warm, nonchalant conversation with her.

It was then that I suddenly felt a disquieting gaze on my cheek, and I turned to look. I saw Reina Ruu with a sort of sad expression on her face, but she quickly looked away.

What was that about...? Wasn't Ai Fa supposed to pretty much have a monopoly on shooting me an icy glare at times like this?

As those thoughts ran through my head, Ludo Ruu popped up while yawning.

"What, you've started already? Man, it's sweltering out... Hey, Asuta, let's go bathe. All the women are done, right?"

"Ah, no, I'm fine doing it later. I'll be at a stopping point once I finish this off."

"What's the point of having three folks clinging around two stoves? Or are you saying you can't manage anything without Asuta? The men are all already preparing giba, you know."

"Shut up! You just want to go bathe, right? We don't need Asuta at all!"

Why exactly did I have to get thrown under the bus, here?

"Go ahead. We'll watch over the pots, so please go with him," Reina Ruu said with a smile, though I could still spy some sadness in her gaze.

"Got it. Well then, I guess I'll join you... Your mom and them really are done, aren't they?"

"I can't exactly have you marry into the family unless they're unmarried, right?"

"No, but..."

"Dad and Jiza would just kill you dead, is all."

"That's what I mean! Did you confirm it?!"

"U-Um, we were able to come here because Sati Lea's group had returned from bathing..." Reina Ruu said bashfully, her face turning a little red.

Ah, that's no good. Looks like she really drew the short straw out of the group. I really should hurry along to the bath.

I called out to Ai Fa's group inside, and then headed off with Ludo Ruu.

"Still, isn't it kind of unusual for you to be inviting me to bathe, Ludo Ruu?"

"Hmm... Well, there's sort of something I wanted to ask you about," he said while walking as if he was throwing his legs out one after the other and pointing his pale eyes my way. "Did you talk to her about it yet?"

"It?"

"Sacrificial hunting."

"Ah."

Damn, I'd completely forgotten about that. How could I be so stupid?!

Of course, it had been because each and every day had been so very busy, but that was no excuse.

Ai Fa was hunting all on her own, but she was catching an excessive amount of giba. Ludo Ruu suggested that may be down to her using something called "sacrificial hunting," and said that if I wanted to know more about it, I should ask Ai Fa directly.

Why had I gone and forgotten something so important? My own carelessness there was seriously making me want to scream.

With that said, though, I still didn't have any clue just how important that may be. The term "sacrificial hunting" sounded ominous, and Ludo Ruu had a serious look on his face when he brought it up, but that was all I had to go on.

Now that it had come to this, I had no choice but to ask the person who had fanned the flames of my unease.

"Sorry, it completely slipped my mind... Hey, seriously, what is that sacrificial hunting thing?"

"If you haven't asked, then don't worry about it. You can just ask your clan head if you want to know."

"No, but I mean, shouldn't I be fine asking someone else about that? I mean, there's going to always be someone by my side today."

"It should be fine if the women hear though, right? I mean, they won't

understand anyway. Though it may be for the best if my dad doesn't hear anything about it."

"I won't ask, then. I mean, I don't feel like trying to keep Rimee Ruu quiet."

I shot another sidelong glance, and saw a face staring back at me like he found this really tiresome.

"Guess there's no helping it... Sacrificial hunting is an old technique that uses a giba summoning fruit. When you crush that fruit it spreads a smell that giba love through the air, and they come running. That's all there is to it."

"Hmm? It seems to have a rather exaggerated name then, doesn't it?"

"...Apparently when giba sniff that scent, they become crazy ferocious. They'll normally run away if they spy a person in the distance, but I hear they'll intently come charging at someone with that smell about them."

"Wha...?"

"It's a hunting style that will ultimately sacrifice your very life, so it's called 'sacrificial hunting.' If you hunt that way, no matter how much life force you may possess, it will never be enough, so I doubt there's anyone who uses it nowadays."

I was at a loss for words.

"So I'm sure Ai Fa can't be doing it, either. Still, she sure is catching a crazy amount of giba... I just sort of want to ask her how she's doing it all on her own."

"That giba summoning fruit..."

"Hmm?"

"Does it have a sweet smell, like flowers?"

Ludo Ruu's whole face now turned my way, his eyes narrowed in suspicion.

"I've got no clue. I've never even seen one."

"I see..."

That scent like sweet flowers that I had only ever smelled from Ai Fa... If it was from giba summoning fruit...

“Well, my dad hates people who throw away their lives, so if there was a hunter out there using giba summoning fruit, I’m sure he wouldn’t be happy about it.”

“Right...”

“I would respect them, though. If someone’s out there going that far to hunt giba, then I think that’s amazing. I mean, it may be really stupid, but it’s also super cool, so they’d definitely earn my respect.”

I couldn’t think of what to say.

“Hey, Asuta,” Ludo Ruu said, suddenly grabbing me by the collar. In an instant, the youth’s somewhat thin face was right before my eyes. “I’m saying, you should respect her too. If such a hunter exists, then you shouldn’t worry about her, but give her your respect.”

“...Got it.”

Ludo Ruu suddenly let go, then started leisurely walking forwards again.

I held back a sigh and scratched my head, towel and all.

It was around then that the doors blocking off the Ruu bathing area came into view.

“Ah, seems like it’s going to be a hot one again today...” Ludo Ruu said as he stepped beyond the doors. While thinking of Ai Fa waiting back in the kitchen, I followed after him.

And then, I almost let out an audible yelp.

“Oh, you were here already, Jiza, Darmu?”

Yes, his two older brothers were there. In a way, the pair were even harder to deal with than Donda Ruu.

Ludo Ruu paid them no heed, just tossing away his clothing until only his necklace was left.

There was a stream running through there, which would come up to my knees at most. It was rocky all around it, and in the rear was a rather tall cliff face, with forest up top casting shade down on the scene.

The two hunters were seated there, in the middle of wiping down their dark brown naked bodies with their palms and small cloths.

“Ooh, that’s cold!” Ludo Ruu yelled out excitedly after jumping in.

I wasn’t excited, though. No, not at all.

Jiza Ruu glanced over my way, and then silently resumed wiping himself down.

Darmu Ruu glared at me with flames in his eyes, but sure enough, he quietly got back to bathing, too.

Yeah, as if I could get excited under these circumstances.

But I also couldn’t just run away, so I grabbed hold of the clothing I was wearing. I took off the vest, t-shirt, and everything else, until I was left with just my necklace. And then, I sat myself downstream from the way their backs were facing.

“What’s with the scary face, Darmu?! Today’s a happy occasion, right?” Ludo Ruu asked, raising his right leg high out of the water. Then he brought it down hard, causing a large amount of water to rain down on Darmu Ruu’s head.

Oh man, I almost fainted, there.

Darmu Ruu temporarily froze in place, but then he resumed washing himself as if nothing had happened. The way that I couldn’t see his face from where I was sitting actually made it all the more frightening.

But still... Just what was with the bodies of the men of the forest’s edge?

I’d overworked myself quite a bit in this past month too, my fat getting replaced with muscle, meaning my weight went up despite my body tightening all around. I figured I was in the best shape of my life and had built up a pretty muscular body, but I still looked like a spindly dog that was wasting away when compared to them.

The differences had to start from our very skeletons. Their shoulders were wide, their chests bulky, and their limbs and necks were slender and well proportioned. And though the contours of their bodies were drawn in super tight, their back muscles were seriously impressive.

Everything was well-proportioned and uniform, so they even looked slim when wearing clothing, but ultimately they still had the necessary muscles firmly developed, and there wasn't a bit of unnecessary fat to their bodies. Their bodies really did seem to be put together with the same sort of functional beauty that I sensed from Ai Fa.

Looking closely, their wrists were thick and their hands were large. And it wasn't just that their fingers were long, as their palms were also big and thick. If we shook hands, they could probably easily crush mine in their grasp.

And again like Ai Fa, their dark skin had countless scars shining white across it.

Being stabbed by a giba could take your very life, so the majority of those probably just came naturally from moving through dense thickets and rocky areas.

This was what it meant to be a hunter of the forest's edge.

"What are you spacing out for? Today's a once in a lifetime big job for you, isn't it?"

Another massive downpour accompanied those words.

Ludo Ruu dove down, right in front of me.

"Take your time and really cleanse your body properly! This is a real auspicious event for the Rutim, after all!"

"I-I know. You sure are energetic early in the morning, Ludo Ruu."

"Hmm? Hehehe, yeah, you're right! I mean, I can't help but be after getting to eat delicious food each and every day! Right now, I feel like I could even lift up a giba with a single hand!" Ludo Ruu said with a laugh, seriously enjoying himself. That expression actually made him look adorable, like a little girl.

He had a honed body like that of a wild animal, but he was still at least shorter than me, and he didn't have as robust of a physique as his elder brothers. I certainly didn't think I could beat him in a contest of strength or anything, but I still felt relieved, somehow.

"The women from the main Ruu house should be fine, now. I've hardly lifted a hand for the last five nights of dinners, and they've gotten plenty of practice

making hamburgers, so they should be able to keep on making delicious meals from tomorrow on.”

Ludo Ruu suddenly frowned.

“Hmm? What is it?”

“Asuta, you’ve kind of been talking about if you weren’t around a lot lately. That makes me really mad.”

“Huh? No, but you see, I’m not exactly in a position to be manning the Ruu family stove so frequently. Isn’t it a good thing, if the women can make delicious food all on their own?”

“I know that! But that’s not what you mean, right?!”

He smacked the surface of the water with a *splash, splash!*

He really was childish.

“Asuta,” Jiza Ruu said, speaking up for the first time. “This is perfect. There is a matter that I wished to discuss with you.”

“Right. What is it?”

“...Are you going to meet with that Kamyua Yoshu man from the city of stone tomorrow?”

He turned the upper half of his robust body towards me, and looked at me with his thread-like eyes.

“Yeah. If he comes to visit, then I think I’ll end up seeing him.”

“I see... It is not as if entering into the forest’s edge is forbidden. There is an agreement with the lord of the Genos domain that they are not to step foot here without good reason, but that is more meant to prevent the people from the city from being exposed to danger. So even if that man comes again, we have no right to get in his way.”

“...Right.”

“However, I do not agree with people from the city meddling with the forest’s edge. As you can see just by looking at the Suun clan, the culture of the city can only corrupt our people.”

I couldn’t really answer that.

“Asuta, you also have the feel of a person from the city about you. I believe you should live in the city of stone... Is there anything wrong with my thinking?”

This was the first time Jiza Ruu had ever talked to me this directly.

Just how had he reacted to Gazraan Rutim’s decision to go against the traditions of the forest’s edge? To be honest, I couldn’t imagine it went any better than with Donda Ruu.

Naturally, those were the thoughts running through my head.

“I don’t know if you’re wrong or not. But... I like this settlement at the forest’s edge more than that post town.”

And so, that was the only way I could think to respond.

“I see,” Jiza Ruu responded, standing up. “Gazraan Rutim is a precious part of my family. I pray more strongly than anyone that this ceremony ends without incident.”

Then Jiza Ruu wiped himself down with a cloth hanging from a door, put on his clothing, and left.

“...Asuta, I’m amazed you could actually talk to Jiza when he was like that. I could never do it,” Ludo Ruu said, sounding a little sulky.

“Yeah, maybe it hasn’t sunk in yet how scary he really is. He’s seriously intense, but I guess I just don’t know quite how to be scared of him?”

“What’s that about? You know, Jiza’s even scarier to me than dad is... Hey, Darmu, why do you hate Asuta? He makes delicious food, and sometimes I don’t quite understand him, but he seems like a good guy, doesn’t he?”

I felt those words soak deep into my heart, but more importantly, I couldn’t help but be really amazed at how familiarly he was talking with Darmu Ruu. Well, they were brothers though, so maybe that was only natural.

Sure enough, Darmu Ruu didn’t respond or even look at me, and just left as Jiza Ruu had done.

“Hmm... You sure are hated, Asuta.”

“Yeah, I’m aware.”

“Actually, when it comes to Darmu, it’s more like he’s afraid of you.”

“Huh? There’s no way! No matter how much I struggled, there’s no way I could ever beat him!”

“No man alive would ever lose to you... In a battle of strength, that is.” Then, Ludo Ruu sat cross-legged under the water and turned to face me. “It sure is strange. You’re so frail and weak-looking, but you’re not afraid of anyone. You looked even stronger than my dad at that celebratory banquet.”

“Ahaha. That’s a real honor to hear.”

“Your hand.”

“Hmm?”

“Show me your hand.”

“Hand?” I questioned, offering the palm of my right hand. Ludo Ruu placed his own palm on top of it.

“It’s so small, like a woman’s.”

I felt like the word “stunned” appeared over my head just then, like I was Rimee Ruu or something.

Ludo Ruu was supposed to be smaller than me, but his palm and fingers were a size bigger than mine. A year from now, he really may end up looking down on me from above. And when that thought crossed my mind, I felt catastrophically depressed.

Still, it really would make me happy if I really was still here at the forest’s edge a year from now.

3

Two hours passed without incident after that, and the four pots were nice and cooked. Roughly half the moisture had evaporated too, which was perfect.

Now, it was time to add in the tarapa sauce.

The inside of the pot was ever so slightly pink from the fruit wine, but in an instant the sauce turned the whole thing a deep red.

The aria had softened it, but the tarapa still had a strongly acidic smell, which soon filled the kitchen.

“Alright, now let’s add the poitan, too. Make sure you get the right amount, okay?”

We were adding 10 poitan per pot. Any more than that, and it would become too floury and ruin the texture.

We made cuts into the potato-esque poitan, then added them in one after another. And even with a low flame like this, they soon broke down and dissolved.

It really was a strange ingredient. It bore a resemblance to wheat flour, but it wasn’t as close as boar and giba meat, onion and aria, or tomato and tarapa. In other words, it was an ingredient I would never have tasted without coming here to this world.

There wasn’t anything exactly like it, and because of that I struggled and struggled with how to prepare it, and somehow I ended up feeling attached to it in the process.

As that thought ran through my head, the 10 poitan in my pot all dissolved without leaving a trace.

It had started off as a tomato red, but now it had shifted to something midway between pink and orange.

As I carefully stirred it, I fine tuned the taste with rock salt and pico leaves, and it was finally done.

It had cooked for two hours, so the chatchi ended up soft and crumbly all the way to the center. The tino and aria were so soft that you didn’t even need to chew, as they just melted in your mouth. And the giba meat... I had made it bite sized, but it didn’t have any toughness to it at all. The shoulder meat melted in your mouth, while the thigh meat just had a pleasing bit of chewiness left to it.

After tasting those various bits out, I combined them with the rather sour

tarapa and bit down... and an exquisite deliciousness filled my mouth.

It certainly needed some time and effort, but it came out so well that it really may have been the peak of my current giba dishes.

Still, this wasn't home cooking. It was an extravagant dish for a banquet.

Banquets are when you can partake in such luxurious dishes. And wedding banquets should overflow with as much joy as possible.

And if they needed the money to pull off such extravagance, the hunters had to be throwing themselves into their work with even more zeal than usual, right? Or at least, that was the concept I was working off of.

If my own efforts made it across to Gazraan Rutim and his family, that would be great.

"Alright, heat it for just a little longer, and then cut the flame. And I ask that each of you stir it so that it doesn't burn."

Ai Fa, Reina Ruu, Lala Ruu, and I each stood in front of one of the four stoves. And having been left out, Rimee Ruu just stood there staring straight at me. She wasn't saying a word, but her big eyes were positively sparkling.

"Do you want to—"

"Taste test?! Yeah!"

She stole away the back half of my sentence, there.

I scooped up just a bit of the stew with a wooden spoon and lowered it down, where the adorable little girl was waiting with her mouth wide open. It seriously felt reminiscent of that night when I first met her, as I went ahead and moved the spoon on into her mouth.

"So... good...!" she mumbled, the food still filling her mouth.

Then, she started staring at me again.

Now that I think of it, she begged me for two bites back then, too.

Surely Rimee Ruu wouldn't be greedy enough to demand a third bite, right? As I thought that I scooped up some thigh meat and chatchi this time around, only to get hit on the head from behind with a, "Hey! Don't go spoiling that

runt! There won't be enough left for the banquet!"

"I won't eat that much! Lala, you man-woman..."

"There, there..." I said, inserting the spoon into her wide open mouth.

Rimee Ruu's expression practically melted as she bit down on the spoon, while Lala Ruu furrowed her brows.

"What the heck?! No fair! I've been holding back all this time!"

"Huh? You have been? As long as it's just a taste test, it's no problem giving you some. That's the special privilege of those who man the stove, after all."

"Why didn't you say so sooner?! Rimee, you runt, give me that spoon!"

"Hmm? What should I do, I wonder?"

As I watched over this little quarrel, actually finding it kind of adorable, there was a tug on the sleeve of my t-shirt. It was Reina Ruu, carefully stirring the pot next to mine, but also shooting me a bashful look.

"Ah, I mean... Go ahead?"

In an instant, Reina Ruu's face was positively sparkling.

I was overcome by a cozy, homely feeling, somehow.

Still, we could only take it this easy for now. Once the sun hit its peak this place would become a battlefield, so surely it would be fine enjoying the pleasant atmosphere for the time being.

"Does this finish up the work for the morning?" Ai Fa asked, speaking up for the first time in a while.

"That's right," I replied with a nod, and then she waved over Rimee Ruu.

"Well then, I shall return home temporarily. Rimee Ruu, could I ask you to take my place?"

"Yeah! But what are you heading back for?"

"I need to stir up the meat in the pantry. If I leave it for even a day, the pico leaves will go bad."

I see. She still had to stir things back home too, huh?

“Hold on. I’m going to be open after this too, so I’ll join you.”

“Why?” Ai Fa asked, tilting her head a bit. “I should be perfectly capable of handling the task on my own. You should rest up.”

After saying that, Ai Fa wasted no time leaving the kitchen.

“Hmm... Does Ai Fa hate us?” Lala Ruu suddenly asked.

“Of course not,” I replied, denying the notion. “It certainly doesn’t look that way to me. Ai Fa just takes some time to open up to people, I think.”

“But I’ve never seen Ai Fa have a real conversation with anyone but Rimee or Granny Jiba. Even if she doesn’t hate us, she sure doesn’t seem to have any interest in us, right?” said Lala Ruu, sulking a bit. Maybe she actually wanted to get along with Ai Fa.

“Well, but... You all know about the incident where she was invited to marry into your family two years ago, right? Thanks to that, her relationship with Donda Ruu got really awkward, and she made a habit of keeping her distance from the Ruu clan, so maybe she just can’t break that?”

“But you talk to us like normal.”

“Right, but I’m just an idiot.”

“Yeah, I know.”

Apparently that was an accepted fact.

“But still, papa Donda won’t be asking her to marry into the family at this point, right? And she’s already getting along with Rimee and Granny Jiba, so she shouldn’t have any reason to avoid us. So she really just must not have any interest in us.”

“No, I’m telling you... It just takes her time to warm up to people.”

“Did it take time for you? No wait, do you actually get along?”

“Hmm, that’s a tough one!”

Putting aside the matter of whether or not we got along well, I couldn’t recall ever having much trouble knowing how to deal with Ai Fa. It felt like from real early on, we started talking to each other without any need to hold back.

But even if we were living together now like it was only natural, the idea was supposed to be that she was just looking after me for a while to make sure I didn't cause any trouble. And yet, after about a week of living with her, I declared that I wanted to take down Donda Ruu and leave him speechless. For Ai Fa, that should have been a massive pain. And yet, she possessed the same level of enmity I had towards Donda Ruu, or perhaps even more, due to the frustration born of the man insulting my cooking.

Despite appearances, Ai Fa's emotions had some serious swings, so I hadn't found it to be all that strange, but now that I thought of it, she never showed any proper emotions in front of most others.

And... Ai Fa said she didn't want me to go away.

Hmm... Yeah, this is no good...

I was getting the feeling that my relationship with Ai Fa wasn't something that could be explained to others. And besides, I would just feel like I was betraying Ai Fa if I talked about stuff like that while she wasn't around.

And so, I bowed my head and told Lala Ruu, "Sorry. I really don't know after all."

Lala Ruu gave a "Tch!" and turned to face her elder sister, who was still standing at a stove diagonal from the young girl.

"What do you think, Reina? You've hardly talked to Ai Fa too, right?"

I thought she would be troubled being asked such a question, but she rather quickly responded, "I still think that it would be best for Ai Fa to marry into our clan, even now."

She just smiled when Lala Ruu asked "Why?" to the unexpected response, then she turned and looked at me.

"I mean, Rimee and Granny Jiba adore her so much, so I'm sure she must be a splendid person... And besides, if that happens, the Fa clan will become part of the Ruu clan, right?"

Hmm... Yeah, I was left feeling bewildered again.

I was glad that she was opening up, but since she was my age, unlike Rimee

and Lala Ruu, Reina Ruu may have actually been kind of tricky to deal with.

At the very least, I couldn't just earnestly say "thanks" to that.

"I'm fine either way," Rimee Ruu said cheerfully while trying her hardest to stir the contents of the pot with the stick entrusted to her by Ai Fa. "Even if they're not family or under us, I still love Ai Fa and Asuta! It would be even nicer if their house was at least a little closer, though!"

This was why I adored Rimee Ruu.

I hoped that she could keep on smiling around Ai Fa forever.

"If you can get along with someone, then you're bound to naturally do so eventually," I said to Lala Ruu, cutting the conversation off in a neutral and inoffensive manner.

4

And then, the battle began.

The sun had passed its peak at last.

"Well then, we'll be following the plan I discussed yesterday, so Tito Min Ruu's group will be cutting meat, Reina Ruu's group will be dicing aria, and Mia Lea Ruu's group will be baking poitan."

There were 11 women gathered in the main Ruu house, roughly half of the total women in the Ruu settlement. I asked those 11 women to split into three groups and each carry out their own tasks.

The group of five including Granny Tito Min and Vina Ruu were to cut the meat meant for the steak and hamburgers.

The group of four including Reina and Rimee Ruu were to dice the aria for the hamburgers.

Mia Lea and Lala Ruu were to just keep on baking poitan using the outdoor stoves.

Sati Lea Ruu was meeting with other women from the branch families with young children, to take turns watching them while baking poitan as well.

After all, there were going to be 100 people attending. Plus, many of the men ate double what the women did.

By my basic calculations, that meant we needed to prepare 150 people's worth of meat and poitan.

There would be a reasonable amount of soup to eat too, but I didn't know how the meat would end up getting divided, and I couldn't allocate out the poitan in halves, either. And besides, I heard it was customary to put out so much food that it couldn't all be eaten when it came to such banquets, so I decided not to count the amount used for the stew.

Even though the people of the forest's edge lived poor yet honorable lives, banquets were still special occasions. In that case, I had to prepare as much as I could. That's how I arrived at the figure of 150 people's worth of food.

It would be 500 grams of meat for one person, so 75 kilos.

Poitan were two per person, so 300.

That was how much I decided to prepare.

Furthermore, I tasked the second biggest house after the main house with making a more modest new dish: stir-fried vegetables. And even disregarding the stew, this needed three aria per person, meaning it would use up 450.

The aria had shrunk quite a bit after being heated and then fried, and it sure didn't seem like it would be all that appetizing all on its own. And so I chose some other vegetables that would fry up well, the cabbage-esque tino and bell pepper-like pula, and made up some stir-fried vegetables to accompany the steak and hamburgers.

But still, even if three aria of stir-fried vegetables per person was plenty, I was nervous about having the stew as the only dish of that sort, so I went ahead and added a soup using those same three vegetables and giba meat. For that, I just used around one aria per serving.

Of course, the soup used giba meat, and so did the meat dishes and stew, so all told I had to be using over 120 kilos.

By some basic calculations, that meant each woman would get 800 grams,

while each man would have 1.6 kilograms of meat, which should be plenty, I thought.

And so, this was the complete menu: –Giba steak (thigh, roast, spare rib) –Giba hamburgers

–Tarapa and giba meat stew, with abundant vegetable blend –Baked poitan with gigo mixed in

–Three-vegetable stir fry

–Giba soup with three vegetable varieties That was what I ultimately settled on, having been entrusted with the stove for this wedding banquet.

The menu was already filled with rather heavy dishes, so I was thinking of adding cold giba shabu-shabu or something. But I somehow got the feeling that it may not be suited to a banquet for hunters, and when I asked the members of the Rutim clan about it, they said they preferred warm stuff to cold, so I figured this was good enough.

As a digression, I also proposed removing the rib meat from the bones, but Dan Rutim firmly stated, “You can’t!” in a full-force refusal. “Isn’t it tastier biting it right off the bone?!”

I was thinking it would be a real issue if anyone threw as much of a fit as Dan Rutim did on that night, but then he added, “If there’s any left over, I’ll eat it all!” so apparently that was an unnecessary concern.

Still, over these past five days, the people of the Ruu settlement had already come around to seeing giba torso as such fine meat that it would be a shame to just throw it away. The women from the branch families who studied under me and helped with my research all happily took the spare meat back to their families, where they succeeded in shattering the men’s preconceived notions.

And of course as representative of the reformists, Gazraan Rutim was doing much the same with the giba he caught, so there was no need to worry about the Rutim.

Plus, from the way that Ai Fa had no concept of torso meat being “mundt feed,” that must have been an opinion unique to powerful families like the Ruu and Rutim.

There were 100 people amongst the seven clans under the Ruu, but the only one on the same scale as the Ruu and Rutim was the Lea clan, while the Min and Maam had fallen quite a bit, and the Ririn and Muufa were smaller still. And so, I didn't think there should be any problem there.

"If those Lea folks won't eat it, then I will!" Dan Rutim shouted.

In other words, one per person may turn out not to be enough.

So as a result, I went with 150 spare ribs. That was the least I could do out of consideration for my client's father.

Well, at any rate, by the time the sun hit its peak, the Ruu settlement was already shifting into a battlefield.

◇

"Asuta! We're done dicing the aria!"

"Ooh, that was quick! Then this time, I'm counting on you to mince!"

"Mince! Got it!"

Rimee Ruu cut through the meat, her knife-handling in no way falling short of that of her mother and elder sisters.

This time around, I decided to go with 200 gram-sized hamburgers.

That made them plenty big enough to be eaten alongside steak, and besides, some of the men may avoid them. Right now the only sample I had to go on was the main Ruu house, and two of the four men there rejected it, so I had to be prepared for half of the men total to do the same.

And so, I came up with a new plan.

If someone didn't like the soft meat of the hamburger, I hoped to win them back by giving them the suggestion to steep the grilled meat in soup.

That was one of the discoveries my experimentation led to.

On the second day of my experiments, I was firmly resolved to make hamburgers for dinner in order to fulfill my promise to Ai Fa, but I just didn't feel right with the idea of splitting the menu between the men and the women.

Experimentation is experimentation, and dinner is dinner. And with dinner, I

figured you really should have the whole family eating the same food.

What I came up with then was soup and hamburger.

Everyone was free to add their hamburger to their soup. Then I explained that if they did, it would crumble and they could eat it like that.

Even if they said they preferred tough meat, that only applied when they ate it on its own, as they had always eaten such crumbly meat that had been overcooked over a strong flame in their giba stew.

It was definitely something of a desperation measure, but none of the men of the main house raised any complaints.

When I gave it a try myself, I found the savoriness of the hamburger meat contributed to the soup, making for a rather nice flavor. And so, I decided using this method for the banquet made sense, too.

For the sake of the folks who wanted to eat the hamburger as is, I had prepared the fruit wine sauce to be added afterwards. I would be providing that during the banquet as well.

In this way, my menu for the banquet was steadily perfected through the dinners at the Ruu house.

Now then, let’s get back to the story at hand.

At the Fa house, I had to mix in a large amount of diced aria, but at the Ruu settlement there were plenty of pots, so I didn’t need to worry about where the aria went. And so, for the 200 gram hamburgers, I went with 1/4th of an aria per each. That was about the ratio that we used back at the Tsurumi Restaurant.

Now then, I was making 200 gram sized hamburgers for 100 people, and wanted to make 20 extra to account for screw ups in the cooking process, so that meant 30 diced aria.

“We’ll fry the aria here. Ai Fa, light up one of the stoves.”

Ai Fa nodded, then lit a fire in the nearest stove using lana leaves.

Ai Fa’s presence had become rather inconspicuous once the women had gathered, but she was still offering some serious support from the background.

She couldn’t wield a kitchen knife as skillfully as the women I had taught, so she was mostly helping out with assorted tasks like this and carrying goods. Transporting massive amounts of food from the pantry, returning things there once they were prepared, carrying heavy pots, refilling water jugs... That was the sort of tiresome work Ai Fa was carrying out all on her own.

“Thank you. You’ve seriously been a huge help,” I stealthily whispered into her ear. Ai Fa tilted her head a bit, and then drew close to my ear, too.

“I believe that if food is to be served for a Rutim banquet, it should be created by those related to the clan. In that case, this role suits me best.”

I cocked my head a bit, then whispered into her ear once again, “That may be so, but I’m not related to them, right?”

With that Ai Fa tilted her head again, then drew closer once more.

“You’re just carrying out a job for which you were paid, are you not? Do not confuse your position for my own.”

As we repeated that back and forth, Rimee Ruu stopped enthusiastically preparing meat and turned to ask, “What are you guys whispering about?”

“Ah, it was a secret strategy meeting.”

“Huh?! No fair! I want to do it, too!”

“That was a lie. We were just chatting. The only reason we were whispering was so that we wouldn’t pester everyone else,” I said with a smile. Then, I met eyes with Reina Ruu, who was staring at me from the side.

Something really did seem off with her. I mean, she shouldn’t have any reason to be looking so miserable just because Ai Fa and I were talking a bit in secret.

I couldn’t help but feel a little gloomy as I spun some fat around the heated pot and then added the diced aria.

Reina Ruu really was a fine girl all around. She wasn’t two-faced. She was simply innocent, and kind, and a good learner. On top of that, she was blessed with stunning looks. To be honest, having such a charming, wonderful girl have such feelings of affection towards me was even harder than dealing with Vina Ruu coming on to me.

I had no intention of searching for a lover in this world, and if someone were to steal my heart even so... It wouldn't be Reina or Vina Ruu. I was sure of that much.

"...Are you not adding any fruit wine?" Ai Fa asked, snapping me back to my senses.

"Gah, right! Sorry, Ai Fa, but—" I started, only for a container of fruit wine to be thrust in front of my face.

"That was the first time I saw you look like you were going to mess up cooking something," Ai Fa whispered into my ear with a laugh as I hurriedly poured the fruit wine over the already golden brown aria.

Just what sort of face had I been making to get that sort of reaction?!

Before I could confirm that, Lala Ruu shouted, "Ai Fa, could I get some more poitan?!" and Ai Fa disappeared from view.

Damn! I must have looked lame there! I thought to myself as I transferred the fried aria to a bowl with a handmade flat spoon.

Then, when I looked up... I found Reina Ruu still shooting me a melancholy look as she continued to carefully prepare meat.

Chapter 5: The Rutim Banquet (Part 2)

1

Slowly but steadily, the sun started slanting to the west. The world was sure to be awash in twilight in less than two hours.

The plan was that around when the sun was touching the western forest, the bride and groom would arrive in the Ruu settlement and the banquet would begin.

Around now, they were supposedly going around to each house of their related families and gathering blessings from each of them. Once each family gave their blessing, they were to come here in order.

There were already nearly 30 people gathered at the plaza.

Apparently children under the age of five weren't qualified to participate in the banquet though, so unfortunately, the infants and toddlers were gathered in one of the Ruu branch family homes, where the women took shifts watching them.

As for the men, I didn't see any aside from a few old folks and youths under 13. The hunters were still out in the forest, even on a day such as this.

They were supposed to not push themselves and come back early so that nothing tragic occurred on the day of the banquet, but still, the men of the five families other than the Rutim and Min were out carrying out their duty as hunters.

It was said that bestowing giba horns and tusks you hunted that very day was the greatest of blessings.

That was the people of the forest's edge for you: honest, yet fierce.

◇

"Alright. All the preparations are complete."

Having finished 70% of the cooking, I wiped the sweat from my brow.

The poitan were baked.

The three-vegetable stir fry had been finished.

The stew and the soup were both complete.

The fruit wine sauce for the hamburgers had even been jammed back into the original fruit wine containers.

All that was left was cooking the meat.

A vast number of hamburgers and a portion of the steaks were all lined up in the main Ruu house's kitchen. There were six stoves there, but since I needed to use both strong and weak flames, that meant only three sets could be cooked at a time. But the pots were large, so I could prepare five of them at once in each, or 15 in total at once.

It looked to be just about time...

"Well then, let's start cooking the meat."

With that signal from me, the hamburgers were added to the pots, and the smell of meat and fat utterly filled the kitchen.

The hamburgers were the trickiest dish to cook, so Reina and Mia Lea Ruu were in charge of that, along with me. The other women from the main house headed to the branch houses, where they were grilling steaks. As for the women from the branch families who had their hands free, they were to come here to help move pots.

And so, young Shin Ruu's mother and elder sister were now standing next to me while holding a grigee pole.

"Alright, I'm counting on you."

They passed the pole through both handles of the pot, then moved it to a stove with a low flame.

When the red meat juices came rising up I flipped the patties and moved them back to the stove with the strong flame, where I added in fruit wine and then closed the lid. The sweet scent that came spewing out before the lid was shut soon permeated the kitchen.

Things seemed to be going smoothly for Mia Lea Ruu behind me and Reina Ruu on the outdoor stoves, too.

“I’m honored to have the opportunity to assist you, Asuta,” a reserved voice called out. It had come from Shin Ruu’s older sister, Sheera Ruu.

She was slender for a person of the forest’s edge, and had a sort of ephemeral air about her. She was probably just a bit older than I was.

“My father Ryada lost the strength needed to hunt, and my younger brother Shin became head of the house at the mere age of 16, so we were truly left at a loss... But then we tasted the cooking you taught us, and it brought everyone great joy, and imbued in them a strong desire to keep on living. I am truly grateful to you.”

“I’m grateful for your overly generous words. Still, your skill with a knife is no less than even Reina Ruu’s, which is amazing,” I said with a smile as I opened the lid and checked how they had cooked. “I hope you keep on cooking them delicious food and bringing them happiness. That’s something only you all can do... If you don’t mind, I think it’s about time to transfer it back to the weak flame.”

“Right.”

With that, she moved the pot again with her mother’s help.

Once these finished cooking, the first batch would be complete.

“You’re an unusual man, Asuta. It’s just like Shin said. You man the stove, and yet at times, you have the daring look of a hunter about you.”

“You really are exaggerating again. I’m no one all that great.”

“No, it’s true. Manipulating flames like this, and taking such hard, smelly giba meat and making it so delicious... It really is like you’re one of those sorcerers from the eastern kingdom.”

“That’s just what it means to be a chef. I’m sure you can find a whole ton of more skilled cooks in the capital, before you even go bringing sorcerers into it. Alright... it’s done.”

I took the hamburgers and lined them up atop a pseudo-rubber tree leaf on

my work stand.

Then, I scraped off all the impurities stuck to the pot using a wooden spatula, returned it to the strong heat, dropped in fresh fat, and threw in five new patties. In the meantime, Ai Fa laid out another pseudo-rubber tree leaf atop the finished hamburgers, placed flat stones to the left and right as supports, and then placed a board on top. With that, we could steadily pile up the finished goods.

“Ah, Ai Fa, what’s that leaf called, now that I think of it? It’s been such a constant help to me, but I never learned its proper name.”

“Suurub.”

“Huh?”

“This is a suurub leaf.”

Ah, I see. I couldn’t help but give an awkward smile, figuring it was already just a pseudo-rubber leaf to me, and the name wasn’t that different anyway.

It was bigger than a person’s palm and had no smell, and the surface was smooth and shiny. And since we were cooking this much meat, it served as an indispensable supplement for the few plates we had.

The guests were only supposed to bring their own plates and skewers to use. And so, I was using planks in place of trays, and pseudo-rubber leaves as plates. I’m sure I must have put a great burden on the women, having them gather up these planks and several hundred pseudo-rubber leaves.

And yet, the women all wore bright expressions. Their faces were shining with excitement as they wondered how much the food they had prepared would surprise and overjoy their relatives and related families.

I may have been the head chef, but they were the ones who made all of these dishes.

It really would be nice if this deepened the bonds between everyone. If everyone shared in this happiness... And if Gazraan Rutim and Ama Min’s wedding went as well as one could imagine.

“Asuta! These hamburgers are done! I’m going to start on the steaks!”

“Right! I’m counting on you!”

“I’m back! Asuta, things are going smoothly in the other houses right now, too!”

“Thanks, Rimee Ruu. Could you tell them that it’s about time to start heating up the stew?”

“Got it!”

The work was progressing smoothly.

After that, though, I got a report that there was an issue with moving one of the pots, which ruined five steaks. But the women from the branch families practically took off flying, cutting off fresh meat and seasoning it with salt and pico leaves all on their own.

“Oh, it’s just awful! Now Vina knocked over a pot of aria soup!”

“What?! Did anyone get burned?!”

“That’s fine! But Vina looks like she’s about to cry! Or wait, she actually was crying!”

“There’s no reason for her to cry! We can remake anything but the stew! I mean, this banquet is going to be a marathon, so just tell her to take her time and make it again like we have up until now, without panicking! Ah... Is there anyone in that house who can make soup right now?”

“I don’t know! But if not, I’ll go help!”

“Alright, I’m counting on you, Rimee Ruu!”

I had already accounted for this much happening.

And as all this was occurring, all the meat in the main Ruu house got cooked. Afterwards, the plan was to fill a heated pot with water and stack up the dishes as tightly as possible. I wasn’t expecting it to do much, but it would hopefully at least help keep things warm.

“Alright, looks like we’re okay here, now. I’m going to go around checking on the other houses, alright?”

“Got it! Well then, Reina, you all should go get changed. We’ll take care of

things here," Mia Lea Ruu replied.

The younger women, Reina and Sheera Ruu included, responded "Right!" and exited the kitchen.

Noticing the expression on my face, the older woman broke out in a grin.

"It's a banquet, after all. That makes it a big moment for the unmarried women to show off. A lot of new marriages are set up at events like this."

"Oh... Is that so?"

In that case, it would be safest to avoid Vina and Reina Ruu outside of work.

Ai Fa stood there imposingly, the only unmarried woman left in the kitchen, and said, "I am a member of the Fa clan," while shooting me back a frightening glare.

I didn't quite get it, but apparently Ai Fa wouldn't be dressing up.

I was awash in complex feelings over that, both relieved and yet at the same time disappointed.

"Well then, I'm off. I'll be back soon if there aren't any problems."

With that, I left the kitchen alongside Ai Fa. The sun was already on the verge of touching the western forest, so we really were pushing things right up against the limit.

"Guess I'm about halfway done now, huh?"

While shooting a sidelong glance over the rather full plaza, I headed towards the closest house amongst the branch families.

"Half? But isn't all the cooking finished?"

"The cooking is finished. But I'm still on the job until the food makes it to the guests. I guess maybe I'll be done when the last steak and hamburger make it to the mouths of the bride and groom."

Everything seemed to be in order with the branch families.

One house had a mountain of stir fried vegetables, another a heaping helping of baked poitan, yet another a ton of steaks, and one was heating up the stew that had been moved there from the main house.

When I arrived at the last of the houses, I found Rimee Ruu giving her all to strain the scum from the soup all on her own.

“Good work, Rimee Ruu. I see, so this is the culprit behind Vina Ruu’s tears, huh?”

The neighboring stove was all damp, and aria and chunks of meat were scattered all over.

“So, where did everyone else go?”

“They all went to change. I mean, they’re all unmarried.”

“Ah, I see. What about you, Rimee Ruu? Aren’t you going to change?”

“Yeah! I’ll go once this is done!”

Huh. I certainly would like to see Rimee Ruu all dressed up.

“I’ll take your place, then. The bride and groom should be here soon, so hurry up and get changed. Ah, but could you go help Mia Lea and them at the main house afterwards?”

“Got it! Thanks! Huh...? Ai Fa, are you not going to change?”

“I’m a member of the Fa clan. I have no ties to the Rutim clan, so it would make no sense for me to dress up for this banquet.”

“I see. I wanted to see you in your banquet clothes, Ai Fa. Well anyway, I’ll see you later!” Rimee Ruu said, then she went dashing out of the kitchen.

As soon as she was gone, Shin Ruu appeared in her place. Now that I thought of it, this *was* his house.

“Hey, welcome back, Shin Ruu. I’m glad to see you’re alright.”

“Yeah... You haven’t had any problems on your end, either?”

“It’s been fine. Your older sister and mom have been working really hard, too.”

That wasn’t mere flattery. I really meant it.

Those two were a serious boon to our forces, so I had them help make hamburgers at the main house rather than remain here. And that didn’t just

apply to moving pots, as they also showed their skills when it came to mincing the meat and making the patties.

And also... I had become rather fond of this quiet, unsociable, awkward young man, too. He was like the polar opposite of Ludo Ruu, and seeing the two of them together was actually really soothing.

“Are you Ai Fa of the Fa clan...?” Shin Ruu asked, looking at Ai Fa with slightly narrowed eyes.

Now that I thought of it, this was actually the first time these two were meeting.

“I am the head of this house, Shin Ruu. I realize I’m being impolite in doing so, but there is one matter I’d like to discuss with you.”

Huh? I thought as I looked back and forth between the two.

Both of them were expressionless, so I couldn’t discern any information just from looking at them. Still, despite the silence, my unease wasn’t exactly flaring up.

“Ai Fa, you—” Shin Ruu started to continue.

“Shin, you’re back?” Sheera Ruu asked, cutting him off. “Oh, my...” she stated, freezing in place after entering the kitchen. “You all are here too? Welcome, Ai Fa and Asuta.”

I had only just parted with her a short while ago, but Sheera Ruu had already changed into her outfit for the banquet.

I couldn’t help but be a bit impressed. She had given off a fairly weak, fleeting impression visually, but now she was so beautiful she was like an entirely different person. Her long blackish brown hair, the same color as her younger brother’s, was now loose and flowing down her back. And her hair had countless little flowers and berries in it, plus it had a transparent veil on top. Awash in the light orange of twilight, that veil gave off an iridescent sparkle. The fact that such fibers existed in this world was enough to make my eyes open wide.

The fabrics around her chests and hips may have been different, too. I

couldn’t quite recall the details, but I got the feeling that the swirling patterns had gotten more elaborate and vibrant. Plus, she had a slightly purple flowing transparent fabric running from her hips to her ankles, and on top of that, she also had wooden and metal accessories around her wrists and ankles rather than the usual grigee fruits used to ward off insects.

In short, Sheera Ruu looked beautiful.

“Ah, is this the remade soup? If it’s alright, I can take care of the rest.”

“Really? Then I’m counting on you. Um... take care that your clothes don’t get burned, alright?”

“Yes, I understand,” she answered with a smile and a real gentle charm.

I turned back around towards Shin Ruu, and the calm-faced youth shook his head.

“I can tell that you are still working. My apologies. I’ll come again when you’re free.”

“I see. Farewell,” Ai Fa replied, seemingly completely unconcerned, as she exited the kitchen. All I could think to do was give a bow to the two siblings and follow after her.

“Hey, what business did Shin Ruu have with you?”

“Who knows?” Ai Fa bluntly answered.

“He’s a member of a Ruu branch family, right? I can’t remember you ever talking to anyone like that before.”

“I see.”

Well, as long as it was just Shin Ruu, I was sure he wasn’t plotting anything. There was still something bothering me a bit about the whole thing, but right now, I was in the middle of a job.

And so, I stepped out into the plaza, and...

Suddenly, the whole place erupted in cheers.

The bride and groom had arrived.

A group of around thirty were slowly making their way forward through the

plaza. To be specific, they were the members of the Rutim and Min clans.

There was an old man I didn't recognize standing at the head of the group. Was he the Rutim clan elder or something? He was bald, but his white beard stretched down to his chest, and he looked quite old. At any rate, his back was straight and his steps were firm, plus he was clad in the outfit of a hunter.

There were two small children off to the left and right. One was a boy, and the other was a girl. And both of them looked smaller than even Rimee Ruu.

The boy was so little, yet he was dressed like a hunter, and he was proudly puffing out his chest.

The girl had on the same sort of transparent veil that Sheera Ruu had been wearing, and she was giving an energetic smile.

Their small hands were holding flat baskets with flowers and berries weaved into them, which were overflowing with giba horns and tusks. Those must have been the blessings they had received from the families related to them. The men had still not given their blessings, so they silently approached, greeted the elder, and added a horn or a tusk to the pile.

And then, the men in their hunter's garb and the women in their lightweight outfits seemed to part. With that, today's stars finally made their appearance: Gazraan Rutim and Ama Min.

Naturally, Gazraan Rutim was dressed as a hunter. The key difference, though, was in the giba pelt cloak wrapped around his robust frame. It was undoubtedly a giba pelt. As to how I could be so certain, the cloak still had a head to it. The giba's head was draped over Gazraan Rutim's burly right shoulder, covering it. And it still had its imposing horns and tusks, making it almost look like it was still alive.

The cloak covered his right half but his left side remained exposed, and I could see a small and a large blade peeking out from underneath. They were surely special for this banquet, too. The leather sheaths on both had been embroidered and branded, and on top of that, there were beautifully colored stones embedded here and there throughout.

The only other notable difference was the emerald green grass crown atop his

dark brown hair. But even so, the Rutim heir looked even more manly and gallant than usual.

As expected, the bride walking silently alongside him was wearing an iridescent veil. But unlike Sheera Ruu and the other women, hers had three layers to it, and she also had a grass crown on like the one her husband-to-be was wearing. The hem of the veil reached down over her face, its iridescent shine clouding her expression. But even so, I could at least tell that the bride had a joyous smile on her face.

And she also had transparent shawls dangling from her shoulders and hips, such that the entirety of her dark brown skin was wrapped up in a gentle light.

The cloth wrapped around her chest and waist underneath were covered in brilliant whirling patterns, and the accessories around her neck and wrists were certainly gorgeous, but that iridescent shine alone was beautiful enough to mark her as more special than anyone else present.

The cheers of those blessing the pair reverberated through plaza and showed no sign of abating, with one stupidly loud laugh overwhelming them all. That had come from the father of the groom, Dan Rutim.

The large bald-headed man was walking at the head of the other men, and was laughing for some reason. I didn't quite know why, but... he certainly seemed to be having fun. I figured he must be overjoyed. I mean, he had to be over the moon, with his son having grown into such a splendid man, and for him to be marrying such a beautiful bride.

His potbelly was seriously swaying, as was the fat on his cheeks. And seeing that, the children around him started laughing too. In turn, Dan Rutim started laughing even harder.

I couldn't quite tell from this distance, but I felt like I saw something lightly sparkling in the corners of those big eyes of his.

"Asuta," a voice said, and I felt a light tug on my arm. When I turned to look, I saw Ai Fa quietly staring back at me.

I gave a single nod, then clenched my fists.

"Yeah. We're finally in the second half."

The banquet had begun.

2

“Carry the stew out to the plaza, please! And it’s hot, so don’t rush!”

It was a real chaotic, topsy-turvy mess after that.

The two stars of the night were led to the stage erected in front of the main house, and Dan Rutim announced the banquet kicking off, but I no longer had enough leeway to stop and listen. After all, the food needed to be set up for people to eat as soon as his speech ended.

First up was the stew.

We placed four pots spaced as evenly as possible atop the ten simple stoves set up in a circle, then lit weak flames in them. Then we placed pots full of water atop the other six stoves for the sake of keeping things warm, and stoked the flames just enough so they wouldn’t be overly strong. Finally, we placed the steaks and stir-fried vegetables atop large planks that were being set up in place of tables. For the steaks, I decided we should start with the safer options of roast and thigh meat.

There were Ruu women manning each stove, and at first I had them focus on getting everything set up. I felt bad about it, but I had no choice but to have them take turns eating and enjoying themselves. But if any of the women were displeased about it, they at least didn’t let it show where I could see.

The women who manned the stands with the steaks held up heaping helpings of baked poitan, and handed them over to people who were coming for the meat. Then, they would add, “This is poitan.”

Naturally, the women manning the stoves with the stew were in charge of pouring it out. They added, “This soup is meant to be one bowl per person.”

People could eat whatever they pleased and as much as they wanted of the grilled goods or the stuff heated up in pots. After all, it was a banquet, so maybe this way of doing things was too regimented...

But still, I thought it wouldn’t be enough to just cook up and grill meat

without a stench to it. No, I wanted to bring them an even greater happiness. And so, I just had to hope that the deliciousness of the food would blow away any feelings of being overly exact about things.

I was already flying around from home to home giving instructions, so I didn't really have any proper idea of where each woman was. Even Ai Fa, the only one who had been constantly sticking by my side, disappeared somewhere when Granny Tito Min called for her.

"Well then, let us begin the banquet!" Dan Rutim called out in a stupidly loud voice, which I heard coming from the stage. "Let's bless Gazraan Rutim of the Rutim clan and Ama Min of the Min clan!"

"Bless them!" 100 voices cheered out in unison, and the ceremonial fire was lit using the tower of firewood piled up in the center of the plaza.

Something akin to torches were also set up on pedestals surrounding the plaza, dispersing the darkness.

Illuminated by that grand orange light, the people present grabbed hold of bowls and skewers.

"Eat and drink up! And give your thanks to the women of the Ruu clan, who worked hard for this day!" Dan Rutim yelled out, his voice getting raspy. He must have been yelling too much.



As if guided by that voice, the people claimed containers of fruit wine, as well as the meat placed atop pseudo-rubber leaves.

White, healthy teeth bit down into the meat.

The stew that had been poured into wooden bowls was slurped down.

Baked poitan were timidly brought up to mouths.

I didn't even have time to confirm the expressions on their faces, though, as I had to keep on running from house to house.

"Next up is this house's ribs! Are they ready?"

"Everything's fine. They're really eating up the first bit of meat in no time at all though, aren't they?" said a middle-aged woman whose name I hadn't memorized yet from one of the branch families, giving a hearty laugh. "It seems like I should get going. The girls from the first group must be real impatient to dig into that stew, after all."

With that, the woman's arms which were thicker than mine picked up three planks at once, each of them holding seven plates of spare ribs.

"I'll go replace them... That stew of yours really is a masterpiece, isn't it?"

"Ah, did you already have some?"

"I mean, it would be really serious if it ran out before I got any. I started off by having just that, then hurried back here in a big rush. The other women will be back soon, so you should get a bit in you too, right?"

"I'm fine eating later. At any rate, I'm counting on you."

"Right!" the woman responded, and then she left.

Soon afterwards, I heard a loud voice proclaiming, "Heeey, these are giba ribs! Anyone with guts, go ahead and give 'em a bite!"

It seemed I really had made the right call, devoting myself to working behind the scenes. After all, an outsider like me showing my face wouldn't exactly make the food taste any better.

"Sorry we're late! We'll carry out the rest right away!"

With that, several girls whose names I also didn't remember, all clad in beautiful outfits, came flying into the kitchen.

"All of the first round of steaks are gone already. There's only a little stew left, too!"

"In that case, the soup should be next. Alright, thanks!"

Shin Ruu's house and the one next to it were in charge of soup.

I started off by running on over to Shin Ruu's house, where I found Sheera Ruu manning the kitchen all by herself.

"Huh? You're all on your own? Wasn't your mom supposed to be here, too?"

"She left to eat some stew. I already had some ahead of her," Sheera Ruu said with a fleeting smile. "That stew food is truly delicious. I felt like I was about to start crying as I ate it, somehow..."

"Is that so? Then I hope you'll have it made for your wedding banquet, too."

With that, Sheera Ruu made a bit of a sad face and shook her head.

"I have a weak constitution, ever since I was born. That's why I'm still unmarried at this age. A woman who can't even carry a single water jug is nothing but a burden for her family..."

"That's not true at all! Even if you can't manage water jugs, you can still carry pots, right? And that much arm strength should be plenty for manning the stove."

I may have been in a bit of a manic state right now, since I even added a wink there at the end.

"Besides, you're really good at cooking, Sheera Ruu. I'm sure you'll become a bride who can cook a delicious meal. And once the men know the value of tasty food, they won't be able to leave you alone, for sure."

"Oh, my..." Sheera Ruu muttered, her cheeks flushing red.

It was then that her mother returned.

"Looks like the stew is pretty much all gone. Now then, Sheera, it's our turn."

"Right."

The gentle mother and her daughter with a fleeting presence used a grigee pole to carry off a pot.

Meanwhile, I headed to the neighboring home, glancing over at them as I went.

All of the remaining pots of soup were at this house. That thought was on my mind as I entered the kitchen, but the three pots of soup had long since been carried out, and the dirtied pots from the stew were now sitting atop the stoves.

And in that fairly large kitchen, there was a single woman standing there all on her own: Vina Ruu.

“Asuta...?”

Her sensual eyes had been drooping down just a bit, and now they were opened wide in surprise.

Sure enough, she was dressed in banquet attire, too. She had a transparent veil on her head, and a similar lightweight fabric around her waist, and though her hair and limbs were always more magnificently decorated than women from other houses, she had on even more accessories than usual.

Her long chestnut-colored hair was usually bundled up and draped over her right shoulder, but now it was flowing loose, which only made her all the more sensual.

But at least for today, I couldn’t exactly play along with her advances.

“Everything’s already been carried out here, right? In that case, I have work to do...” I said and turned around.

But then, Vina Ruu yelled out “Wait!” from behind.

That was the first time I had ever heard Vina Ruu shout. I couldn’t help but stop and turn back around.

Vina Ruu was shrugging her shoulders in a childish manner and hanging her head.

“Asuta... Are you mad...?”

“Huh? Why?”

“I... I spilled the aria soup...”

“Ah, that? It’s fine. The fresh soup made it in time. And I’m just glad that you didn’t get burnt.”

“You’re not mad...?”

She was looking straight at me with upturned eyes.

I had no idea how much was acting and how much was real, which made dealing with her seriously tricky.

“I’m not mad. More importantly, please enjoy the banquet. You were in the group that set up the stew, right? In that case, you shouldn’t have any work for a while longer, yeah?”

“I hate the banquet... All sorts of men ask me to be their bride, after all...”

I wanted to ask, “What’s so wrong with that?” but it seemed like that would just complicate matters, so I refrained.

“Well then, I have to get going.”

“Wait!” she yelled out once again.

Vina Ruu was wriggling her body back and forth while cradling it with both arms.

“Um... I may be a woman who tried to abandon her family... But it really isn’t like I hate them, of course...”

“What?”

Just what was she talking about? I seriously just wanted to get moving to the next house already.

“Actually, I love my family more than anyone. I don’t hate any of them. I want each and every one of them to be happy...”

“Um, just what are you talking about, here?”

“I don’t want to have to hate family...”

And then, she went and shocked me yet again.

Vina Ruu fell to her knees, still cradling herself in her arms, and looked up at me like she was pleading.

“Ai Fa would be fine. I could hate her... If you were tied together with Ai Fa, I could seduce you away and do whatever I please...”

“No seriously, what are you talking about?!”

“I don’t want to hate Reina, though,” Vina Ruu stated in an unusually blunt tone. “Just don’t tie yourself together with Reina... I don’t want to hate family...”

I seriously had no clue what was going on.

Of course I had sensed something from how Reina Ruu had been acting, but there was no way her family would accept her saying she wanted to marry me or something.

But Vina Ruu had such a terribly sad look on her face that I couldn’t help but doubt if it was really her.

After a good bit of worrying, I approached Vina Ruu and put a hand on her soft shoulder.

“It’s alright. I don’t know what you’re so worried about, but that sort of wild future will never come to pass.”

Fortunately, I was able to say all that without having to lie to myself.

Vina Ruu looked at me with her lightly teary eyes.

“I won’t be marrying Reina Ruu, so there’s no reason for you to have to hate her. I can promise you that much.”

I gripped Vina Ruu’s shoulder, and then ended with one last firm nod. At least for now, that was the best I could manage.

“Sorry, I know you’re in the middle of work...”

“Don’t worry about it. Just stick to the plan as we push towards the end, alright? Well then, excuse me...”

I went flying out of the kitchen, as if trying to escape Vina Ruu’s gaze.

A sort of murky sense of guilt filled me up inside.

Even so, I didn’t have any more time to spend consoling Vina Ruu. I had to hurry onto the next place as soon as possible.

Was this guilt part of the price I was paying? In that case, I had no choice but to swallow it down.

As those thoughts ran through my head, I ran along the outer circumference of the plaza. At this distance, the people just looked like black silhouettes. I couldn’t see their expressions at all.

Even so, there was a tremendous enthusiasm in the air. The heat of their passion and their life forces wouldn’t lose out even to the roaring flames of the ceremonial fire.

What a truly dazzling, lively world...

I just kept on running, and it was like that tremendous life force of theirs was giving me a push from behind.

My next destination was the far off main Ruu house.

The bride and groom were silently seated atop the stage constructed in front of it, while Dan Rutim was laughing like a fool while holding spare ribs in both hands.

There was no way I could ever mistake him, even as a silhouette.

“Are you all not going to eat any? If you won’t, then I’ll eat it all up, y’know?!”

While praying that he would at least let the people who wanted to eat some do so, I jogged towards the kitchen.

At last, the next dish would be the hamburgers.

“Ah, it’s Asuta! You’re finally here!”

There were nearly ten women there in the kitchen.

They had their fill of the banquet up until now, but now they were my rear guard for the work yet to come.

Anyway, one of the members, Rimee Ruu, was standing near the entrance holding spare ribs in both hands.

“Hehehe. Look, I’m Dan Rutim!”

“Come on, now. If both you and that old-timer eat a whole ton, then there won’t be enough left for everyone else to have their share, right? It really should be one per person.”

“But I chose small ones! Is it still not okay...?”

She looked at me like a dejected puppy, and I patted her on the head.

“You’re adorable, so I’ll allow it. And that outfit’s really cute, too.”

“Really? I’m so happy!”

She may have been a young child, but she still had on a special outfit for the banquet. With her iridescent veil and numerous accessories for her hair and arms, I had no problem saying that Rimee Ruu looked super cute. In particular, the red flowers she had tucked in by her temples on either side were truly striking, and also really went well with her reddish hair.

“By the way, have you seen Ai Fa? I haven’t seen her once since the banquet began.”

“Ai Fa? Didn’t Granny Tito Min call for her?”

“The elder was calling for her, so I just told her that. I haven’t seen her since then.”

Granny Tito Min was a member of our hamburger unit, too.

So, had my confidant and the one and only member of my raiding party, Ai Fa, gone into hiding?

“Um, if you’re talking about the Fa clan’s female hunter, I saw her carrying a steak before,” said a woman who I believe was the wife of the son of Donda Ruu’s second younger brother.

“Really? Thank you.”

If she was carrying out her raid without my orders, then that was just fine.

I had just been starting to think that it would be easiest for me to just keep on running around like this on my own.

“Now then, it seems the time for the hamburgers to make their debut is fast approaching. Actually, over half of the food has already been used up... Isn’t it

pretty early to be hitting this point?”

“Your food is just so tasty that things keep disappearing one after another!”

“Well, half of that food may have been eaten by the head of the Rutim too, right?”

The older woman shot me a pleasant grin.

I wanted to smile too, but unfortunately I couldn’t right now.

“After these hamburgers, we have one more round of steaks with one per person, yeah? Could we actually need to add on more?”

“It’s certainly possible. Actually, it seems like we really will come up way short. The men and women sure are eating a lot. I’ve even seen folks struggling over meat here and there.”

Did this call for a shriek of delight?

We had prepared to grill up additional meat if worse came to worst, but not for adding more vegetables or poitan. The best we could do is try to garnish it with whatever aria and tino was left lying around.

“Got it. Then once we get the hamburgers out, I’ll set about cutting up meat. Let’s go with thin slices, and grill them over a strong flame.”

“Alright. Well then, shall we get going?”

With that quiet command from Granny Tito Min, the women started carrying out the roughly 200 hamburgers and containers full of fruit wine sauce.

“Ah, Rimee Ruu. If you happen to be free, would you mind checking on how Vina Ruu is doing? I think she’s in the kitchen of the house where we had three pots of soup.”

“Vina? Ah, she always drinks nothing but wine when it’s time for a banquet... Got it! I’ll bring her a hamburger!”

“Thanks. I’m counting on you.”

With that, my rear guard carried out the hamburgers, leaving the kitchen temporarily empty. All that was left was a portion of the steaks meant to be presented last.

After setting them up on top of covers on the stoves to keep them warm, I gulped down some water from a ladle.

My body was getting pretty darn tired. And yet, my heart was feeling uplifted.

I was a bit worried about Vina Ruu, but aside from that, everything was going extremely smooth.

I didn't know what sort of faces everyone made while eating, but judging from the expressions the women wore, I figured there was no need to worry.

No serious accidents had occurred.

My job was just one push away from being finished.

I gave a nice big stretch, then headed towards the pantry to carry out the additional meat.

I wonder if Ludo and Shin Ruu are enjoying themselves, too? And I hope Ai Fa didn't miss out on the stew...

I grabbed the candlestick by the entrance, then stepped into the pantry.

The room where the meat was stored was even further in.

This vegetable storage space was used to temporarily store completed dishes, so the shelves were all pushed up against the walls. And there were also hardly any vegetables left on them, either.

There were just a few extra vegetables remaining that had been prepared in case anything got screwed up, and some that weren't part of the menu this time around.

Apparently the Ruu and the Rutim were splitting the cost of all the ingredients used.

Would this strengthen their bonds, or instead cause a rift to form? There was still a lot I didn't know about Donda and Jiza Ruu's natures, so I couldn't say for certain.

But still, I was just carrying out my work.

As that thought ran through my head, I headed towards the room where the meat was stored. And then...

The door I had left open closed shut with a slam.

I turned around with a “Huh?” only for a small, soft body to come flying into my chest.

It may have been incredibly little and soft, but it was also very strong.

And so, I ended up getting toppled over backwards.

It was awful lucky that I didn’t end up dropping the candlestick in the process.

What the light from that candle illuminated was Reina Ruu’s brooding face.

3

“R-Reina Ruu? What in the world are you doing?”

Reina Ruu was currently on top of me, still clad in her banquet attire. She was practically clinging to my chest, and was staring at my face with a terribly brooding look in her eyes.

“Asuta...” she started, forcing the words a bit out through her small yet sensual lips. “Asuta, I want to make a request of you...”

“A-A request?”

“Please, become a member of the Ruu clan.”

The look in her blue eyes was completely serious as she stared at me from up close and personal.

“Leave the Fa house, and join the Ruu... Become part of our family, please.”

“W-What are you saying, all of the sudden? There’s no way Donda and Jiza Ruu would ever accept that, right?”

“I’ll convince my father. As for Jiza... If I just talk to him, I’m sure he’ll understand.”

I most certainly did not think that was the case.

Actually, I didn’t even want that to start with.

“What brought this on? I have no idea what you’re thinking, Reina Ruu.”

“I want to be with you, Asuta! I want to welcome you as one of us! That’s not strange at all, for members of a clan that has lost strength to join another. We people of the forest’s edge have survived by coming together in that way.”

With that, Reina Ruu gripped my t-shirt tight.

“I’m sure my father has already acknowledged your strength. And if the clan head decides it, then even Jiza won’t be able to oppose. So I just need to take the time to convince him!”

“I can’t do that. Leaving Ai Fa all on her own and joining the Ruu clan... There’s no way I could do something like that, right?”

What sort of face was I making then, I wonder?

Reina Ruu knitted her brows, looking pained.

“I’ve also told Ai Fa how I felt. It doesn’t have to be Darmu. There are plenty of unmarried men in the branch families. If she just set aside her blade, and firmed up her resolve to marry... I mean, father clearly saw quite a lot in Ai Fa, to have offered to have her marry into the main family. Normally it would be unthinkable to make such an offer to a family like the Fa, without so much as any relatives left...”

“But Ai Fa refused, didn’t she?”

Had she been discussing something like that with Ai Fa right in the middle of the banquet?

Since the door was closed, the clamor of the banquet sounded distant.

And... my heart filled with something akin to sadness.

“...Even so, I want to be with you, Asuta.”

Reina Ruu buried her face in my chest.

“Ai Fa is strong. So strong that it’s scary. I was unable to move Ai Fa’s heart. But... I’m sure that Ai Fa could live on her own. She’s strong enough for that.”

“That may be so.”

In actuality, Ai Fa had lived for two years all on her own. And if she hadn’t run into me, she surely would have kept on living like that.

But...

The two of us *did* meet.

“Ai Fa is a hunter. Rather than birthing children, she chose to hunt giba and eventually perish in the forest. But in that case... There was no point in her welcoming a man like you into her family, right? The Fa bloodline will end with Ai Fa. In that case, you should join the Ruu and—”

“Reina Ruu,” I said, grabbing hold of her smooth shoulders. “I understand full well how you feel. Thank you for worrying so much about my future. But... I can’t.”

Reina Ruu looked taken aback.

While watching large tears well up in her blue eyes, I said, “I have no intention of leaving the Fa clan. Even if Ai Fa would be fine with it, I wouldn’t be. So... I’m sorry.”

“But... why? Even the obstinate men of the branch families have recognized your strength. If I can just have time to convince Jiza, then the whole Ruu clan will—”

“I’m very fond of everyone here, too. But even so, I want to stay together with Ai Fa.”

I pushed Reina Ruu off of me as gently as I could, and then sat up.

Reina Ruu was left crouching down near my knees, and soon the tears started to flow.

“I’m really sorry... And thank you.”

Reina Ruu stood up, still sobbing.

But then, with a strong light in her teary eyes, she looked straight at me one last time.

“...I’m not giving up.”

With those words, she ran out the door.

The door was left wide open, so the excited clamor of the banquet came streaming in once again.

My body felt heavy like it was coated in mud, but even so I picked myself up off the ground.

Was that... the right way to deal with Reina Ruu?

Welcoming an outsider like me into the family, and living together with me...

If I had been picked up by Reina Ruu instead of Ai Fa, just how joyful might my life have been?

But still, even so... The one I met back then was Ai Fa.

I could no longer even imagine a future where Ai Fa and I lived separate lives.

After hitting myself in the temple two or three times, I walked towards the meat storage.

However, I suddenly stopped in place once again.

From the other side of the door, I heard a shrill woman's shriek.

Was it Reina Ruu?

No wait, it was actually several women.

Had some sort of accident occurred?

Maybe one of the men finally grew enraged by the constant strange dishes, like the spare ribs and hamburgers?

As my thoughts raced, I went flying out of the pantry.

I ran past the side of the house and the stage, finally stepping foot in the plaza.

There was a strange clamor in the air.

Now, a strange negativity had blanketed the banquet, so smothering that it made the joyous uproar from before seem like a lie.

Everyone was looking the opposite direction of the stage, towards the entrance of the plaza.

Had the Lea clan or someone gotten angry and left?

I weaved my way through the crowd, taking as much care as I could to not bump into others, and eventually popped out next to the ceremonial fire in the

plaza’s center.

What I saw there was hard to believe.

What’s going on...?

For the moment, I couldn’t even comprehend what I was looking at. Just what had occurred to result in this scene? It boggled my mind just trying to figure that out.

The stove closest to the exit had collapsed. The hamburgers and vegetable stir-fry that had been sat atop it were now scattered all over the ground. And...

There was a massive, dead giba with its head thrust into that collapsed stove.

It sure was a big one. Probably around 100 kilos.

Still, it looked to be a rather old giba, didn’t it? Its coat was in poor shape, and one of its horns was broken.

Not to mention the several wooden spears that had been stabbed into its thick torso.

Its blackish-brown pelt had been stained with a great deal of blood, and the smell was tremendous.

To top it all off, the flames from the stove hadn’t completely gone out, so they were now smoldering the fur from the giba’s head.

The smells of a wild giba, its blood, and the burning fur... It was as if an evil presence had started filling the plaza, sullying the blessings of this night.

Did the giba charge into the stove, and then the men finished it off?

But wait, I had heard that regardless of how ferocious or cowardly a giba may be, they would run away when they saw people as long as they weren’t already up super close.

I simply couldn’t imagine that this giba had approached the plaza when more than 100 people were there, and then charged head first into the brightly burning stove of its own volition.

Even though I was mostly just standing there stupefied, I soon learned that my thinking was correct.

There was a flat plank underneath the giba's corpse. And that plank had handholds made with vines attached to it, too. In other words, it was a pulling board, meant for carrying things like metal pots and water jugs.

The giba hadn't died here. It was transported here as a corpse, and thrown into the stove.

In a deliberate, malicious act perpetrated by...

"What's all this? It's a joyous occasion, but everyone's gone all quiet, huh?"

It was a man's voice, dripping with ill intent. An ever so slightly high pitched one, from a young man.

The voice was deep yet sluggish and slightly lisping, and I sort of felt like I recognized it from somewhere.

I slowly lifted my gaze, and found three men standing on the other side of the smoldering black smoke.

One was a large young man. His blackish-brown hair was cut short, his eyes were blue, and despite his large build, he was actually surprisingly lacking in unique traits.

The second was another young man, smaller than the first. He may have been short but he had a firmly muscled body and a square face, calling to mind a lion dog statue. His hair was loose and disheveled, and his eyes that shone like those of a stray mutt were the same color as those of the man beside him.

And then the last man was even more massive than Donda Ruu and Dan Rutim, looking like a blimp made of flesh. His height looked to be around two meters tall, but how much must he have weighed? I wouldn't have been surprised to hear it was 200 kilos. His face, arms, hips, and legs all swelled out, to a degree that he looked like he would move quicker by rolling around than walking.

His forehead retracted heavily, and his dark, shaggy hair curled up around his ears. That caused him to look rather old, but then there was something oddly babyish about his bulging face, which I couldn't help but find eerie.

It was definitely my first time meeting this flesh balloon, but I recognized the

other two.

Diga Suun, the heir to the main Suun house who I met only once nearly a month ago.

And Doddo Suun, the second son of the main Suun house, whose bad side I got on just seven days ago.

They were most assuredly men of the Suun clan, who led the people of the forest's edge.

"Where are the clan heads...? Are Dan of the Rutim and Donda of the Ruu hiding somewhere? We men of the main Suun house came out of our way to visit this celebration, but the clan heads aren't even going to greet us?"

Diga Suun's raised voice carried an offensive odor throughout the plaza. In all likelihood, they were drunk. At the very least, the pair I was familiar with were holding fruit wine containers.

"What, did you not like our blessing? You can't have some sort of issue with a giba this big, right? And it even has three tusks and horns, all told. It's a gift from the Suun main house's oldest son Diga Suun, second son Doddo Suun, and youngest son Mida Suun. Now gratefully accept it, Rutim."

Youngest... Did he just say youngest? So he meant that fleshy blimp was the youngest out of the group? Even though the eldest, Diga Suun, didn't look like he had even hit 20?

No wait, that all didn't matter right now.

I took a look around, tightly clenching my fists.

The women were frightened, and the men were angry.

All of the men had the look of hunters in their eyes, and seemed ready to draw their blades from their hips as soon as the excuse presented itself.

That only made sense, though. Their family's banquet was being defiled, after all.

There was no way that such proud hunters would forgive such scum barging into the banquet like this just because their clan ruled their people.

But with that said, nobody was making a move.

The men there were just silently raging, grinding their teeth so much it was almost audible and clenching their fists so tight it seemed like they were about to start bleeding.

I had heard that pointing a blade against the Suun clan would mean causing a conflict that would split the forest's edge in two, and perhaps even lead to the destruction of all those living there.

And so, they wouldn't make a move?

Were Donda Ruu and Dan Rutim just silently raging somewhere in this plaza, too?

I couldn't just stay silent, though.

Plus, I strongly felt it made sense for me to be the one to stand up, as I didn't belong to the Ruu or Rutim.

I detoured around the giba corpse and now faced the men head on, rather than through the flames.

Instantly, two of the three turned my way with flames in their eyes. Those flames were tepid, though.

"Just what do you think you're doing?!" I angrily yelled.

The flames in their eyes raged even more viciously.

"I didn't hear anything about even more guests showing up! I only prepared enough food for the 100 people of the Ruu, Rutim, and their family! Nobody told me I would need to deal with such sudden arrivals!"

"Damn outsider... You foreigner from the Fa house!"

Diga Suun took one step forward.

He naturally had a blade dangling from his hip, but he was still far enough that he wouldn't reach me even with a leap... probably.

"What's the meaning of this, inviting this outsider to your banquet but not even so much as asking our Suun clan to attend?! The Min clan was under the Suun 80 years ago, to begin with! You can't tell me we're not qualified to be

here when this outsider is standing here! Ruu! Rutim!”

“Please discuss that matter with the heads of the Ruu and Rutim clans! I’m here because I was paid a fee by the Rutim clan to man the stove for this banquet! And I don’t care who you are, I won’t let anyone interfere with my work!”

I handed the initiative over to Dan Rutim and them.

These scum had gone astray, but I hoped that by hitting them with sound reasoning, I could shift things in my favor. That was what I was calculating in the back of my mind... But to be honest, I just threw out what I was really feeling. The anger in the depths of my stomach had risen up and come out my mouth in the form of words.

I thrust a finger towards the unfortunate giba corpse laying there.

“Clean this giba up right away, please! We’ll talk after that! Do you really think you can eat giba while staring at one’s corpse? Can you eat giba stew while smelling the stench of its blood? As the one charged with this banquet’s stove, I cannot accept that! Please, remove that giba from this plaza right away!”

“You brat...!”

“After that, if the clan heads allow it, I’ll prepare food for you all, too! But the food that you wrecked can’t be remade tonight! If you intend to interfere with my work even further, then I’ll have to demand reimbursement from the Suun clan!”

Diga Suun kept on trembling.

Behind him, Doddo Suun drew his blade.

Several of the women started shrieking.

“You would draw your blade at a banquet, you fool?!” a voice like steel shouted, bringing the women’s shrieking to a sudden halt.

The voice was full of anger and pride, and had several times more force behind it than those of myself or those fools from the Suun clan.

It was Ai Fa’s voice, and it reverberated through the air.

“My clan member Asuta and myself are here at this banquet as the result of a deal with the eldest son of the main Rutim house, Gazraan Rutim! There’s no reason for anyone to find fault with that! I have to leave it up to the head of the Rutim to decide how to deal with you... But if you point your blade at a member of the Fa clan, I will show you no mercy!”

Ai Fa firmly stepped forward out of the dim shadows.

She resolutely stared at the intruders with eyes ablaze, her head held high... and she was dressed in beautiful banquet attire.

4

Ai Fa...

Her long golden hair flowed down her back all the way to her hips. Atop it was an iridescent veil, and there were small flowers and berries in it here and there throughout.

She had accessories made from berries and metalwork around her neck, arms, and ankles, as well as a thin, slightly purple cloth trailing from her hips.

It was the same sort of banquet outfit the other women were wearing. Yes, it was the same... But none were as beautiful as Ai Fa. Or at the very least, it looked that way to me.

And unlike the other women, she held a blade in a leather sheath in her hand and had the daring expression of a hunter on her face.

“Ai Fa... It’s been a while, hasn’t it...?” Diga Suun said, turning her way while gesturing to halt his younger brother with the drawn blade. “Why, you’re dressed like a woman... Have you finally made up your mind to get married...?”

There was an unpleasant glint in Diga Suun’s sluggish eyes, and a disgusting, vulgar smile crossed his slack face. He looked like he was about to lick his lips, and it made me so mad I was ready to go leaping forward without even thinking about the danger.

Don’t... Don’t you look at Ai Fa with those eyes like muddy water!

Did this man intend to not just trample upon my work, but also the person

most precious to me?

However, unlike me, the one faced with that repulsive gaze remained perfectly calm.

“Hmph. It would ruin the atmosphere of this party for an unmarried woman to not be dressed in banquet attire, so I figured there was no helping it and put on such an insubstantial outfit. I believe I taught you full well that I need no husband when you experienced the cold depths of the river bottom two years ago, eldest son of the main Suun house.”

“You...!”

“Hurry and sheathe your blade! You have come to this banquet uninvited, mislead others, and caused harm to our people. Is that how the leading clan should behave?! If you say you lead our people, then you should serve as an example for us!”

Diga and Doddo Suun stared at Ai Fa, rage burning in their eyes.

It was then that the fleshy blimp of a youngest brother, who was looking off elsewhere, abruptly stated, “Hey... Something smells really good... And I’m real hungry...”

His voice was small and high-pitched, like that of a young child. Normally you would figure your voice became deeper the bigger you were, but if you got too fat, did it put pressure on your windpipe?

He really was like a symbol of the depths of the Suun clan’s depravity.

“Shut up! Be quiet, you half-wit!” his older brother angrily rebuked, causing a disappointed look to cross his face as he stopped talking.

I decided to take advantage of the opportunity to butt in.

“If you intend to keep on insisting that you really are here to celebrate the wedding, then first sheath your blades, and clean up that giba. If the Rutim clan head decides to forgive you, then I’ll cook up some—”

“Who’d forgive those bastards?!” a voice other than the Suun men yelled out in response.

I could feel a bundle of bloodlust approaching from behind me. When I turned

around to look, I found Dan Rutim and Donda Ruu.

Dan Rutim was still holding large spare ribs in each of his hands, but there were thick veins bulging across his bald head.

Donda Ruu had a container of fruit wine dangling from his hand and a grin like that of a wild beast on his face.

And both of their eyes had raging flames burning in them. These two clan heads were more furious than anyone else.

“You brats... How dare you sully my son’s wedding?!”

Putting aside Donda Ruu, I had never seen the head of the Rutim clan anywhere near this furious. His eyes were open so wide it looked like they were about to burst, his thick eyebrows were raised high, and the plentiful fat on his cheeks was trembling.

His thick lips were turned upwards exposing his sturdy-looking white teeth, and there were thick veins pulsing across his temple, too.

Compared to this, the anger he once pointed my way was like how you would react to a puppy piddling on the floor. He really did look like a furious genie.

I questioned if anyone could keep their wits about them when faced with such rage, and when I turned to look...

Diga Suun was frozen in place and had gone completely pale.

Doddo Suun, meanwhile, was holding onto his blade with trembling fingers.

As for Mida Suun, he was just standing there, looking like he didn’t know what was going on.

“Who would want to celebrate a wedding with scum like you?! And who would let you filth eat such delicious food?!”

As he roared, Dan Rutim bit into the spare ribs he was holding, then threw the remaining white bones to the ground by his feet.

Donda Ruu stepped straight forward, too.

“Suun clan brats... Do you really think punks like you are any match for us?! If you want to pick a fight with the Ruu and Rutim, then you’d better bring your

clan head and all the men you've got!"

His roar was like lightning crashing down from the heavens.

I just barely heard Diga Suun squeak out a shrill, "Eek!"

"As if we could eat the meat of a giba this old! We won't be accepting this 'blessing,' you bastards!"

With that, Dan Rutim strode firmly forward, then grabbed the fur of the giba with its head in the stove with both hands.

What happened next defied belief.

Somehow, Dan Rutim lifted that giba, which looked to be around 100 kilos, straight over his head with just his arms.

Dan Rutim probably weighed around the same amount himself, but still, that was some preposterous strength.

Diga Suun shrunk away with a "G-Gah!"

Doddo Suun also looked fully ready to flee.

Even Mida Suun let a "Wah!" slip.

"Begone!" Dan Rutim yelled, and threw the giba's massive body.

With that, the Suun brothers took off running with a pathetic "Waaah!"

The poor giba corpse bounded two or three times, shattering the wooden spears stabbed into its back, before it finally settled near the entrance to the plaza.

Soon enough, the Suun sons disappeared from sight into the darkness.

"You damn fools!" Dan Rutim yelled, overlapping with a tremendous cheer. Everyone present had practically exploded with joy.

That cacophony was proof of just how detestable they found the Suun clan, as well as how much they were always holding back their fury.

"Dan Rutim... Sorry if I was too impertinent there."

I took the towel off my head and bowed to Dan Rutim.

In an instant, that furious genie erupted with a laugh of "Gwahaha!"

“What are you saying?! I just wasn’t able to even move for a bit there, because I was so mad that I couldn’t breathe! And then you two went and said what I wanted to, and I finally came back to my senses!”

You... two?

With that, I noticed that Ai Fa was standing next to me. She had the same quiet expression on her face as always, but she was dressed completely differently.

“At any rate, those brats obviously just got drunk and decided to interrupt our banquet. If they’d been moving on their clan head’s orders, they would’ve brought along men from their branch families, after all,” Donda Ruu said with flames still burning in his eyes, and then he gulped down some more fruit wine.

“Hey! Return that old giba to the forest! The mundt will clean up after those brats’ carelessness!”

Several men nodded, then ran over to the poor giba’s corpse.

With that, Dan Rutim’s eyebrows drooped with pity.

“Ugh. That giba didn’t do anything wrong... Hey! If you’re reborn as a giba again, then I’ll make you into a delicious meal!” I yelled out without even thinking, causing Dan Rutim to turn my way.

“Asuta! My belly was full of rage, but now it’s all empty! Is the next dish not ready yet?” he asked, placing a thick hand on my shoulder, causing me to unwittingly jump back.

“Your hands! Please, go wash your hands! You just grabbed that giba’s fur! No matter what, don’t go eating ribs with those hands, alright?”

“The ribs are all gone. Aren’t there any more left, Asuta?” Dan Rutim questioned, his thick lips pouting. It was an expression like a sulking baby would make.

“If there are any left, then I’ll grill them up as extras. So please, just wash your hands as you wait... Well then, I’ve got work left, so excuse me.”

“Right! I’m counting on you, Asuta!”

I glanced over at Ai Fa. She nodded back at me, said, “I’ll deal with the broken

stove,” then turned her back.

After staring for a few moments at her long, blonde hair covered by the veil rolling down her beautiful back, I took off running to the kitchen.

◇

Time kept on passing, and before long we hit the climax.

The bride and groom had watched over the banquet from atop the stage for the duration, but now the Rutim and Min elders lent them a hand, and they descended to the ground.

Then they were led to the stove constructed in front of the stage.

There, Jiba Ruu was waiting, with Vina Ruu holding her hand.

The pair got down on their knees before Jiba Ruu, and they bowed as the groom offered up his right shoulder while the bride offered her left for the old woman to grab onto.

With her trembling fingers, Jiba Ruu removed the grass crowns from their heads, then warmed them over the stove where herbs were burning. Then, she placed the crown that had been on the groom on the bride’s head, and the one the bride had worn on the groom.

Before long the two slowly stood, then Jiba Ruu removed a horn and tusk from her own necklace and held them out.

“I offer these blessings... Tonight, Ama Min of the Min clan becomes the wife of Gazraan Rutim of the Rutim clan, taking the name Ama Min Rutim. With this, the bonds between the Min and Rutim shall deepen, bringing about greater strength and prosperity for our forest’s edge...”

“I, Gazraan Rutim, bestow Ama Min Rutim upon the forest.”

“I, Ama Min Rutim, bestow Gazraan Rutim upon the forest.”

Cheers filled the air once again.

And as if pushing through those cheers, the women of the Ruu branch families approached the stove where the herbs had been burning, carrying a metal pot.

Inside the pot were a hamburger just waiting to be finished, and the best cut of steak, a fillet.

The women diligently added firewood, leading to a roaring flame that was more than just a little strong. Then, they took Jiba Ruu by the hands and fell back.

In their place, Vina Ruu stepped forward.

Apparently the custom was that after a bride gained her new name, the oldest unmarried woman of the parent clan was to offer her the first meat she would eat.

Vina Ruu stood in front of the stove, then grabbed the fruit wine container that had been dangling from her waist. Only the necessary amount of fruit wine was inside.

Vina Ruu gently poured out the contents of the container into the metal pot.

Suddenly, deep red flames flared up, but they soon died down.



The guests present all went, “Ooh...!”

Next, Vina Ruu withdrew, gracefully pointing to the pot as she did so.

The women then raked out about half of the burning firewood to regulate the flame.

Following that, the bride and groom walked up before the stove, and used a skewer they received from the women in order to split the hamburger in half.

When I saw that meat enter the bride’s mouth, my work was finally at an end.

Epilogue: The End of the Banquet

“Alright, this is seriously the last of the meat!”

With that, the additional meat was delivered to the banquet.

Just how much meat ended up getting consumed today? It was already so much that I couldn’t calculate it all out, yet the men and women all cheered and crowded around.

As I watched that sight from the side of the main Ruu house, I called out to the girl by my side.

“...Lala Ruu, aren’t you going to go eat?”

“My stomach’s all full already. And if I overeat, I’ll get fat.”

I got the feeling that she could still stand to put on some more weight. I mean, she looked downright scrawny compared to her two big sisters.

But Lala Ruu was still only 12 years old. I guess she was the sort that grew taller first. But I was sure that she would end up just as lovely a lady as her sisters in just a few years.

“Hey, that final fire at the end was amazing. What was that?”

“A different sort of fruit wine than usual. When it’s got strong alcohol, it burns easier.”

Naturally, I was talking about the fruit wine I had received from Kamyua Yoshu.

I couldn’t think of any other way to use it, so I made it part of the trick for the banquet’s finale.

Lala Ruu gave a largely disinterested sounding, “Hmm...” and then closed her eyes. “Still, Ama Min Rutim was amazing. She’s a pretty person to start with, but in that bridal outfit she was on a whole other level.”

“That’s for sure. It really was a surprise... But your outfit was wonderful too, Lala Ruu.”

Of course, Lala Ruu was also wearing banquet attire.

She was still a young child, but she really did look more womanly with her hair down like that.

But even though I respectfully kept my praise of her appearance to just her outfit, I still ended up getting a firm slap on the back.

The strong pain sunk into my exhausted body.

“Owww... So, what was the business you had with me, anyway?”

“Hmm? Ah, it wasn’t really anything like that, just... Have you seen Shin Ruu?”

“Shin Ruu? I don’t know... Wasn’t he hanging out around Ludo Ruu?”

“Ludo was with my other brothers. That’s strange... He should’ve been with Sheera Ruu and the rest of his family, at least up until a little while ago...”

Well that was no surprise, seeing how it was a banquet with 100 people present.

I had finished up my work, but even so, I still hadn’t run into Ai Fa.

“Hey Asuta, good work. You sure worked hard, not just manning the stove but also dealing with those blockheads from the Suun clan, huh?”

Speak of the devil, I suppose, as Ludo Ruu popped up then.

“If Jiza wasn’t right next to me, I would’ve given those bastards a beating myself. Well, it was the Rutim banquet, so I guess it made sense to let their clan head take credit.”

“That sure was mature for you, little Ludo. And I mean, it’s better to not get involved with the Suun clan at all.”

“Shut it, man woman. So... What were you two doing? It’s hard to even tell if she’s a man or woman, but are you planning on marrying her after all, Asuta?”

Enraged, Lala Ruu went for a slap, only for the young hunter to dodge out of the way.

“Come on you two, this is a happy occasion... Hey, Ludo Ruu, do you know where Shin Ruu got off to?”

“Shin Ruu? Ah, he went to the vacant house where you guys are staying,” Ludo Ruu replied, furrowing his brows and looking just a bit displeased. “Now

that I think of it, Ai Fa was there too... Damn, I hope she doesn't say anything she shouldn't to him."

Something she shouldn't...?

The puzzle pieces started to click together inside my exhausted brain.

"What do you mean, 'something she shouldn't'? What did you tell Shin Ruu? And wait, why are Shin Ruu and Ai Fa talking in the first place?!"

"Oh, shut it. It's got nothing to do with you," Ludo Ruu brushed his sister off while staring my way.

I gave a nod, then moved my shoulders away from the wall they had been leaning on.

"Lala Ruu, let's go check it out. I was looking for Ai Fa, anyway."

"Huh? Ah, yeah..." Lala Ruu responded somewhat weakly and took hold of my arm, then I set off walking towards the plaza.

"Hey, what's going on with Shin Ruu and Ai Fa?"

"I'm not sure yet. But I'm not that close to Shin Ruu, so could you talk to him?"

I pushed through the crowd of people towards the vacant house, accompanied by Lala Ruu as she tilted her head.

Everyone really seemed like they were enjoying themselves.

Now that the banquet was wrapping up, I finally had time to look around at everyone's expressions.

Even the men who usually had such tough looks on their faces now wore hearty smiles.

Meat and wine. Family and relations. Orange crackling flames. A gallant groom and a beautiful bride... Everyone seemed to be getting drunk on all sorts of things.

I really was glad to have been a part of this banquet.

And I was proud to have completed this job.

But for me, Ai Fa was the only one I could truly share those feelings with.

“Ah...” Lala Ruu called out.

It was then that Ai Fa and Shin Ruu appeared from behind the dimly lit vacant house.

Shin Ruu was soon absorbed back into the crowd of people, leaving Ai Fa the only one standing there.

“Shin! Shin Ruu!” Lala Ruu yelled, pushing away from me and taking off into the mass of people.

Naturally, I jogged on over to Ai Fa instead.

“Asuta...” Ai Fa said, her eyes opening wide in surprise. “What is it? Did something happen?”

“No, nothing on my end.”

I stopped in place in front of Ai Fa.

Suddenly, my right knee gave out. I was about to tumble down to the ground, but Ai Fa instead caught me and supported me with her strong arms.

“What’s the matter? Are you feeling off?”

“No... I’m just dead tired. And I mean, I was only able to steal a few bites here and there.”

“You fool. So you haven’t had a proper meal despite doing all of this work?” she said with an angry look on her face as she leaned me up against the wall of the house. “Wait here. I’ll go get some meat.”

“No, it’s fine. I don’t think I’ll be able to get anything down for the time being, anyway,” I said, hurriedly grabbing Ai Fa’s arm. “I finally finished the job. Let me bask in that just a little longer.”

As I said that, I slowly lowered myself down to the ground.

Ai Fa looked a little hesitant, but she ultimately sat down next to me, her one knee up in the air as usual.

“Hey, Ai Fa... You know, it wouldn’t be so terrible to behave a little more womanly at least when you’re dressed like that, right?”

“So even you’re saying such strange things... I’m only dressed like this because I had no choice after Granny Jiba was being so insistent,” Ai Fa said, flicking the transparent veil with her slender finger. “Before I am a woman, I am a clan head and a hunter. It’s just plain laughable, me wearing an outfit like this.”

“That’s not true at all. It’s true that you’re a clan head and a hunter, but you’re a woman, too.”

Ai Fa had a displeased look on her face, but I just smiled back at her.

“It really suits you. And that’s no mere flattery. I really mean it.”

Ai Fa’s face didn’t go red, but she looked flustered, as if some food had gotten caught in her throat.

And then, she ended things by saying, “Don’t go blurting out such nonsense.”

With that, I turned my attention back towards the banquet, which showed no signs of winding down.

“...Your job is finished.”

“Yeah, it’s done.”

“I don’t know what will happen next, but at the very least, you carried out your task.”

“Right.”

“This is your strength, Asuta.”

Ai Fa somehow seemed like she was staring terribly far off into the distance.

What was going on? She had just seemed totally normal, but now she felt like she was far away from me.

“Asuta.”

“Yeah?”

“Should you perhaps be with the Rutim instead?”

I stared straight at the side of Ai Fa’s face, but she showed no sign of looking my way.

“Gazraan Rutim has acknowledged your strength, and Dan Rutim is of the same opinion. I doubt it will be enough to earn you marriage into the main house, but you would surely be wholeheartedly welcomed as a member of the clan even without any blood relation, like your current relationship with me.”

“Hey.”

“And if you continue to strengthen your bonds, perhaps one day you will be able to marry into one of the branch families. And then, you’ll also be—”

“What the heck? Why are you saying that, all of the sudden?”

I drew closer to Ai Fa, but sure enough, she still wouldn’t look my way.

“...Let me ask in another way, then. What do you hope to accomplish by staying in the Fa house?”

“What...?”

“The Fa clan is not as prosperous as the Ruu or Rutim. We could never hope to provide for the preparation of such a luxurious meal. Aria, poitan, giba meat, and just a few vegetables, and only enough for the two of us... Are you really satisfied just making that?”

“I am. It’s not as if I’m serving you food as a chef. It’s just as family, and as the one who mans the Fa house’s stove. And that means getting by within the means of the household is my job.”

“And you’re satisfied with that?”

“Yes,” I firmly responded. “It makes me happy, making food like this for work. I definitely get enjoyment out of the process. But the clan I want to man the stove for isn’t the Ruu or Rutim. It’s the Fa. I want you to eat my food, more than anyone else.”

Ai Fa was silent.

“It’s always possible some other eccentric will ask me to man the stove for a night or even another banquet, right? And I’d gladly welcome such a job. But I want to keep on cooking for the Fa house as I hold that hope in my heart.”

“But...” Ai Fa muttered, still not looking my way. “Today, my relations with the Suun clan grew even worse.”

“The same is true for me.”

“I have the strength needed to protect myself. But I don’t possess the power to protect you while I’m out in the forest and you’re in the house on your own.”

“That’s...”

“The Rutim and Ruu do, though. Even if the Suun are willing to harass others like they did today, they don’t have the guts needed to point their blades at the Ruu or Rutim.”

I just sat there and listened.

“It’s dangerous for you to remain at the Fa house.”

“...Did that thought come from you?”

I drew even closer to Ai Fa, but she still didn’t move.

“I mean, isn’t it a little late to be saying that? We met that Doddo Suun guy seven days ago. So why are you saying that now?”

“Ever since that day, you’ve been spending all of your time here in the Ruu settlement.”

“Yeah, that’s true. But this morning, you said, ‘Once tomorrow comes, we shall return to our former lifestyle,’ didn’t you? So why are you suddenly saying such things now?”

“Today, the Suun clan’s grudge grew even deeper. And you also displayed your strength to the Rutim.”

“That’s all?”

“...I was told that you should not remain a member of the Fa house.”

“By Reina Ruu?”

Ai Fa’s silence gave me my answer.

“I got the feeling that was it. I mean, I’m grateful to hear that she was worried about me, but...”

I saw Reina Ruu’s pained, teary face in the back of my mind.

“But that’s how she felt, not me. I don’t want to act on anyone’s feelings here

but yours and mine.”

She didn’t say anything.

“How I feel is obvious. I want to stay in the Fa house. I’ll only leave when you get sick of me and drive me out.”

“...So if I tell you to leave, you will?”

Ai Fa was still staring off into the distance and I was mad, so I grabbed her shoulder and forced her to look my way. She could have easily shaken me off, but Ai Fa offered no resistance.

For the first time in a long while, her blue eyes looked at me.

“I want to be by your side. I don’t want to leave, even if you hate me. If you want me to leave, then you’ll have to drag me out by force. I mean... there’s no way I could ever beat you in terms of raw strength.”

Once again, there was no response.

“Was it a lie when you said you didn’t want me to disappear?”

There was a fire in Ai Fa’s eyes.

“I don’t want that. But I don’t want to expose you to danger, either. That’s precisely why I’m suggesting you should join the Rutim clan!”

“I see. If that’s how you feel, then I really do want to stay by your side. As for the Suun clan... If it really is a danger, then let’s come up with some sort of countermeasure. I mean, I think if worst comes to worst, I could always rely on that Kamyua Yoshu guy.”

“...That man is from the city of stone.”

“If you don’t like that, then I’ll drop it. In that case, I’ll get down on my hands and knees and beg the Ruu or the Rutim, or whatever it takes. I’ll say, ‘I know I’m not part of your family, but protect me.’ But no matter what, I don’t want to be separated from you.”

There was still a fire in Ai Fa’s eyes, but now it flickered.

I didn’t know if she was mad or what... She might not even quite know herself.

Ai Fa was a woman, but she was also a hunter. The one and only female hunter here at the forest's edge. And I...

"...What business did Shin Ruu have with you?"

"What?"

"You were just talking, right? Could it have been about sacrificial hunting? Was he discussing that matter with you, in order to support a family of five all on his own?"

It didn't seem like she was going to say.

"What did you say to him, Ai Fa?"

"...'Sacrificial hunting is a dangerous technique. If you lose your life, then who will take care of your family then?'"

"I see. But you keep on using it even though you've got me, right? That sweet scent that clings to you comes from giba summoning fruit, doesn't it?"

The blood started to faintly rush to Ai Fa's face.

I was really caught up in the moment, but maybe I shouldn't have touched on her smell...

But I loved that scent.

The sweet smell of giba summoning fruit.

The refreshing smell of herbs.

The sharp smell of pico leaves.

The gentle smell of grigee fruit.

The delicious smell of meat and fat.

All of those blended together harmoniously to make up Ai Fa's aroma, and I adored it.

That was a scent belonging to Ai Fa and Ai Fa alone.

A smell only she could attain, carrying out the work of both a man and a woman on her own.

A unique aroma, combining the fragrances of both the forest and the home.

“There’s no need to keep on being a hunter if it means putting yourself in such danger... You never want to hear anyone tell you that, right, Ai Fa?”

She didn’t reply.

“I’m the same way. I don’t want anyone to tell me it’s too dangerous for me to keep on manning the Fa house’s stove.”

Ludo Ruu’s words came to mind: Don’t worry about her, respect her.

Ai Fa was going that far to hunt giba. To live as a person of the forest’s edge, as a hunter.

Quitting sacrificial hunting may even be the same as quitting being a hunter at all for her. Maybe she would have no choice then but to marry into some family.

If she chose to reject that fate and keep on living as a hunter...

And Ai Fa was so strong, and proud, and beautiful...

And so, I truly didn’t want to negate Ai Fa’s choice, or her determination.

I was so charmed by Ai Fa precisely because of the sort of person she was.

Because she possessed the scents of both the forest and the home, the strength of a hunter yet also the beauty of a girl... I wanted to stay by her side.

“I’ll think on the thing with the Suun clan, too. So please, let me stay with you. I want to be together with you, Ai Fa.”

Ai Fa remained silent for a while.

Her strongly blazing eyes remained fixed on mine, as if she was trying to find out my true intentions.

How much time passed with the two of us like that...?

Eventually, though, Ai Fa said, “...Do as you please,” and turned away.

She was pouting ever so slightly, and her cheeks were still just a bit red.

Ai Fa was finally back to her usual self.

It was then that a large shadow approached with a jangling sound.

“My apologies for interrupting when you’re in the middle of something, but

could I have a little of your time, Asuta and Ai Fa?" Gazraan Rutim asked, stepping into view.

The gallant hunter in his headed giba cloak looked silently down upon us.

"Yeah, go ahead. We weren't really busy," I replied, then remembered that my hand was still grabbing Ai Fa's shoulder, so I hurriedly removed it.

When you added in the fact that Ai Fa was facing away with red cheeks and a pout, it was pretty darn obvious that we really were in the middle of something.

Actually, it was almost impressive the way that he went ahead and called out to two people who were so clearly busy with something else.

"My sincerest apologies. It's been difficult for me to get away from the banquet. So while I know I'm being rude, I still went ahead and called out to you."

"Ah, no, don't worry about it," I said, standing up.

Ai Fa naturally stood as well, and she took the chance to firmly jab me in the side with her elbow.

"I was uncertain whether or not I would be able to see you tomorrow, so I brought along your payment in order to hand it over tonight," he said, holding out the giba horns and tusks that made up the other half of my reward.

They surely were part of the blessings the couple had received for their wedding. But at any rate, they were tied carefully yet firmly together into a necklace using a leather string.

"Thank you so much for the delicious meal. When I saw the happy faces of my family, I knew that I hadn't been wrong in my judgment."

"No, thank *you* for believing in me. And... congratulations on your marriage."

"Thank you," the groom replied with a bashful smile. "I'm also truly sorry that you beared the full brunt in the matter with the Suun clan, too. Apparently the other men were holding themselves back for the time being when they saw my father Dan and Donda Ruu in such a rage that they may well have drawn their blades."

"Nah, we just went and did that on our own. Honestly, I was just worried that

I may have been inviting disaster for the Rutim.”

“Disaster can come upon us at any time, regardless of our intentions. That was made quite clear tonight.”

There was a strong flame burning in Gazraan Rutim’s unflinching eyes.

“Still, the Suun clan isn’t likely to take decisive action, either. No matter how much we may not get along, they would never be able to handle the giba hunting without us. In order to maintain their cozy lifestyles, they aren’t able to raise their blades against us Ruu and Rutim.”

“I see. You mean because they’re receiving the reward money from the capital, right? It really is hard to imagine that they’re also people of the forest’s edge...”

“I’m in complete agreement. You two are in a different situation, though. I’m sure the Suun clan wouldn’t hesitate too much before crushing the Fa clan, which only has the two of you as members,” Gazraan Rutim said, his tone of voice growing firmer. “However, as long as you maintain such close relations with we Ruu and Rutim, I can’t imagine they would go and do something unscrupulous so lightly... Yet, there is the example of today to go on, as well. Please take care of yourselves, Asuta and Ai Fa.”

“Right. We intend to give the matter plenty of thought, too.”

Gazraan Rutim gave a single nod, then looked down at the necklace he had handed over to me.

“Still, are you really satisfied with just 20 giba worth of horns and tusks for your service? I really do feel I should offer you all of the blessings that we received for today.”

“It’s plenty. In fact, I’m downright overjoyed. And I plan to go ahead and use these soon.”

Having said that, I turned towards Ai Fa, whose face was still slightly red.

“With these, I can buy a new pot! And then I’ll be able to make soup and baked dishes at the same time! It really feels worth all the effort, right, Ai Fa?”

With that, Ai Fa lightly kicked me in the leg, the same sour expression still on

her face.

Intermezzo: The Young Sage

Gazraan's honest opinion upon their first meeting was that the boy had an unusual feel about him. That was his impression when he was introduced to Asuta of the Fa clan, who was manning the stove for the celebratory banquet before his wedding.

From his black hair and eyes and his ivory-tan skin, it was clear that the young man was a foreigner. He was far frailer looking than the hunters of the forest's edge, and his face seemed soft like that of a woman. He surely lacked the strength needed to hunt a giba. Yes, the boy appeared so frail that it was hard to imagine him surviving outside of the city of stone.

However, there was a strong, bright light in his eyes, unlike those of the city dwellers that Gazraan Rutim had seen up to that point.

This young man didn't fear the people of the forest's edge.

That was surely the source of the strange impression he gave.

He was a city dweller surrounded by the people of the forest's edge in the middle of their settlement, and yet he was perfectly calm. On top of that, he was wearing attire from the forest's edge and had introduced himself as being part of one of their clans. Considering how much the people of the forest's edge were thought of as heathens in the Genos domain, such a thing would normally be considered simply impossible.

Well, he's right here in front of me, though, so I guess it doesn't make sense to call it "impossible."

Even so, Gazraan Rutim simply couldn't understand why Donda Ruu had entrusted someone like him with the stove.

His father Dan Rutim had been going mad with anger, and Ama Min was casting her gaze downwards and looking troubled.

At this rate, this could end up leading to friction between his father and Donda Ruu.

That was Gazraan Rutim's greatest concern.

Right now, they were in the midst of amassing strength to oppose the treacherous Suun clan. They needed to hunt a great many giba, birth more children, gain more subordinate clans, and eventually take down their foes. If a rift were to form now between the Ruu and their largest subordinate family, the Rutim, it could cast a darkness over the future of the entire forest's edge.

Still... Donda Ruu looks no less indignant about this than my father Dan...

This youth named Asuta had gone and presented the meat from a giba torso of all things for a celebratory banquet.

There wasn't anything especially wrong with eating torso meat. It was just as that Fa clan head, the rumored female hunter Ai Fa, had said.

Calling such meat mundt feed really may have been nothing but pure disdain and slander towards clans that had grown weak. It was true that it was an unwritten rule of the forest's edge that weakness was a sin, but if they were to make light of the weak, they would be no better than the Suun clan. The weak should simply serve as a warning to instead strive to obtain greater strength, and there was no purpose to scorning or abusing them.

But still, Gazraan Rutim just couldn't see the purpose of intentionally eating torso meat.

The Fa clan head had said, "Because it's delicious," but he couldn't understand that, either.

The moment he bit into that giba rib in the midst of that suffocating atmosphere, though, he understood entirely.

Gazraan Rutim had been paying a lot more attention to his father and Donda Ruu's actions than he was to the boned meat he was bringing to his mouth, only to be hit by a strong enough impact to almost lose sight of himself.

This is...

The taste was different than what he expected, and any animalistic stench was completely absent.

And what was this thick red sauce? It had the sweetness of fruit wine with the taste of rock salt and pico leaves mixed in, and it had a huge impact on the taste

of the giba meat.

This is... delicious meat?

An unknown sensation was spreading through his mouth.

It was... pleasurable.

He felt euphoric, and experienced the joy of being alive.

It was no exaggeration to say that such thoughts were running through Gazraan Rutim's head.

When he saw his family's joyful smiles, took down a large giba, laid his exhausted body down to rest, or held his beloved in his arms... A joy similar to those had exploded in his mouth and was now racing through his body.

Before his mind could understand what had happened, his heart and body were awash in pleasure. It made for a very strange experience.

When one was parched, water and fruit wine seemed delicious.

When one was starving, the same was true of meat and vegetables.

But what Gazraan Rutim was experiencing now was nothing so common. No, it was something deeper... It was a joy and sense of satisfaction that caused his very soul to tremble.

He felt someone looking at him and turned to look, to find Ama Min smiling his way.

She must have been feeling the same thing that he was.

Unable to wipe away the surprise and impact he had felt, Gazraan Rutim ended up breaking out in a smile too, without even noticing it.

He still didn't properly understand what had happened. And yet, the premonition of some great revolution had gripped Gazraan Rutim's very soul.

◇

The following day, Gazraan Rutim visited the Fa house alongside Ama Min to request that Asuta man the stove for their wedding.

When Gazraan Rutim heard that his father Dan Rutim had made such a

request, he thought the man had gone and done something crazy again. But when he heard that Asuta had turned down the offer, he felt oddly shaken.

To ask someone unrelated to you to man the stove for such an important occasion went against the traditions of the forest's edge.

But even bearing that in mind, he couldn't come up with any significant reason to object. And when he started thinking like that, he could no longer contain himself.

When he earnestly told Ama Min how he felt, she responded, "I feel the same way."

And so, they ended up visiting the Fa house like this.

However, Asuta still stubbornly refused.

"My apologies, but could you wait until tomorrow to hear his response?" the clan head Ai Fa had asked, so Gazraan Rutim and Ama Min ended up returning to the Rutim settlement.

"It's alright. I'm certain our feelings made it across to Asuta," Ama Min said on their way back. "He may have been born in another nation, but I feel that Asuta has a soul fitting of a person of the forest's edge. So I'm sure it will all be fine."

"Yeah... He sure is a strange person, isn't he?"

"You think so?" Ama Min responded. "I don't have any real issue with thinking of Asuta as one of our brethren. It would feel much more natural if Ai Fa were a man and Asuta a woman, though."

"Yes, that's certainly true. A woman clan head and hunter, and a man who tends to the stove, huh? What a strange pair they make."

"They looked very happy, though. So perhaps that's the proper way for them to be after all," Ama Min said, giggling in a childish manner that was very much like her. "Do you remember how they were when they had just returned? Ai Fa had a very gentle expression on her face, and looked like an ordinary young woman. I'm sure she normally only ever shows such a face to Asuta."

"Hmm? I didn't notice at all."

"Really? While Ai Fa is a very strong hunter, she also seems to stubbornly

avoid getting close to others. Yet now, she has a member of her clan like that by her side, so she can likely spend her days in a peaceful state of mind," Ama Min said with a smile as she looked up at Gazraan Rutim. "I'm sure before I met you I would have been jealous."

"Is that so?" was all he could think to say in response.

As they walked along, Ama Min wrapped her arm around Gazraan Rutim's.

"If Asuta accepts this job, then our wedding banquet is sure to make for an even more joyous occasion. Even if he refuses again tomorrow, I intend to keep on visiting the Fa house until he says yes."

◇

Fortunately, Asuta ended up accepting the job.

On top of that, they also got Donda Ruu's approval without any issues when they informed him of the conditions.

"I heard all about it, Gazraan Rutim! You asked Asuta to man the stove for your wedding, right? That sure was daring of you!" Ludo Ruu called out when he was passing through the Ruu settlement.

The youth was always cheerful, but he had an especially brilliant smile on his face at the moment.

"And Asuta will be taking charge of the Ruu stove every day up till then, yeah? That makes me super happy!"

"Is that so? It was a rather extreme request to make of Donda Ruu, so hearing that makes me feel at least a little relieved."

"You sure do have a stiff way of speaking! But still... I heard you're going to give Asuta 20 giba's worth of horns and tusks, right? He seems like he'd accept with no problem even without that, though."

"That wouldn't feel right to us. A price must be paid to have someone utterly unrelated man a wedding's stove, yes?"

"Hmm? We never paid him anything, though. We each gave him a horn or a tusk as a blessing, though."

“...Why was Asuta manning a Ruu stove to begin with?”

With that, Gazraan Rutim learned of the connection between the Fa and Ruu for the first time. He also learned then that Ai Fa had been friends with Jiba and Rimee Ruu, and had been invited to marry into the Ruu clan when her father died.

“So, Jiba Ruu was saved by Asuta’s cooking...?”

“Yeah, that’s right. But Jiza and Darmu still won’t acknowledge him. It looks like my dad’s thinking changed a whole lot with that last dinner, though.”

After a bit of thinking, Gazraan Rutim decided he should talk to Jiza and Darmu Ruu, too.

The sun was already nearing its peak, so Asuta would be arriving here in the Ruu settlement before long. And so, he needed to take care of this matter before then.

“Jiza Ruu, Darmu Ruu, could I have a little of your time?”

Conveniently, the two of them were together in the corner of the plaza.

They seemed to be resting up now that they were prepared to head off for their work as hunters. They were in the comfortable, breezy shade of the trees, quietly discussing something.

“Gazraan Rutim? I was just wishing to talk to you as well,” Jiza Ruu responded, his narrowed eyes firmly staring back. “I just heard tell of your wedding banquet from our clan head, Donda... Just what were you thinking, making such a request of Asuta of the Fa clan?”

“I believe this will grant my relatives further strength.”

Jiza Ruu had the same calm expression on his face as always, but Gazraan Rutim was well aware that underneath that exterior, the man possessed both passion and cool-headedness fitting to his position as Ruu heir.

“You mean by making them feel greater joy at being alive, and in turn increase their desire to stay that way? I won’t say there’s any particular issue with those words, but... Asuta of the Fa clan is a foreigner.”

“Yes. But now he’s a member of the Fa clan, is he not?”

“As long as the clan head acknowledges it, any sort of person can become a member of a clan. But in our 80 years since we moved here to the Mount Morga forest’s edge, a foreigner has never been welcomed as one of our people.”

“Indeed, meaning Asuta is the first. There isn’t any law prohibiting that, so I can’t see how there should be any issue.”

“...Asuta wields a power that he mastered outside of the forest’s edge. Can you firmly say that the change that it will bring about is proper?”

“I can’t, but I don’t believe you can firmly state that it’s wrong, either. And so, I chose to believe that this path is the right one.”

Jiza Ruu folded his arms, the same expression fixed on his face.

Darmu Ruu, meanwhile, just stood there staring at Gazraan Rutim with a glare in his eyes, and made no sign of trying to say anything.

“I understand your concern, Jiza Ruu. It’s not as if I have no doubts myself. However... You also can’t say with certainty that it’s correct to blindly reject all outside power, can you? It seems impossible to me to declare that all such power is wrong, as the world outside our forest’s edge is unbelievably vast.”

“Our brethren only exist here at the forest’s edge, though. The outside world has no relation to us.”

“Is that really so? We were born and raised at the forest’s edge, but it’s not as if we sprouted forth from tree roots, Jiza Ruu.”

He didn’t expect that statement to earn him any approval, but he still felt the need to say it.

To Gazraan Rutim, Jiza Ruu was undoubtedly one of his precious brethren, as well as the heir to his parent clan. Even if talking it out wouldn’t reconcile their differing opinions and feelings, they wouldn’t be able to keep working together hand in hand if they simply tried to hide their disagreement.

“80 years ago, our ancestors lived in the forests of Jagar. Perhaps back then our people truly did live solely in the forest without any interaction with city folks, but since moving to the forest of Morga, we sell giba horns and tusks in

the post town, and abide by the laws of the Genos domain. Even so, we've kept on stubbornly rejecting city folk, but... Is that really the proper way of doing things?"

"Can we not reach a definite conclusion about that? After all, the Suun clan has firm ties with the capital, and you can easily see the depths of depravity that they have fallen to."

"But that's precisely it. Having been forbidden from partaking of the blessings of the forest, we have no way of living left to us but becoming involved with the outside world and purchasing provisions using coins. No matter how much we may try to reject it, we cannot keep on living without associating with the outside world. In that case, does it not make sense to try to make sure our ties with it take the best form possible?"

"And you say... that is why we should accept Asuta?"

"I can't say I've thought it through that far. I simply don't believe that the fact that he was born in another nation is reason enough to reject him."

Jiza Ruu gave a small sigh, then firmly shook his head from side to side.

"At any rate, our clan head has accepted your request, and we have no choice but to abide by his decision. All that's left is to pray that your estimation of Asuta didn't miss the mark, and that he doesn't invite disaster."

"If anything does happen, then I shall offer myself up in atonement."

Gazraan Rutim then ended things by calling out to the silent Darmu Ruu.

"Darmu Ruu, do you hold the same concerns as Jiza Ruu?"

"I... I don't understand such difficult matters," Darmu Ruu replied, sounding displeased. "I just can't stand that pale brat."

Apparently, that wasn't any more serious of a matter than Gazraan Rutim had assumed. In fact, Darmu Ruu actually felt a bit like a sulking child.

...Now that I think of it, Darmu Ruu was the one that Donda Ruu offered to have Ai Fa marry.

Had that matter left him nursing a grudge?

Though he was getting married in just a few days, Gazraan Rutim wasn't all that well versed on the subtleties of male/female relations.

At any rate, I've already chosen this path.

All that was left was to push forward and keep on trusting in the choice he had made.

Gazraan Rutim said farewell to the pair, then awaited the arrival of his strange brethren who had been born in another nation entirely.

◇

The hectic days passed by, and sure enough, Gazraan Rutim stood before Asuta once more, filled with joy and a sense of satisfaction.

This was around when the wedding banquet had come smoothly to a close.

"I'm seriously relieved that everything ended just fine," Asuta said after receiving the necklace that held his payment.

He looked pretty thoroughly exhausted. His eyes were half shut and his back was leaned against the wall of the vacant house, looking like he could collapse at any moment.

Yet his eyes reflecting the bonfire seemed to be filled with just as much satisfaction as Gazraan Rutim's.

The same was also true of Ai Fa, who was for some reason looking away, her face red.

...She really doesn't look like a female hunter right now.

Ai Fa was clad in banquet attire. But that wasn't all, as she also looked even more beautiful than she had before, like she had opened her heart up to Asuta.

The female hunter Ai Fa, and Asuta who mans the stove. Gazraan Rutim could sense that no matter how much of a strange pairing they may make by the standards of the forest's edge, their souls were firmly tied together as family.

"You are a strange man, Asuta," Gazraan Rutim stated, his back facing the hustle of the banquet. "You are undoubtedly a foreigner, yet I also truly believe you are one of our brethren here at the forest's edge. Even though your

physical strength, disposition, and appearance are completely unlike those of the people of the forest's edge... I truly find it strange."

"I see. It really is strange, for me to be accepted so easily..." Asuta replied, his tone sounding a little sleepy. "Well, it's all thanks to Ai Fa. The only reason I have a connection to the forest's edge in the first place is because she went and picked me up."

"Oh, shut up," Ai Fa retorted, crinkling her nose.

But even so, her smooth cheeks remained red.

I see... If Asuta had not met Ai Fa, we really may never have had a day like this.

There couldn't be many folks out there who would bring a foreigner back home with them after finding them out in the forest. Most would either abandon them, or at most escort them to the post town. With a violent natured hunter, he may have even met a rather tragic end.

He was picked up by Ai Fa, then was tied to the Ruu and Rutim through her bonds with Jiba Ruu... And then I met Asuta, too.

This meeting would have some some sort of effect on the forest's edge.

Gazraan Rutim was no seer, so he had no way of saying if that was true or not, but that was just the feeling that he got.

The paths of Asuta and myself overlap.

He had thoroughly experienced that by way of this banquet.

Asuta had brought him such overwhelming joy, so he was already someone utterly irreplaceable to Gazraan Rutim.

They were no blood relation, but even so, Asuta of the Fa clan was one of his comrades at the forest's edge.

I'm sure I will keep on plunging forwards with Asuta from here on out.

He had no idea what sort of future awaited him. But even so, that thought was more a belief than a mere prediction.

If someone tries to harm Asuta, I will act as his shield. If some tries to reject

Asuta, I will be the mouth that persuades them. Asuta gave me more than enough today for me to claim that.

Gazraan Rutim quietly thought to himself that there couldn't be anyone happier than him this night, having gained both a beautiful bride and a precious friend.

"Asuta, you..."

"Sorry. It seems he's fallen asleep," Ai Fa interrupted.

Looking, it seemed Asuta had indeed collapsed to the ground at some point, and was now sleeping up against the wall.

There was an innocence about him as he slept with a satisfied look on his face.

"He ended up falling asleep without eating a thing. He really still has a long way to go when it comes to things like that," Ai Fa said, sounding angry.

However, the light of affection was overflowing from her eyes.

"My apologies for bothering you when you are so exhausted. Please, get your rest."

"Right... Has the banquet still not ended?"

"Yes. Apparently none of them will rest until the last drop of fruit wine is gone."

"I certainly can't keep them company that long. Well then, farewell."

Ai Fa shoved her head under Asuta's arm and lifted him up.

Even so, Asuta didn't awaken, and just kept on peacefully snoring away.

"Ai Fa, let me offer you my thanks as well."

"Hmm? You already paid such a fee for this work, so what purpose is there in tediously offering further thanks?"

"No, I don't just mean for tonight. You have my gratitude for inviting Asuta here to this forest's edge."

"That truly... does not make sense to thank me for."

Ai Fa frowned and looked away.

If Asuta hadn't been there, she surely would have never shown such an expression in front of him.

"Well then, excuse us."

They would surely face all sorts of hardships from tomorrow on, be it from their worsening relationship with the Suun clan, or that mysterious visitor from the city known as Kamyua Yoshu.

And he would offer all of his strength if it would help to save them.

He hoped that they would rest well within the safety of the Ruu settlement for today, and then make all the necessary preparations.

Gazraan Rutim burned the sight of his new comrade into his pupils while such thoughts ran through his head, and then he turned around to return to his beloved bride.

The ceremonial fire kept on burning with the same momentum, sending red flames up into the night sky.

Afterword

You have my deepest thanks for picking up this book, the third volume of “Cooking with Wild Game.”

I can’t help but be surprised at how quickly the volumes have started piling up.

It’s thanks to all of you who have continued to read this series.

I’m also deeply honored that this book received a comment from Norimitsu Kaiho-sama, author of School-Live!

Speaking of Norimitsu Kaiho-sama, the script he wrote for the episode “Festival” of Gargantia on the Verdurous Planet left a really strong impact on me.

The heroines dressed in banquet attire, full of even more energy than usual, dancing with a whole different sort of brilliance than always... As I wrote about the banquet this time around, that work came to mind countless times.

Well, in my banquet I had Asuta fall asleep before the girls started dancing, a real screw up that had readers of the web version lament, “What a careless protagonist!”

With that said, Asuta’s life in this other world is only just getting started!

I would be positively overjoyed if you’re looking forward to what comes next!

Just let me finish by giving thanks to my editor at Hobby Japan, my illustrator Kochimo, 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!

May 2015,

EDA



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Cooking with Wild Game: Volume 3

by EDA

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