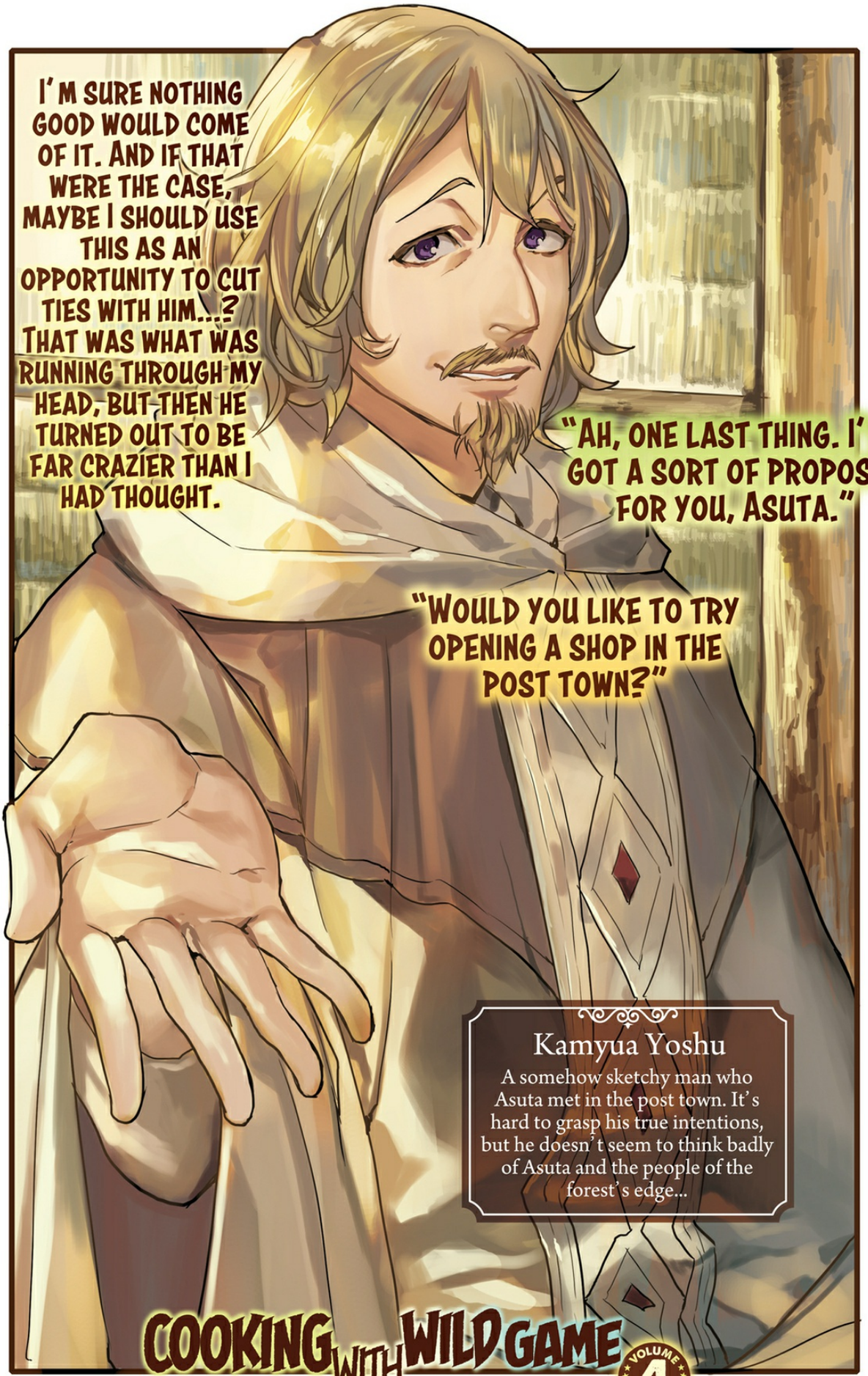
COOKING WITH WILD GAME

VOLUME 4

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I'M SURE NOTHING GOOD WOULD COME OF IT. AND IF THAT WERE THE CASE, MAYBE I SHOULD USE THIS AS AN OPPORTUNITY TO CUT TIES WITH HIM...? THAT WAS WHAT WAS RUNNING THROUGH MY HEAD, BUT THEN HE TURNED OUT TO BE FAR CRAZIER THAN I HAD THOUGHT.
"AH, ONE LAST THING. I'VE GOT A SORT OF PROPOSAL FOR YOU, ASUTA."
"WOULD YOU LIKE TO TRY OPENING A SHOP IN THE POST TOWN?"
Kamyua Yoshu
A somehow sketchy man who Asuta met in the post town. It's hard to grasp his true intentions, but he doesn't seem to think badly of Asuta and the people of the forest's edge...
COOKING WITH WILD GAME
VOLUME 4


WHILE THE PEOPLE THERE INTERACT WITH THE PEOPLE OF THE FOREST'S EDGE, THEY BEAR TERRIBLE PREJUDICE. DESPITE BEING THE NEAREST TOWN TO THE FOREST'S EDGE, IT REMAINED A DISTANT NEIGHBOR. BUT WHAT TYPE OF CHANGE MIGHT BE BROUGHT ABOUT BY ASUTA'S PRESENCE...?
Asuta Tsurumi
A chef trainee who finds himself lost in a whole other world. Learning of the merits of spreading giba meat to the post town, he's left troubled as to whether or not to open a shop.
Ai Fa
The head of the Fa clan. She hunts to maintain her house despite being a woman. She's quite fond of Asuta's hamburgers.


SHE SEEMED TO MAKE UP HER MIND BEFORE TOO LONG, THOUGH, AS HER SENSUAL LIPS OPENED WIDE AND SHE BIT INTO THE GIBA BURGER.
"IT WAS TASTY..."
WAS VINA RUU SOMEHOW EVEN MORE CHARMING WHEN SHE WAS ACTING A BIT CHILDISH RATHER THAN SHOOTING FLIRTATIOUS GLANCES AND WRIGGLING HER BODY?

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Chapter 1: A Chaotic Day

1

It was the day after the biggest job of my life, the wedding banquet...

I was walking along a stamped down yellow trail through the forest's edge next to Ai Fa. We were returning to the Fa house from the Ruu settlement, having completed our six day long task.

"Man, I really wish I could've seen the banquet all the way through to the end..." I unintentionally let slip, grumbling as we walked.

I overslept this morning despite rarely doing so, so I missed the chance to help clean up.

The sun was already nearing its peak.

Even before coming to this other world I was a firm believer in "Early to bed, early to rise," but I was just plain exhausted. It really was regrettable.

Ai Fa glared at me from the side as she kept on walking ahead in long, gallant strides.

"You're still saying that? Your job was to prepare the food for the banquet, so there's no real need for you to worry yourself about such matters."

"No, it's not about responsibility, I just wanted to stick it out with everyone till the very end."

When I finally woke up this morning (or should I say an hour ago) and went flying out of our borrowed lodgings, I found no trace left of the prior night's banquet.

The simple stoves made of stone, the stage where the bride and groom had sat, the stands for the torches, and even the burn marks left by the bonfire... It had all been cleaned up neat and tidy, making for a sight that made it feel as if the previous night's banquet had been nothing but a dream.

From what I was told, apparently everyone got up along with the sunrise and

took care of cleaning everything up.

“It’s just, the aftermath of a festival like that feels kind of sad. It’s sort of like a hole got ripped open in my heart.”

This was also the day I said farewell to the Ruu settlement after living there for six days. Over that period of time, I had grown close to a whole lot of folks. I didn’t know how to deal with the men at first, but as I taught them about bloodletting and the dissection process, I started feeling a tinge of trust and affection towards them. And it went without saying how I felt about the women I cooked together with.

Suddenly, I was feeling a whole lot more lonely.

“Well, as long as I have Ai Fa, there’s nothing to worry about!” I loudly proclaimed, shouting out my earnest feelings and earning myself a kick in the leg.

“Cut that out and just move on, already. Some new trouble is surely waiting for us today, after all.”

“Yeah, I know.”

An hour passed in that way before we finally arrived back at our nostalgic home for the first time in six days... only to find a blond haired man in a long cloak waiting for us there.

“Hey there. I’m glad to find you looking well, Ai Fa and Asuta.”

He was tall and spindly, like a praying mantis. His blond hair and goatee were unkempt. He had a long and narrow face and nose. The outer corners of his purple eyes drooped down, making it look like he was always smiling. And also, those eyes strangely had both the innocence of a child and the calm of an old person about them.

Yes, it was Kamyua Yoshu, a capricious man whose true nature was still a complete and utter mystery to me.

“I came, just as promised. If it’s alright, could we talk for at least a bit?”

“Yeah. I’ve been wanting to talk things over with you properly too, so I’m grateful for the opportunity.”

Kamyua Yoshu gave a satisfied smile upon hearing that.

“And I’m very much grateful to hear that *you’re* grateful. I’m also glad to find you in such a good mood, oh lovely female hunter.”

Ai Fa didn’t give him so much as a single syllable.

“Please don’t go smashing my clan head’s good mood to bits... And if we’re going to talk inside the house, you’ll need to let us take charge of your blade.”

“Ooh, is that a custom amongst the people of the forest’s edge? Sounds good to me. I just can’t stop smiling when imagining how much my curiosity will be satisfied today alone,” Kamyua Yoshu said, playing dumb both in words and expression, then offered up his longsword in its leather sheath without a hint of hesitation. It was notably longer than the savage blades wielded by the people of the forest’s edge, but it was also a good bit thinner, so there wasn’t much of a weight difference.

What was this blade meant for cutting, though...?

“...Well then, please come this way.”

Myself, Ai Fa, and our guest passed through the door, in that order.

The Fa house didn’t seem to have changed at all.

Ai Fa kicked off her footwear, hung her fur cloak on the wall, and then sat in her usual position. However, rather than leaning her blade against the wall like she normally did, she kept her guard up and left it near at hand.

I sat down beside her, leaving our guest’s sword nearby as well.

Kamyua Yoshu, meanwhile, gently seated himself without so much as removing his cloak.

He really is a strange fellow...

He saved us from that predicament back in town, and then things almost turned to bloodshed when he showed up at the Ruu settlement. This was my third time meeting the man.

No matter how many times I saw him, though, I could never tell what he was thinking with that aloof smile of his.

“Now then... First off, I would like to offer an apology.”

“An apology?” I repeated, tilting my head. With that, Kamyua Yoshu smiled even brighter.

“When we first met in the post town, I went and ran my mouth unnecessarily about all sorts of stuff and confused you two. I don’t especially want to actively go against the Suun clan, who lead your people.”

We were suddenly striking at the heart of the matter.

“So could you please cut it out with glaring at me like I’m trying to go up against the people of the forest’s edge? I mean, I came here in the first place because I want to get along with your people. Can’t you believe me?”

Ai Fa had one knee raised and was sitting there solemnly and silently. Regardless of how he may have been taking that, Kamyua Yoshu just smoothly continued on.

“I rushed ahead too much when discussing things back then. I just couldn’t help myself because I was finally getting a chance to interact with people from the forest’s edge, who I had admired for so long, and one of them was a beautiful woman like you, Ai Fa. Please, forgive me.”

Even so, Ai Fa remained silent and expressionless.

This was Ai Fa’s second time meeting him and she had a chance this time around to get her thoughts in order, so perhaps she could now just let a bit of his talkativeness pass her by.

But regardless, it was my job to exchange words with this man and search out his true intentions.

“Well then, let me just ask... What are you after, Kamyua Yoshu?”

“You can just call me Kamyua. And what am I after...?”

“You claimed it was related to work, but you went and came all the way out here just to meet with us. It couldn’t just be to shoot the breeze, right?”

“No, but you see, I really did just want to chat with you...” Kamyua Yoshu said, staring in amazement. “I’ve felt a kinship with the people of the forest’s edge for a while now. But that was all one-sided, and to you all I’m just some

suspicious outsider. It's only natural that you wouldn't listen when someone like that comes around and starts talking about the laws of the forest's edge or the corruption of the clan that leads your people. And so, I came here hoping to start out by deepening my relationship with you two."

With that, Kamyua Yoshu pulled out a bottle of fruit wine from within the folds of his cloak.

"This is a gift, to drink at nighttime or whatever suits your fancy. Ah, right, gotta show it's not poisoned," he said, taking a swig of the fruit wine.

"Hmm... I still don't feel like that answers my question, though. You say you want to deepen your relations with the people of the forest's edge, but I still have no idea why or for what purpose."

"Huh? Do you need some sort of reason or purpose for wanting to get along with others? If I had to say... I suppose it would be the empathy I feel towards your people for having to change their gods, the respect for the solitary hunters of the forest's edge I've seen about the post town, and the personal interest and fondness I have for the two of you. I think those three things form the core of my actions."

He sure could talk. But though his logic was quite sound, his tone and the expression on his face came across as flimsy.

"But you all must have some interest in me to invite me into your house like this, right? I mean, you're not fond of townsfolk by nature, are you? Is it just hard to ignore it when someone like me comes here to the forest's edge?"

"Thank you for putting in the effort to acknowledge our feelings... By the way, did you discuss the matter of your job with the Suun clan?"

"Ah, yeah. If I were to try to bypass them and handle it through some other clan, it would trample on their honor and could cause some unnecessary strife, which I would feel bad about."

This man's job was to guard a group of merchants heading from Genos to the Eastern Kingdom of Sym. And in the process he wanted to pass through the settlement at the forest's edge, so apparently he had requested to have the Suun clan help lead the way or something.

“I’m surprised things went smoothly. I mean, considering how you got involved with their main household...”

“Yeah. I made sure to give my real name, but there weren’t any problems at all. I guess you have to be broad-minded to lead a people, even if you are corrupt,” Kamyua Yoshu said with a grin. While it may not be nice to say so, it was honestly hard to trust that face.

“It’ll still be a while before that job comes to pass, by the way. It’s a rather massive group so it’ll take a whole lot of time to prepare, and they also seem to be a rather superstitious crowd. The lucky day for departing on a journey is said to be the fifteenth day of a month, so there are still over twenty days left from today.”

Now that he mentioned it, I still hadn’t learned how the calendar worked in this world, or even which day of what month it was currently.

But so nobody would pick up on that, I just said, “I see,” and gave a vague nod.

“So, it’ll take two whole months between leaving here for the Eastern Kingdom of Sym and returning. That’s why I want to form as much of a bond with you all as possible in these next twenty days. Thank you for accepting a suspicious guy like me rather than just rejecting me, you two.”

“Well, it’s not like we’ve formed a firm bond just yet, though...”

“There’s no value in a bond formed so easily. A bond becomes strong enough to last by overcoming countless trials together.”

He may have had some nice lines, taken at face value, but there really was something flimsy about them when they were coming from him. As I wondered just why that was, my stomach suddenly broke the silence with a *gurrrgle.*

Ai Fa’s glare had been fixed on Kamyua Yoshu, but now it coldly turned my way.

“Are you hungry? If it’s mealtime for you all, then don’t worry about me being here.”

“No, I don’t really normally eat much during the day. It’s just last night I didn’t

really get a chance to have a proper meal...”

“That’s not good at all! You’re already so thin, so you need to make sure you eat properly.”

I didn’t exactly want to be told that by such a spindly guy, but maybe he only looked so thin because he was so incredibly tall.

It was hard to tell because of his long cloak, but he seemed to have a firm build from the wrists on up, and if I wasn’t mistaken, his fingers were long enough and his palms thick enough that he wouldn’t lose out to Jiza or Darmu Ruu.

“The sun only just hit its peak. Hmm... I suppose it really would be rough eating nothing but dried meat till sunset. Ai Fa, is it alright if I use up just a bit of meat and aria?”

“Do as you please,” she replied, so I headed towards the pantry.

Our guest called out, “Um, excuse me...” with sparkling eyes and stopped me. “When you said ‘meat,’ did you perhaps mean giba meat? If so, would you mind if I eat just a bit, too?”

In that instant, a crack ran through Ai Fa’s calm expression.

“Someone from the city of stone... wants to eat giba meat?”

“Hmm? Is there something strange about that? It’s mainly just the people of the Genos domain who have such feelings of dread and aversion towards the people of the forest’s edge,” Kamyua Yoshu said with a cheerful smile. “I wasn’t born in the Western Kingdom at all, much less Genos in particular, so to me the giba are nothing but a pest, and the people of the forest’s edge are just brave hunters who take them down. The travelers from the south and west wandering around the post town don’t look at you with such fear in their eyes, right? So this should be nothing to feel surprised about.”

He said all that, but I didn’t even know which ones were the people from the east or the south or wherever. However, I got the impression that there were a lot of yellowish brown skinned folks amongst those who looked at Ai Fa with fear or contempt in their eyes.

“Still, it’s true that no people but those of the forest’s edge eat giba meat, I believe. I don’t know about the south or the east, but at least when it comes to the western lands, giba don’t exist outside of the Morga forest’s edge. If I can have the honor of being the first person of the Western Kingdom to eat giba meat, then that alone would be enough to make my trip out here today worthwhile!”

His eyes were seriously sparkling like those of a child.

Meanwhile, Ai Fa still clearly had a troubled look on her face.

This must have been quite a shocking development, considering how the people of the forest’s edge had been derided as “giba eaters” for nearly 80 years.

“What do you think, Ai Fa? You’re the clan head. I’ll abide by whatever you say,” I asked from my half-risen posture, only to be suddenly grabbed by the collar. I just barely avoided falling over, while Ai Fa came in close in a way that made it look like she was about to bite my throat.

“I... I cannot make a decision. Asuta, what do you think?”

She was so close to me, but she was whispering so quietly that I could just barely hear her. She must not have wanted the guest sitting right in front of us to hear, no matter what.

I moved back in surprise, and then when I saw Ai Fa’s face, I was even more shocked. Her expression remained stiff and chilly, but there was a childish unease in her blue eyes.

Was it really that shocking?

I used my own body as a shield to hide that face from our guest, then drew in close to whisper in her ear.

“As long as it doesn’t brush up against any of the forest’s edge’s taboos, I don’t especially mind. How about if I offer him some meat and aria as thanks for the fruit wine he brought as a gift?”

She yanked me closer by the collar again.

“...I leave the decision up to you.”

Ai Fa’s lips touched my earlobe, causing me to feel a little flustered.

While making sure to hide how I was feeling, I turned back towards our guest and gave an easygoing nod.

“My clan head gave her permission, so I’d like to serve you a light meal. It’ll be as thanks for the fruit wine, so I would like to prepare as much as you’d like rather than just a bite.”

“Then I’ll take as much as you’re having!”

It sort of felt like a huge old dog was happily wagging its tail at me.

But still, this may prove to be a good opportunity. Sharing a meal really was an effective method to have a heart-to-heart talk with someone, after all. And so, I headed towards the pantry again, thinking it would be nice if this let me see inside this suspicious fellow’s mind at least a bit.

In the meantime, Ai Fa gently closed her eyes, showing no intention of responding to Kamyua Yoshu as he blathered away.

2

“Thanks for waiting.”

Considering the time of day, I didn’t exactly feel like making any sort of elaborate dish.

And so, I just cut giba rib meat to an appropriate thinness, heated it up together with sliced aria, then added some fruit wine after flavoring it with rock salt and pico leaves, making for a simple stir-fried meat and vegetables dish.

“You sure seem skilled at that. Were you a chef in town in your past life or something, Asuta?”

“Ah, well, something like that.”

As I replied, I offered our guest a wooden spoon and plate.

It was about 1/4th the size of my usual dishes. That was what I went with because I figured he would eat all of it even if it wasn’t to his taste.

“My, I sure am happy! I’ve run all around the western domain, and I’ve even

visited the Eastern and Southern Kingdoms now and again, but I've never seen another animal like the giba. I've been interested for a while now in what such a gallant looking animal's meat tastes like."

I see. Apparently in my world wild pigs aside from boars had all died out, but did such animals not even exist in this world to begin with?

At any rate, we went ahead with our light meal.

Kamyua Yoshu said, "Thanks for this blessing," while picking up the wooden spoon with a wide grin on his face. And then, he used it to scoop up a bit of giba meat and aria and chuck them in his mouth.

His unshaven jaw moved up and down greatly as he chewed, and then he swallowed it down.

And then, the expression completely vanished from Kamyua Yoshu's long, narrow face.

I almost dropped my wooden spoon in surprise.

As soon as the thin smile pulled back from his face, Kamyua Yoshu's aloof expression shifted to the ominous countenance of an assassin, or the Grim Reaper.

His eyebrows were raised while his eyes were caved in, and it looked like the flesh had been shaved away from his cheeks. Up until now I had paid no attention to the shading of his face, but suddenly it felt downright terrifying.

Ai Fa had regained her composure as I was cooking, but with this change she was staring at Kamyua Yoshu as if she didn't want to miss a thing.

In the meantime, Kamyua Yoshu kept on moving his spoon until he had eaten up the contents of his plate in no time at all.

Thanks to all that, I hadn't moved my spoon at all since eating my first bite.

A voice lower than the one he had used till now slipped out from his thin, wide lips.

"...What is this?"

"Ah, I mean, it's a giba dish."

“Yes, that’s right... This is my first time eating meat like this.”

His purple eyes looked towards me with a sharp, piercing light in them.

“This is insanely delicious, isn’t it?”

“Ah, really? I’m honored...”

“So, this is giba meat?”

“Yes...”

“This really is the first time I’ve ever eaten meat that was this tasty.”

“Um, sir! Your face is seriously scary!”

“Huh? What? Really? Sorry!”

With that, Kamyua Yoshu suddenly wrapped up his long, slender face on both sides with his large palms.

“That’s no good! I was so surprised that my hidden face slipped out! Both my public and hidden faces are the real me though, so don’t misunderstand!”

I not only wasn’t worried about misunderstanding, I didn’t even want to understand in the first place.

Rather than coming to understand one another through eating together, it had only made him seem all the more suspicious.

“Man, that sure was tasty! I’m moved! Your people have been keeping this delicious meat all to yourselves? That’s no fair!”

He had put away his hidden face or whatever, but he was still just as suspicious as always.

As I shot a sideways glance her way, I caught Ai Fa sighing. It scared me a little to notice that she was removing her grasp from the sword at her feet, which was partway out of its scabbard.

This man really had given off a seriously sinister aura.

“So the people of Genos have been calling you all giba-eaters while knowing nothing of this delicious flavor, huh? How utterly stupid! Did you all decide to keep this wonderful meat to yourselves as an act of revenge against them?”

“No, that’s not it at all,” I replied, then finally took my second bite of food.

When I did Ai Fa nudged me with her fist, her knee still up in the air.

“Asuta. I’m a little hungry now too thanks to that smell.”

“Huh? There’s nothing I can do about that now, though. I mean, that’s why I asked if you needed any back when I was making it...” As I said that, I scooped up some meat and aria with my wooden spoon. “Here. Say ‘aah.’”

The top of my head was hit with a jab. Then my plate was ripped away and she stole two bites before thrusting the remains back at me.

That was just plain mean...

“Hmm... I’m impressed! Still, this deliciousness is thanks to your skill too, isn’t it? The amount of salt is just perfect, and the fruit wine flavor is great too. Asuta, did you study under a famous chef?”

“Not at all. My family just owned a small restaurant.”

“In what country? I’ve never seen anything like it in any of the nations I’m aware of.”

So, the conversation shifted that way, huh?

Well, no matter who I was dealing with, my stance on that matter wouldn’t change.

“It would take a while to explain, but I was born in an island nation known as Japan. I’d never even heard of the Amusehorn continent, but one day I suddenly found myself waking up in the forest at the foot of Mount Morga.”

“...You’d never heard of Amusehorn?” Kamyua Yoshu questioned, his eyes opening wide once again.

Well, that came as no surprise. If I met a foreigner in Japan who had never heard of the nation, I’d probably be just as surprised.

“What do you mean? I was assuming you were of mixed blood from the east and west, judging by your appearance...”

“Ah, are people with mixed heritage from the east and west common?”

“They’re rare, but the countries are on friendly terms, after all. It needs to be

firmly decided which nation they'll belong to from the start, but they aren't especially persecuted... Wait, are you saying you didn't even know that much, Asuta?"

"Sorry, but I honestly didn't."

We had been far too busy lately, so Ai Fa's lectures on the history of Amusehorn had to be called off. After all, I ended up drifting off to sleep whenever we were chatting about trifling matters after dinner.

Actually, Ai Fa herself was part of this unique isolationist tribe at the forest's edge, so she didn't seem to be all that knowledgeable to start with. When it came to matters concerning the world at large, she just passed on what she had heard from her parents or Granny Jiba.

"Hmm... So that's why you decided to live as a person of the forest's edge despite being a foreigner? To the people of the west, the people of the forest's edge are symbolic of disaster, to those of the south they're a tribe of traitors who abandoned their god, and to those of the north they're sworn enemies... That's why I had you pegged as having been born in the Eastern Kingdom, Asuta."

"My kingdom was called the far eastern island nation. Do a lot of folks from the east look like me, perhaps?"

"Not really? A lot of them do indeed have black hair and eyes, but their skin is also often real dark. There were a lot of folks like that walking around the post town, right? They're from the Eastern Kingdom of Sym."

I see. Apparently there was no point in trying to apply my old common sense here.

"Well, I don't really get it at all myself. I don't mind if you just think I'm a fool who hit his head and started believing in some strange delusions or whatever."

"Got it. That's what I'll do, then."

I was seriously taken aback.

"Ah, but I don't think you're a fool, though. Hmm, still... It sure was a shock. I never imagined giba meat would be this tasty... The rumors about Genos all said

that giba meat stunk and was hard, making it practically inedible.”

“I’m sure those rumors were spread by folks who had eaten meat that hadn’t been properly prepared. But giba meat is delicious.”

“Yeah! I’m well aware, now! A part of me had believed that since they primarily subsisted on aria and poitan, the people of the forest’s edge didn’t have much interest in food and just kept on living in honorable poverty. Preconceptions sure are frightening. Rather than living in noble poverty, it wouldn’t be strange at all for you to introduce yourselves as a race of gourmands. Hmm, this sure is a shock...”

“Ah, hold on a second. I was born in another nation entirely, so please take that matter into account. I believe your impression that they’re a race that lives in noble poverty with little interest in food was right on the mark.”

“Is that so? But this giba meat is just so delicious, so I don’t think the term ‘poverty’ suits them. Though I suppose even if they have such tasty meat, they otherwise just eat cheap aria and poitan, huh? Hmm, how interesting!”

What should I do here?

I didn’t feel like telling this suspicious guy everything just yet, but with that said, I also got the feeling that it would be dangerous to let him feed Duke Genos false information.

“Kamyua Yoshu, my apologies, but could I ask that you give us a little time?”

“Hmm? For what?”

“I was born in a foreign nation, so I still don’t fully understand the rules and taboos of the forest’s edge. To be frank, I’m not able to judge how much I should be talking to you about internal matters here at the forest’s edge. And so, I’d like to privately discuss that matter with my clan head.”

“Yeah, go right ahead! You’ve been the only one chiming in as I’ve been blathering on, anyway. So if you were to stop talking, I’d just be talking to myself! In that case, if you want, shall I leave for a few hours? To be honest I still haven’t finished my preparations for my job, so I wanted to check things out a bit further south, too.”

“South... The Ruu settlement is in that direction, isn’t it?”

“I won’t go near there today. It seems I’m not especially welcome, and I learned in the process that I really need to be a bit more careful in how I handle the people of the forest’s edge.”

In that case, I guess something good came from Darmu Ruu pointing a blade at him. Though with that said, I think it would have been better if he had realized it before things had come to that...

“But if you’re heading south, you won’t be able to avoid passing in front of the Ruu settlement. The settlement is set up as one long, narrow path, after all.”

“It’ll be fine. I’m skilled at hiding. I did a good job of it yesterday, didn’t I?”

“...What?”

“I stealthily watched the banquet yesterday from the shadows of the forest. It caused me quite a fright when those young folks from the Suun clan showed up, but fortunately things didn’t end up turning violent.”

Kamyua Yoshu didn’t look shy in the least about saying that, and he even gave a big smile.

3

“Hey, seriously, what do you think of that old-timer?” I asked Ai Fa while simmering poitan. “I felt like I had less and less of a grip on him the more we talked. Would it be smarter to just not get involved with him any further?”

“...I don’t know,” Ai Fa replied, her voice sounding a bit listless. “I never had any intention of forming bonds with anyone from the city of stone, but that man didn’t say anything particularly illogical. It’s just that his attitude wasn’t serious in the least.”

“That’s for sure. It certainly would be a whole lot easier if we could just trust that old-timer... He’s like the complete and utter opposite of Jiza Ruu, who’s always super serious even if we don’t see eye to eye. And both of them have eyes that make it look like they’re always smiling...”

“And that man... He ate giba meat,” Ai Fa muttered with a gloomy look in her eyes. “I never imagined someone from the city of stone would do such a thing. That was what surprised me most of all.”

“Really? I wasn’t born at the forest’s edge, and I’ve only ever been to the post town once, but that old-timer’s words made sense to me.”

“...What do you mean?”

“Huh? I mean how he said giba and the people of the forest’s edge who hunt them are only seen as symbolic of disaster by the people born in Genos. The folks of Genos had their fields attacked so that leaves plenty of room for misunderstandings and misconceptions, but people born elsewhere have no reason to fear you all, right? Plus it should have been decades since giba were last actually causing such disasters anyway...”

Ai Fa was silent.

“And the majority of the folks doing business there must be Genos natives, so the people of the forest’s edge have probably mostly just dealt with folks who were afraid of them. If there were more foreigners out there who could ignore the strength and slightly isolationist nature of the people of the forest’s edge like that old-timer, maybe those misunderstandings never would have spread around as much as they have.”

“...Asuta, it’s hard to understand what you’re saying,” Ai Fa whined. Yes, Ai Fa went and offered such a feeble complaint, shockingly. “You really were born in a city of stone, even if it wasn’t Genos. Your words are just as confusing as those of that Kamyua Yoshu fellow.”

“Yeah. It’s true that the place I was born and raised really was closer to that post town than this forest’s edge. But just because something’s hard to understand, doesn’t mean it’s alright to neglect the effort to—”

“Who are you saying is ‘neglecting the effort’?”

The frail tone of voice she used seriously took me aback.

As she sat against the wall by the stove, Ai Fa was making an even sadder expression than I had thought, casting her eyes downward.

“It’s difficult to understand, but I’m trying to do so. Are you blaming me for being slow to understand...?”

“N-No, I’m not! Sorry! I was wrong there! So I’m begging you, please don’t cry!”

“As if I’d cry! Just what sort of person do you think I am?!”

That practically sounded like a line I would yell, and Ai Fa’s face was a little red as she said it. Still, that was a whole heck of a lot better than her looking like she was going to cry.

“Well at any rate, let’s at least decide on a plan for now. How much should we be opening up to that old-timer? Is there anything it’d be bad to let him know? And is there anything we really *should* tell him about? I think it’d be good to at least firmly decide on those matters.”

“Understood,” Ai Fa replied, and then for some reason she suddenly stood up and circled behind my back as I heated up the poitan.

As I was wondering what was going on, she suddenly placed her hands on both my shoulders and whispered into my ear, “What do you think, Asuta?”

I was a bit taller than her, so she must have been standing on her tiptoes. And she wasn’t touching anything but my shoulders, but I could vaguely feel the warmth of her body running all the way down my back.

“H-Hold on a second! Why is it like we’re talking in secret even though we already drove that old-timer away?”

“It’s not certain that man has gone away from this house, is it? What if he’s listening in from the other side of one of these walls?”

Even so, did she really intend to spend the next few hours this close and personal?

“H-Hold on! It looks like the poitan are done heating up. I need to deal with them.”

The warmth from Ai Fa’s body quietly withdrew.

Seriously, this was worse for my heart than dealing with Vina Ruu.

As I transferred the dissolved poitan into a little boat made from a pseudo rubber tree leaf, I stealthily wiped the sweat from my brow.

I had used six poitan, enough for three people.

Kamyua Yoshu was going to return before sunset, so he asked if he could join us for dinner.

“I’m not asking you to let me stay the night! I’m just suddenly very interested in the cuisine of the people of the forest’s edge, is all! And if you need me to pay, that’s no problem!”

The fruit wine he had brought seemed to be especially high class, so I had no intention of asking him to pay. And Ai Fa gave her permission, albeit with a complex expression on her face, so I ended up preparing dinner for three.

“Now then, before we talk things over in secret, why don’t we decide on tonight’s menu?”

While scraping off the burned dregs left by the poitan with a wooden spatula, I turned around and looked Ai Fa’s way.

“What do you want for dinner?”

“Hamburgers.”

That was quick!

I looked shocked, and then Ai Fa restated, “...Hamburgers.” I mean, even if you say it again...

“I see. Now that I think of it, though, this menu may require some thought too...”

Ai Fa approached me from the side, placed a hand on my neck, brought herself up to around my height, and then whispered, “What do you mean?”

Was she being serious with all this?

“I mean, it might not be such a good thing to give him the impression that hamburgers are a regular meal at the forest’s edge, right? But if we explain in detail, that’ll involve expanding the conversation to cover our relationship with the Ruu and Rutim. And I think it would be good to decide in advance just how

much of that information we should reveal.”

I had no choice but to ask Ai Fa, but she was currently so incredibly close that the aromatic particles coming off of her invaded my nasal cavity even if I held my breath. And even though I had just had a snack, Ai Fa’s aroma was igniting a fresh hunger in me.

Knowing nothing about that mental state of mine, Ai Fa brought her lips up to my ear once again.

“...Why?”

“Hey! If you’re just going to add a little interjection like that, then you don’t need to whisper, right?!”

“I suppose that’s so,” she replied, turning her ear towards me again.

So I really did need to whisper, huh?

“Umm... That old-timer seems to have some sort of connection with the lord of the Genos domain, right? Feeding someone like that false information could lead to further misunderstandings, and besides, he doesn’t seem overly fond of the Suun clan, so doesn’t it seem like a bad idea to tell him too much about the Ruu and Rutim?”

“...But that man has already met Donda Ruu, and he knows of our involvement with that banquet, doesn’t he?” Ai Fa whispered.

It somehow felt like my right earlobe was on the verge of just up and melting off.

“That’s true. And so, the important thing here is... The question of whether we should hide the fact that Donda Ruu is ready to move to crush the Suun clan as the opportunity presents itself, or if we should reveal it.”

This question required a bit of contemplation.

Having exhausted my stamina, I plopped down on the floor and nudged the aria awaiting its turn to shine with the tip of my finger.

“Still, though—”

“Uwah!”

“What is it? Don’t go scaring me like that, you fool.”

“I-I’m the one getting scared here, dummy! Don’t go suddenly whispering at me from behind like that!”

“...You should be able to sense my presence at least that much, right?”

“Unfortunately, I don’t have the sort of first-rate detection skills you hunters do! So I’m begging you, please approach from where I can see you!”

“So fussy...” Ai Fa muttered in dissatisfaction, moving around in front of me and squatting down. Then, she grabbed my jaw, turned my head sideways, and moved in close.

“But still, as long as the possibility exists of that man having further contact with Donda Ruu, it would also be foolish to try to hide things carelessly... Of course, we have no duty to actively tell him anything.”

I see. So I’ve got nowhere to run. I’m sure this was a case of God testing my reasoning or nature or something.

What a serious pain.

“Got it. Let’s hit on the key point, then. Ai Fa, what do you think we shouldn’t tell that Kamyua Yoshu guy?”

Ai Fa was lost in contemplation once again.

We were close enough that I think if I moved the tip of my nose just 10 centimeters, it would bump into her knee.

I seriously just couldn’t feel calm in this situation.

Before long Ai Fa looked up, then hurriedly whispered into my ear, “...Nothing in particular.”

“Nothing?!”

I reflexively almost wanted to dope slap the back of her head.

Ai Fa pouted her lips, right up close and personal to my face.

“You’re the one who brought up the idea of this secret talk, aren’t you? You must have your own thoughts, right? If so, then let me hear them.”

Then, she turned away in a huff.

What the heck? I was already feeling just as worn out as I was from the big job yesterday...

“I mean, you said that you thought of the Suun clan as the shame of the forest’s edge, but you also couldn’t stand townsfolk trying to deal with them, right? So for example, if that old-timer were to have Doddo Suun executed for his crimes, would that make him an enemy of the people of the forest’s edge?”

Ai Fa furrowed her brows, looking puzzled.

Then, she replied not in a whisper, but in her usual voice.

“If a member of the Suun clan is judged for breaking the laws of the city, they are the ones at fault. In that case, there would be no need to try to get vengeance for them... But if someone from the city were to dare to judge them based on the laws of the forest’s edge, and were using the people of the forest’s edge for their benefit in the process, that would seem to be nothing but a crafty scheme to me.”

I see. The explanation was a little tricky, but ultimately she was saying that if someone breaks the laws of the city then its citizens should judge them, and if someone runs afoul of the laws of the forest’s edge, then the people of the forest’s edge should judge them, huh?

“Hmm... But in actuality, the Suun clan is breaking laws left and right, aren’t they? But currently, there isn’t anyone in the forest’s edge to cast judgment on them, right?”

“What are you saying? I haven’t let the Suun clan’s tyranny slip by even once.”

“I know, and I think that’s amazing... But everyone at the forest’s edge can’t behave the way that you do, right? Just yesterday, everyone was just standing there and bearing that atrocity from the Suun clan with serious anger on their faces, at least until Donda Ruu and Dan Rutim made a move.”

“There’s no way they would ever display hostility towards the Suun clan without permission from the head of their clan. I’m free to behave as I wish, though, because I’m the head of my own clan.”

“Then, I hate to ask this, but... Do the people from small clans without any ties to the Ruu just have to keep on bearing the Suun clan’s tyranny?”

Ai Fa bit her lip a bit and glared up at me, then replied, “Even if they are the clan that leads our people, if they were to openly act in a tyrannical manner, all of our people would have no choice but to turn to the Ruu clan. And so, those fools have been exercising some small amount of self restraint so that things wouldn’t come to that.”

“In other words, they keep their evildoing in secret because they can’t let it be out in the open, huh?”

Ai Fa let those words stand.

“Ai Fa, you’re strong. Because of that, you were able to rein in Diga and Doddo Suun’s wrongdoing. But if folks who lack your strength just have to choke back tears in the shadows... I really don’t think I can just accept that.”

“...I only have the power to stop tyranny happening in front of me,” Ai Fa responded, grabbing me by the collar again. It didn’t feel violent, though. More like she was clinging to me a bit.

“I can only manage myself. And so...”

And so, she had lived on her own?

And so, I became a burden for her?

I nodded and placed my own hands over Ai Fa’s.

“I’m sorry if it came across like I was blaming in you. Nobody would ever forgive something so inhumane. I mean, that was why the Ruu and Rutim folks were so furious, too... By the way, is the Suun clan’s power really all that great? They may have nearly 100 men under them just like the Ruu, but would everyone under them just do as they say?”

“I don’t know. I don’t even know all of the clans under them.”

“Ah, I see... But those folks under them can’t all be corrupt, right?”

“I have no way of knowing that, either... But if all hundred of them under the Suun clan were neglecting their giba hunting duty, the forest would have long since been overflowing with the beasts.”

“That’s true. I mean, if a hundred out of the five hundred living in this settlement were corrupt like that...” I started to say, only to remember some ominous words I had heard. “...Now that I think of it, Ludo Ruu told me there were too many giba around. Shin Ruu’s dad had his leg done in because three giba charged them at once, even though they don’t usually attack in packs. And then he asked how things were with the forest around the Fa house lately, but...”

A somewhat intense expression crossed Ai Fa’s face, and her hands kept gripping my collar.

“You should have been aware of that matter since the day after we met, Asuta.”

“Huh?”

“You asked me if the giba would be wiped out if we kept hunting them each and every day. And at that time, I replied that rather than decreasing, the number of giba was growing year by year.”

I was silent.

“The number of giba is clearly increasing. It’s obviously an abundant period at the moment, but even so, it’s a bit odd how many there are... To be honest, there are currently so many giba filling the forest that I don’t even need to use the giba summoning fruit.”

“Huh? Then you’re not doing any sacrificial hunting?”

“For the last few days, I haven’t been. Even so, I’ve still been taking down one every two days.”

“Really? That *is* odd. Then this sweet smell isn’t from the giba summoning fruit?”

Ai Fa’s face immediately flushed beet red, and her fingers grasping my collar grabbed on tighter.

“The scent of giba summoning fruit doesn’t disappear easily once it gets in my hair! And I’ve told you for a while now to stop spouting such nonsense about my smell, haven’t I, Asuta?”

“No, but I was just complimenting you...”

“Silence! At any rate... the number of giba continues to grow year by year.”

“I see. Still, Ludo Ruu didn’t go and state it so clearly. He ultimately just said he got that feeling.”

“...The Ruu settlement is located farther south than my home. And the Suun settlement is north of here.”

While there was still a bit of red to her cheeks, a raging flame had been lit in Ai Fa’s eyes.

“Which is to say, if the Suun clan were to keep neglecting their duty as hunters, the effects may appear more strongly to the north.”

“...So as far as you can tell, the number of giba has continued to grow?”

This may be more urgent of a situation than I had been thinking.

Even setting aside my petty morals and sense of justice, ignoring the corruption of the Suun clan may lead to the downfall of the people of the forest’s edge in general, huh?

“...Ai Fa. This may be too big for us to handle. Shouldn’t that Kamyua Yoshu guy try to form a relationship with the Ruu or Rutim rather than us?”

“That would be pointless.”

“Huh? But why?”

“Consider Donda Ruu’s disposition. That man is prepared to take up his blade without a hint of hesitation as soon as the Suun clan’s corruption crosses the line. He would say that we don’t need help from the city of stone, and would wish to restore order to the forest’s edge by our own hands... And I can’t say I don’t understand that feeling.”

Then, though it was rather unlike her, Ai Fa gave a sigh.

“It’s precisely because I understand that feeling that I didn’t want to become the spark that lights up a conflict. A great many hunters would be lost in an all out battle between the Ruu and Suun, and order at the forest’s edge would surely collapse.”

“But even so, you won’t rely on the city of stone’s aid...?”

I couldn’t help but sigh myself.

The situation was so incredibly tense, and Ai Fa and I had a chance encounter with someone who seemed to be connected to the greatest authority in the Genos lands.

Just what sort of role did the gods or devils or whatever have laid out for our tiny clan of two?

For the time being, all I could think to do as a mere powerless chef was to slice off some meat for my clan head and our guest.

4

“Hey there, sorry I’m late.”

Our guest came wandering back in just around when the sun touched the treeline to the west.

“Only 500 people live here, yet this settlement sure is vast. It’s my second time visiting, but I still haven’t grasped the full picture of its scope.”

“Is there a need for you to do so?”

“Ah, no, well, I mean, it *is* a big job, after all...”

A few hours may have passed, but Kamyua Yoshu still seemed just as sketchy as always.

“Still, that sure is a wonderful smell! It was worth not chewing on dried meat along the way so I could get nice and hungry! Ah, right, here’s my sword.”

“Please, come this way. I just finished preparing.”

We weren’t really planning on throwing our schedules out of whack, so we had been planning on just going ahead and eating if Kamyua Yoshu was late to arrive.

And then, he went and returned with such perfect timing that I couldn’t help but worry that maybe he really had been listening in on us this whole time.

More so than any concerns about him overhearing what we had discussed, I really just didn't want to imagine him seeing Ai Fa unwittingly trap me in such close proximity like that.

"Whoa, this is amazing! Why is the meat in such a round shape?"

"This is made by dicing up the meat and then balling it back up."

"Hmm... So why go through all that trouble?"

"Because it's delicious."

Did no dishes like hamburgers exist in this world?

Well, maybe it was just that this old-timer wasn't aware of any.

"Anyway, let's eat. We're good and hungry by now, too."

"Yeah! Let's go ahead and do it!"

I had decided to stop thinking so much about dinner, and just went ahead and treated him to the Fa house's staple dinner. That meant giba meat hamburgers, stir-fried aria and tino, and baked poitan.

I really wanted to hurry up and buy a new pot so I could add soup to the menu, too.

"Hmm? Is this fuwano? But I had heard that the people of the forest's edge ate poitan as a staple dish..."

"It is poitan. What's fuwano?"

"The skin of that manju Tara was eating was made from it. In the west, it's frequently eaten along with meat and vegetables, so... Huh? This is poitan? Seriously? How?"

So even outside of the forest's edge, nobody had discovered this way of eating poitan?

My curiosity was flaring up a bit, so I leaned forwards.

"Um, by the way, how do they eat poitan in town?"

"Nobody eats poitan in town. People just keep it in reserve to eat when they're traveling. You don't have to worry about it going bad like with fuwano,

and when you want to eat it you just have to heat it up in warm water. Plus, it's cheap, making it the perfect food for a long trip... But it's not tasty or anything, which is the one issue with it."

"That's an unfortunate issue," I chimed in, only for Ai Fa to tug on the sleeve of my t-shirt. Apparently her hunger had reached a critical point.

"Well then, go ahead. Just please try to restrain that hidden face of yours if at all possible."

"I'll handle it! Well then, I appreciate this blessing."

"Let's dig in!"

"..."

Having each kicked off the meal in our own way, we picked up our wooden plates.

I may have prepared a whole ton of hamburgers yesterday, but this was the first time in a while that I was actually eating one. But it seemed like after making so many, I really had controlling the flames down pat, which made me a little happy.

I went with a big size for them, around 500 grams each. As I bit into the fruit wine sauce-coated patty, warm meat juices came flowing out and satisfyingly filled my mouth. And as I chewed more and more afterward, the deliciousness of the meat and fat kept on spreading... Ah, giba meat really does suit hamburgers.

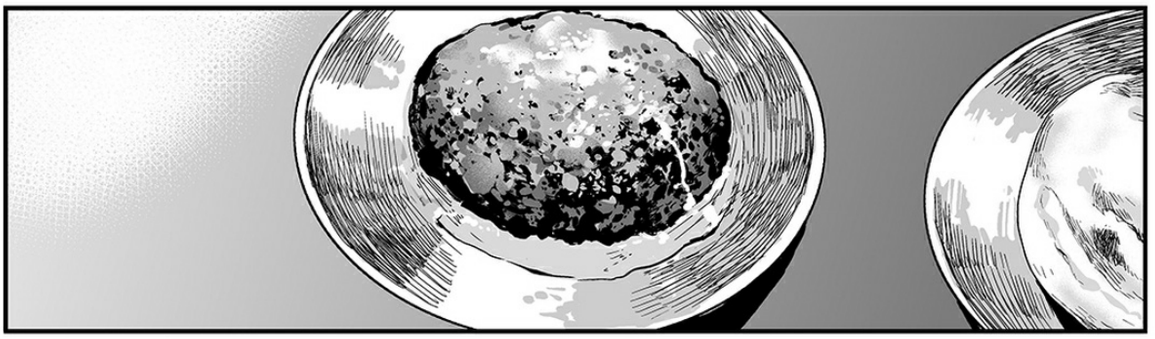
The balance between the grilled outer surface and the soft inside was incredibly pleasing. Tasting this really was enough to make miniature burgers seem somehow lacking.

And the onion-esque aria and cabbage-like tino I added as toppings were also a great match for the meat. Tino apparently didn't last as long as aria or poitan, so I had to keep on using it up like this.

Now then...

When I looked up to check how our guest was doing, I fortunately wasn't greeted by the face of the Grim Reaper. However, this time around he was

making a sort of relaxed, teary face.





I didn’t especially want to involve myself with all that, but I went ahead and did my duty, at least asking, “How was it?”

“Delicious,” he replied, looking like he was about to break down in tears. “I’m trying my hardest not to lose control of myself, but how is it working? Is everything alright?”

“I don’t know exactly what would qualify as ‘alright’ here, but it’s at least not scary.”

“I see. I’m glad,” Kamyua Yoshu said, and then he bit into a poitan.

Instantly, the expression drained from his face, and I felt like I was about to scream.

“Hey, that’s scary! What’s going on? Are you trying to get a laugh or something?”

“I’ve got no such intention. And it’s your fault for surprising me.”

His tone was so grave that it made it feel like he was going to follow that up with, “And so, I’m going to kill you here and now.”

Was this old-timer really alright?

Ai Fa seemed to no longer have any intention of playing along with Kamyua Yoshu’s facial expressions, as she just kept on diligently eating away at her hamburger.

Someone other than a person of the forest’s edge was eating giba meat. I’m sure that point was concerning her, but she didn’t let so much as a speck of that show. Or actually, maybe she was just that absorbed in her hamburger.

Ai Fa always somehow looked happier eating hamburgers than steak or soup. If I didn’t carefully adjust the menu, it really did seem frighteningly plausible that we’d end up eating nothing but hamburgers each and every day.

But still, she sure did look happy...

Did the Ruu and Rutim women look this happy when chewing on their food?

Thinking on it, I just got along way too poorly with the men of the main Ruu house, aside from Ludo Ruu. Could family sense what even such curt men were

feeling inside, though?

I thought that would be nice.

“Man, that was tasty! It was a strange, delicious flavor! Seriously, just who exactly are you, Asuta?” Having finally regained his usual casual nature after finishing eating, that was what Kamyua Yoshu said. “It’s my first time eating such unusual food! You said you diced up the meat and then balled it back up? How in the world did you ever come up with such a wonderful cooking method?”

“I’m not sure. It’s a normal technique back in my home country, after all.”

I vaguely recalled hearing something about it coming from Mongolia or something, where they chopped up hard horse meat to make it easier to eat, but that information wouldn’t exactly be meaningful here in this world.

“Hmm... It’s really good. Shockingly so. This may just be the most delicious thing I’ve eaten in my entire life.”

“That’s an exaggeration. You said you’ve dined with the city of stone’s duke, right?”

“I mean, that’s noble cooking. It’s interesting and uses rare ingredients, but honestly, I can’t tell how good it really is... But I know for sure that your cooking is delicious, Asuta,” the Northern Whirlwind, Kamyua Yoshu, said while nodding his head with crossed arms.

It felt a bit theatrical, but still, it didn’t feel bad to hear.

“But the deliciousness of a meal isn’t determined by taste alone, Asuta.”

“Huh? Ah, right.”

“I had heard giba meat stunk and was hard, but you made it this soft and tasty. And you changed that poitan that’s like muddy water into something akin to fuwano. Plus you went and made things taste so good using nothing else but aria and tino... I believe all of that helped to elevate the overall deliciousness of the meal.”

“Right.”

“For example, if this was served in the castle, I would probably think, ‘I see,

this certainly is an unusual dish. It must have cost quite a bit,' and my surprise would've been a whole lot lower. After all, a more elaborate dish just makes sense with a higher cost. But this dish was made with giba meat plus aria and poitan, which are generally considered cheap and not especially tasty. That had a serious impact on me!"

"Ah, aria is thought of like that too?"

"Hmm? No, they frequently eat aria about town, too. After all, it's cheap and nutritious, making it a staple alongside fuwano. But you don't see it in the castle town much, for example. That's because it's so cheap that people think using it makes you seem poor. But it's considered a staple food in the post town and farm villages."

"Hmm... So it's a food for the masses that nobles rarely eat, huh?"

"That's right. But... Still, I wonder. I think that even removing the surprise factor, this is still plenty tasty. You were made the chef for that huge banquet because you're this skilled, right?"

Suddenly, the conversation had taken a crucial turn.

I was rather interested in this mysterious man's thoughts on cooking, but this was no time to be happily chatting away.

"Um, I forgot to ask before, but why were you peeking yesterday? To be honest, that's in bad taste."

"Ah, sorry. I just couldn't hold back my curiosity. I mean, they were clearly setting that plaza up for a large banquet back when we met at the Ruu settlement, right? And when I heard you had work in two days, I figured it may be related and ended up sneaking on in."

"I suppose that may not exactly be a crime... But still, just where were you hiding?"

"In the bushes lined up in front of the plaza. After all, I figured it would be a bad idea to step foot inside... And then those ruffians went barging in far more blatantly than me."

"...And you knew they were from the Suun clan because Doddo Suun was

with them, right?”

“Yeah. Plus I overheard the conversation. That’s also how I figured out you were the chef for that banquet.”

Mentally, I gasped. In that case... he must have clearly heard Dan Rutim and Donda Ruu’s angry voices.

There really may not be much left to hide at this point.

“That reminds me, Ai Fa, you sure did look beautiful back then! There’s nothing unsatisfying about how you look now, but still, I guess you don’t wear anything like that when it’s not a banquet, huh?”

Ai Fa just tilted her head, as if to say, “Is there any need for me to respond to that?”

It would seem she had grown rather accustomed to handling him.

I’m sure she was full of doubt inside as to what to think of him, as he had gone and praised giba meat over and over again, but at least on the surface she remained perfectly calm.

Meanwhile, I was still left fumbling. It was like trying to catch an eel, where no matter how firmly I tried to hold him he would still slip away. It seemed like it’d take quite some time to properly feel him out.

However...

“Well then, I suppose it’s about time for me to get going,” Kamyua Yoshu said, starting to stand up, leaving me awkwardly sitting there looking like a fool.

“Y-You’re leaving?”

“Yup. I mean, it’s the custom for the people of the forest’s edge to go to bed shortly after dinner, isn’t it? I’m very much a night person, but I would feel bad keeping you all up.”

“Kamyua Yoshu... Seriously, just what did you come all this way for?”

“To deepen my bonds with you. I said that at the start, didn’t I?”

Ah, this was no good. I really couldn’t keep up with this old-timer, it seemed.

I had worried about whether I could somehow use this man’s power and

position to restrain the Suun clan's corruption and protect both Ai Fa and myself, but I still had no idea what he was thinking... He was just too far out of my control.

It may have been better to just completely forget that he even existed.

"Ah, one last thing. I've got a sort of proposal for you, Asuta."

"Huh? What is it?" I half-heartedly asked.

I'm sure nothing good would come of it. And if that were the case, maybe I should use this as an opportunity to cut ties with him...? That was what was running through my head, but then he turned out to be far crazier than I had thought.

"Would you like to try opening a shop in the post town?"

He really insisted on throwing reckless comments out there till the bitter end.

Chapter 2: Day of Decision

1

The day after our meeting with Kamyua Yoshu found us visiting the Rutim settlement in the morning.

Frankly, Ai Fa and I just didn't know how to handle that crazy old-timer on our own at this point.

After heading further south from the Ruu settlement, a settlement of just five fairly large houses came into view. It belonged to the Rutim, and I had already visited here numerous times before the banquet to ask their opinions.

We visited the largest of those houses, the one belonging to the main household, and fortunately found that Gazraan Rutim was already out of bed.

"My, if it isn't Ai Fa and Asuta. What brings you here?" Gazraan Rutim asked with a smile.

The clan head Dan Rutim was apparently still sleeping, but that wasn't an issue for us. After all, what we wanted was the opinion of Gazraan Rutim, who possessed the straightforward honesty fitting for a person of the forest's edge, yet was also flexible in his thinking, like a reformist.

"Sorry for being so forward, just showing up at your house this early in the day."

"It's no problem. The Rutim custom is that a bride and groom can have three days of rest from work both before and after their wedding. I'm honestly glad that I can use the opportunity to welcome you as guests," Gazraan Rutim said, a gentle smile on his face.

Still, I really did feel guilty about intruding on his second day as a newly married man.

But even so, our thoughts were so chaotic at the moment that we really did need a calm, logical third party to weigh in on the matter.

"The thing is, Kamyua Yoshu really did come to visit the Fa house yesterday,

just as promised. And things ended up progressing in a really crazy direction...” I started while being led into a vast hall which was on par with the one in the main Ruu house.

And with that, I explained the crazy proposal that Kamyua Yoshu had offered last night.

◇

“Why in the world would I go and open a shop in the post town?!” I retorted without even thinking, having lost my composure, but Kamyua Yoshu’s aloof expression didn’t shift in the least.

“So that the people of the forest’s edge can gain greater strength and prosperity, of course.”

I sighed, then half-unconsciously scratched at my head.

“How exactly is that related to me opening a shop? I can’t see how they connect in the least.”

“How? You’re a proper member of this settlement despite being born in a foreign nation, aren’t you? So you gaining wealth is directly tied to the prosperity of the forest’s edge, isn’t it?”

“That’s not true at all. No matter how many copper coins I may earn, that wealth ultimately belongs to the Fa clan. And the Fa clan doesn’t have any relatives or subordinates, so that money won’t be making it to other clans.”

“Hmm? What do you mean?”

I explained that the people of the forest’s edge strengthened their bonds almost exclusively through blood ties. And on top of that, commerce was nonexistent at the forest’s edge, so it was essentially impossible for your wealth to ever pass to someone who wasn’t related to you.

In spite of that, the smile wasn’t wiped from Kamyua Yoshu’s face.

“So you’re a little hesitant to accept at the moment, are you? In that case, are you saying you don’t care in the least if someone outside of your clan is happy or not? Do you believe that anyone but your family is utterly worthless?”

“That’s an extreme argument. Of course we have friends and acquaintances.

But even if we become wealthy, that shouldn't have anything to do with their lives, right?"

"If you horde that fortune, like a certain leading clan."

Now that it had come this far, Ai Fa's eyes were completely burning with the look of a hunter.

Of course, I couldn't blame her. I mean, I was about ready to burst with, not quite anger, but doubt and suspicion.

"Hmm... I was just drawing out our chat by throwing out a thought that popped into my head, but you seem to be quite emphatically rejecting the idea."

"...I mean, it was just too crazy of an idea to be part of a mere 'chat.'"

"Is that so? I thought it was a pretty ingenious idea for something I came up with on the spot. And it wouldn't be all that difficult to open a shop there in the post town," Kamyua Yoshu said while maintaining his usual carefree tone, then sat back down and stroked the stubble on his chin.

"Alright, let me explain things in order. My first thought was about the value of giba meat."

"The value...?"

"You all make a living by selling giba horns, tusks, and furs. So why don't you sell the meat, then?"

"Nobody in town would eat it, right? I mean, the people of the forest's edge are feared there as 'giba eaters.'"

"That only applies to the people of Genos, though. Travelers and folks who have moved there from other lands just go along with it."

"No, but..."

"Then let me ask, is it proper for the people of the forest's edge to be feared as 'giba eaters'? Does it make you happy? Are you proud of the title? If that were the case, then I could certainly understand not wanting townsfolk to know how delicious giba meat is. You could just go ahead and forget I said anything... But if that *isn't* the case, then I can't understand why you won't sell it."

I was about to object that you could only say such a thing about giba meat as of this month, but I realized it would be pointless.

As far as I knew, it was true that there was no law that said you could sell tusks and horns, but not meat.

“So are you telling me to open a butcher’s shop? Do you really think that sort of business would work out?”

“If you just try to start selling it, it wouldn’t move. First, you need to let people know how wonderful this meat really is. That’s why I suggested you opening a shop... Not a butcher’s, but a restaurant.”

“...”

“If that’s successful, then giba meat could be sold as a product on its own. If the deliciousness of your cooking becomes known throughout the post town, that would override the false information that giba meat stinks and tastes bad, wouldn’t it? And if that meant that giba meat started getting treated as a good that could be exchanged for coins, then your success would wrap back around and aid the forest’s edge, right?”

Kamyua Yoshu sure looked like he was enjoying himself. It was almost like we really were just having a pleasant chat.

“You won’t get more than a single white coin at most for a giba’s worth of horns and tusks. And it should be about the same for a pelt. That’s far too unjust a reward for a hunt you all undertake at the risk of your lives... That’s something that’s bugged me for some time now.”

“But still... The people of the forest’s edge have continued to live on in that manner for 80 years now. To suddenly tear all that down—”

“Asuta. My apologies, but it hasn’t been all that long since you’ve been accepted as a member of the forest’s edge, has it? I asked my acquaintances from around the post town, but none of them had seen a foreigner clad in the garb of the forest’s edge.”

“...So what are you trying to say?”

“I’m just bringing up the possibility that you may be less informed about life

at the forest's edge than I am," Kamyua Yoshu said with a grin. "Ai Fa has quite a few of the horns and tusks that hunters pride themselves on hanging from her neck. Also, the Ruu clan is a large group with quite a few subordinates. And furthermore, the Suun clan has been hoarding the reward money... Now then, Asuta, have you interacted with any clans beside those?"

I hadn't.

But still, just how did this man know that?

"The answer is simple. If you knew about the normal lives of the people of the forest's edge, you wouldn't go denying any interest in such prosperity so lightly."

"Normal... lives? But you're not even a man of the forest's edge, so how could you know—?"

"I can't. And so, this is nothing but guesswork. If it happens to be wrong, then by all means say as such, Ai Fa."

Ai Fa said nothing in response.

However, I sensed a passionate emotion other than just anger in her blazing eyes.

"The majority of the people of the forest's edge only ever eat aria and poitan, which certainly doesn't indicate any sort of riches. Only a small portion have savings like Ai Fa, while most struggle with poverty. And not honorable poverty, but true and proper poverty at that. And so, quite a few must die young, unable to afford even aria and poitan and having to subsist solely on giba meat... Or at least, that's what I assume. That's the conclusion that I reached by gathering information in the post town and then combining that with what I've seen with my own two eyes here at the forest's edge. Is any of that wrong, Ai Fa?"

"...Clans with power live in abundance, while those without suffer in poverty. That much is only obvious."

"Then I can interpret that as meaning that there are those here at the forest's edge who die early from only eating meat, and even some among them who cannot even obtain meat and die of starvation?"

“...I was raised to be strong so that wouldn’t happen to me.”

“And you were raised that way because that was a real danger, yes?”

What was going on here?

I was even starting to almost think that he knew more about the forest’s edge than Ai Fa, who hadn’t had much interaction with other clans, but he wasn’t even a man of the forest’s edge.

“There are some things that are easier to see from the outside.”

Kamyua Yoshu was still smiling, but something about his expression had shifted.

His drooping eyes narrowed a bit, and his smile relaxed. His purple eyes had the transparent light of an old sage about them... He was such a sketchy guy, but now his gaze held no less wisdom than Granny Jiba’s.

“The people of the forest’s edge are honest and full of integrity... If the giba were to start starving, they would ransack the Genos fields. Therefore, the people of the forest’s edge were forbidden from gathering the blessings of the Morga forest so that wouldn’t happen, right? A coarse, lowly fellow like me can’t comprehend the idea that there are folks out there who would starve to death while holding to such a one-sided agreement. And furthermore, you risk your lives hunting giba, but only get a mere white coin or two in exchange. I can’t imagine something like that is right or proper. The people of the forest’s edge should live wealthier lives than that.”

“But... Too much fortune corrupts people. That is precisely what happened to the Suun clan...”

“But isn’t that because it was a fortune gained through means unrelated to their own strength and will to live? At the very least, I couldn’t see anyone like Ai Fa or Donda Ruu growing corrupted in that manner. If Ai Fa’s necklace suddenly had 100 more horns and tusks on it, would she neglect her duty as a hunter?”

Ai Fa would never do that. And I didn’t think Donda Ruu would, either.

Even the people of the Ruu clan showed no signs of using up their fortune

aside from buying some small amount of vegetables and accessories for their daughters, despite hunting so many giba each and every day. And there was no sign of them neglecting their duty as hunters. They just kept on hunting giba, holding their heads high with pride.

And I also remembered Shin Ruu. That boy had to support his family of five all on his own.

Of course, if he asked his comrades from the settlement for help, he could avoid starving to death. However, he went so far as to consider dangerous sacrificial hunting in trying to protect his family.

And if he hadn't been a part of the Ruu, but had instead been born to a family with weak bonds like the Fa... He wouldn't be able to obtain enough aria and poitan to support his family of five without hunting a giba every other day.

"Well, what do you say? Is the idea that the people of the forest's edge should have more wealth completely unreasonable to you?"

"...Still, even so, to me the people of the forest's edge don't look like they're living unfortunate lives."

The women whose names I didn't even know that I saw when washing dishes, and the gallant men who headed forth into the forest with just a small group... Even if I didn't interact with them, I'd had plenty of opportunities to see such folks walking about. It may not have been to the degree of the Ruu clan for all of them, but there was a bright, strong, tranquil light shining in their eyes.

No matter how poor they may be, and no matter how much discrimination they may face in town, I simply couldn't think of them as unfortunate.

"I'm of the same opinion on that point. I believe that the people of the forest's edge are a truly proud people... And that's precisely why I want them to be able to live more affluent lives," as he said that, Kamyua Yoshu hid his mysterious gaze behind his eyelids.

When he reopened his eyes, he was completely back to his original aloof expression.

"But well, I'm just saying what came to mind here and now. It's up to you all to decide what to do. It's you folks living here at the forest's edge who should

determine its future. Go ahead and plunge ahead on the path that you believe is proper.”

“...Are you really going to insist that you just came up with that idea here and now?”

I glared at Kamyua Yoshu’s easygoing face, spurred on by some impetus I couldn’t identify.

“Maybe you learned that I was a chef with that banquet yesterday... And your goal from the start was to confirm my skill and set up this dinner, right?”

“You’re giving me too much credit, there. I’m nowhere near that clever... But well, I can’t deny that the idea hit me that it’d be good to sell such delicious meat alongside the horns and tusks when I saw everyone happily eating away at the banquet,” Kamyua Yoshu replied without even a hint of hesitation.

I was seriously thrown for a loop. And in all likelihood, Ai Fa probably was too.

Just who was this man?

“And it’s also a fact that after tasting your cooking, I’m confident that this taste is plenty good enough to compete in the post town. My feelings aren’t what matters at this point, though, right? What matters is what’s the proper path forward for the people of the forest’s edge, yeah?”

Kamyua Yoshu slowly stood, his long cloak fluttering.

“At any rate, it’s up to you what path you choose. And if you ever feel like hearing more details, feel free to come visit me whenever. I’m settled down at an inn called ‘The Kimyuus’s Tail’ till the 15th of next month. And I hope to visit you again next time I come to the forest’s edge while making preparations, too... If you’ll have me, that is.”

◇

Gazraan Rutim’s expression remained calm from beginning to end, and he quietly listened to our entire tale without interjecting with unnecessary comments or questions. Then, once it was over, he said, “That certainly is a surprising story. I’m sure no townsperson has ever interacted in such a way with the forest’s edge before. Yes, it truly is surprising...”

Ama Min Rutim was away at the moment, so it was just the three of us in the hall.

I bent forward without even thinking and asked, “What do you think? Just how should we react to that Kamyua Yoshu guy’s words?”

“How you react is up to you. However, if you wish to ask what I would do in that situation...”

It may have made things a lot easier for Ai Fa and I if he said it was an absurd idea that just wouldn’t work. Sadly, though, reality just wasn’t that kind.

“...It seems logical to me,” Gazraan Rutim flatly stated.

“Is that so...?”

“Yes. It’s true that there’s no law that giba meat cannot be exchanged for coins, and there would surely be a need to teach the people of the post town of its taste in order to bring that about. And as for the idea that the people of the forest’s edge should be living lives of greater abundance... I’m in complete agreement.”

There was no hesitation in Gazraan Rutim’s gaze.

If Kamyua Yoshu had that sort of look in his eyes, then maybe I would’ve leapt onboard with his proposal without even stopping to think about it.

Still, there was no point in saying such things. After all, it wasn’t just down to their personal natures, as Gazraan Rutim was a person of the forest’s edge, while Kamyua Yoshu was from the city of stone.

“Excessive wealth can corrupt people... Was that thought of mine insulting to the people of the forest’s edge?”

“No. It’s only natural to think of that first when you know of the Suun clan. But it’s the same as with the hamburgers, isn’t it?”

“H-Hamburgers?”

“Yes. If one doesn’t exercise self restraint, they could indulge so greatly in that flavor that it could lead to their teeth and jaw weakening. Too much of a medicine will act as a poison. And both hamburgers and excess wealth feel similar to me in that way.”

Gazraan Rutim gave a gentle smile.

“As an example, 80 years back when our people first moved here, a great many of them must have suffered from poverty. They lacked any proper weapons, didn’t know of the giba’s nature, and were forbidden from gathering from the forest... From what Jiba Ruu has told me, a great many died from fighting the giba, as well as from starvation.”

“...Right.”

“However, our ancestors lived here at the forest’s edge with pride, and eventually learned how to hunt the giba. Then with those horns and tusks they bought steel, pots, food, and cloth, and they established our current way of living. The Ruu and Rutim clan have gained enough fortune so that we will never run out of everyday goods like aria and poitan, and have been able to buy various other foods and accessories for our women. If there are those like Jiba Ruu who know of the suffering of the old days, and think of our present lives as blessed... Then I don’t believe I would call prosperity inherently the path to corruption.”

All I could think to reply was, “Right.”

Thanks to Gazraan Rutim’s words, my thoughts were steadily growing clearer.

But what about Ai Fa, who was just sitting there quietly next to me and listening?

“This is just a hypothetical, but...” Gazraan Rutim started in a speculative tone. “If you find success in the post town, and giba meat becomes such that it can be exchanged for coins... The only ones who will be able to do so will be the clans who have learned to bloodlet and dissect from you.”

“Yeah.”

“In that case, if the wealth accumulated through that process overtakes that of the Suun clan, won’t it be showing that hunting giba really is the proper path to prosperity?”

I was astounded, but Gazraan Rutim just smiled back at me.

“I don’t know what that Kamyua Yoshu man is thinking. I’m just talking about

if he happens to be plotting to cause the Suun clan's power to fall. If I were him, how would I think...? I just tried thinking that over, and what selling meat would mean for the Suun. However, arriving at that conclusion required knowing in advance that only the Ruu and their subordinates have learned bloodletting and dissection."

That man really might have already figured out that much.

But more importantly than that, I was seriously surprised to see that Gazraan Rutim had thought it all through that thoroughly and arrived at that conclusion.

"You're... You're seriously amazing, Gazraan Rutim. I wasn't able to think things through like that at all."

"Not at all. All I can do is think and hunt giba."

Gazraan Rutim looked back at me with a pure, fixed gaze.

"However, I don't personally know that Kamyua Yoshu man. I cannot trust someone who I've never even met. You two are the only ones I can trust, Asuta and Ai Fa... How do you intend to react to this?"

The one to respond to that was Ai Fa, as she stared at Gazraan Rutim's honest face with a strong, intense flame burning in her eyes.

"I cannot speak of such grand ideals as you, Gazraan Rutim. No matter what future may come, I cannot imagine the Suun clan's intentions shifting so easily."

"Right."

"However... If, thanks to this decision by Asuta and myself, the forest's edge becomes even a little better of a place to live... I believe I would be proud of that fact."

"...Is that so?" Gazraan Rutim said with a smile.

Then, he turned towards me.

"I think the same, but there really is just way too much that we don't know about Kamyua Yoshu. I don't think that we should just go carelessly accepting before thoroughly confirming that there aren't any traps waiting for us." I agreed.

“I see. That certainly makes sense,” Gazraan Rutim said with a firm nod.

“Ai Fa, Asuta... Once you find your path forwards, if you have need of the Rutim’s strength, please come visit at any time. You may not be part of our clan, but you are trusted friends, so the doors to this home are always open to you.”

“Right, thank you. I... I really appreciate it.”

I held out my right hand nearly without thinking, and then hurriedly pulled it back.

“Sorry. Back in my country we had a custom of gripping each other’s hands to display friendship, but I’m sure that doesn’t exist here at the forest’s edge, right?”

“Gripping each other’s hands, is it?”

Despite tilting his head and looking puzzled, Gazraan Rutim held out his right hand.

I gripped that large, strong hunter’s hand with all my might, and got just as firm of a squeeze back.

“Asuta, your strength may be something far greater than I had thought. But even so, I would like to believe that your presence shall act as a medicine.”

With those final words, we left the Rutim home.

2

Next up, we headed for the post town.

We couldn’t just keep putting off dealing with this crazy talk, so we decided in the morning that in addition to purchasing a new pot, we would also visit Kamyua Yoshu.

The 20 giba’s worth of horns and tusks were placed into a bag we usually carried vegetables in, and Ai Fa was carrying it under her arm.

After Gazraan Rutim told us of the shortest route between his house and the post town, we headed off in high spirits... Well, maybe that was a bit much, but at any rate, we got going.

“...Still, no matter how much I think about it, it really is a crazy idea,” I said to

Ai Fa as we walked along. “And it really surprised me to hear natural-born people of the forest’s edge like you and Gazraan Rutim thinking positively about the idea. Is that because you firmly believe that the people of the forest’s edge should live lives of greater abundance?”

“Of course that’s the case. After all, I’ve had the suffering of poverty carved into me,” Ai Fa replied in a low voice, not looking my way. “I mentioned it before, didn’t I? When my father Gil hurt his leg and wasn’t able to hunt, the Fa clan came to the brink of destruction. We didn’t have any family or subordinates, so we had no one to rely on. If the crude trap I had set hadn’t caught a young giba... We would have starved to death.”

“Yeah... I remember.”

“I also saw personally just how much it tormented my father Gil to know that he had driven his family to that point. I don’t believe it’s right for someone to have to face such suffering.”

“...Right.”

“Even if the idea was raised by someone from the city of stone, as long as we are gathering this fortune by our own strength and will, even someone with a personality like Donda Ruu’s won’t be able to complain. In fact, this is more a battle against the city of stone itself.”

It was then that Ai Fa finally glanced my way. Contrary to the serious tone of voice she had used, there was an incredibly clear, tranquil look in her eyes.

“...And as long as you’re by my side, I certainly don’t think our odds are poor.”

“Hey, you’re not going to get anything out of that flattery, you know.”

I was so proud that it felt like my heart was about to be crushed, but to cover that up, I forced a cheerful look on my face.

“Still, we’ve got to do something about that Kamyua Yoshu guy first and foremost. If he’s plotting something in secret, it could make a real mess of things. We should start by thoroughly asking about what would be involved with opening a shop in the post town, and try to feel him out as much as we can in the process.”

“...Right,” Ai Fa replied, a slightly strict expression on her face, and then she turned back ahead.

It was a truly preposterous battle, trying to teach the townsfolk the value of giba meat.

But as long as Ai Fa and Gazraan Rutim saw significance in it, I had no objections.

And so, we had to get started by squaring off with the mysterious Kamyua Yoshu. Determining whether he would be medicine or poison for the people of the forest’s edge was the first step in this battle.

◇

And so, we had once more arrived in the post town.

The sun had already passed its peak. We arrived a bit later than last time, but it looked like there were even more people about than there had been the first time.

The stone highway looked to be around 10 meters wide, and there were large buildings on either side. The people wore all sorts of outfits, and had all sorts of skin and hair colors. There was a giant totos bird carrying luggage. It was stuffy and loud and hectic from all the people crammed together.

That hustle and bustle was enough to make me feel dizzy, but I just said, “Now then...” and turned to face Ai Fa. “Let’s deal with the troublesome stuff first. Plus, I’d feel awkward about charging into an inn while carrying a pot, anyway.”

Still, just which building was ‘The Kimyuus’s Tail’ where Kamyua Yoshu said he was staying?

Looking closely, the surrounding buildings all had signs prominently on display, but the swirling patterns on them just looked like hieroglyphs to me.

I asked Ai Fa, but she just said, “Of course I can’t read.”

In that case, we had no choice but to ask someone walking around the area.

And so, I looked over the people walking around town once again.

Sure enough, the majority of the folks shooting Ai Fa suspicious gazes had yellowish-brown skin.

Still, there were nearly the same amount of ivory-white skinned folks around, and they weren't giving off much of a different impression.

And then, the relatively few white and black skinned people around really didn't seem to be especially afraid of Ai Fa... but they didn't exactly seem overly friendly, either. They had all sorts of different reactions, with some appearing completely indifferent while some shot curious gazes our way.

Figuring it would be safest to go with someone who looked similar to me, I called out to an ivory-white skinned youth.

"Um, excuse me. I have a question I'd like to ask you. Do you know where an inn called 'The Kimyuus's Tail' is located?"

The youth with his short, dark brown hair looked startled and froze in place, and then he looked doubtfully back and forth between me and Ai Fa.

I wouldn't quite say he looked afraid, exactly. And he at least wasn't showing any open contempt, either. He just looked bothered, as well as a bit troubled.

"...If you're looking for 'The Kimyuus's Tail,' it's that building with the red roof."

"I see. Thank you."

With that, the youth left in a hurry.

It was as if he was trying to emphasize "I've got nothing to do with the people of the forest's edge!"

I scratched my head, thinking that was about what I had expected.

"Alright, let's get going."

The buildings were mostly constructed out of wood with logs and boards exposed directly to the air, but a good number of them also had their roofs and walls painted red or green.

Naturally, I couldn't tell if that was mere ornamentation, for preserving the wood, or both.

At any rate, we made it safely to our destination.

It was a large building with two floors, like most of the ones surrounding it. Sure enough, the sign had swirling patterns drawn on it, with one of them looking like a bird's feather.

Speaking of kimyuus, I think that's what Kamyua Yoshu called that manju I ate. It was a light tasting meat like chicken tenders, so maybe it was the name of some sort of bird.

"...Ai Fa, are you alright?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, I just figured this may be your first time stepping foot in a building in the post town."

Ai Fa silently shrugged her shoulders.

It was an action that seemed to say, "What, you really think it would be more dangerous than the forest?"

From my point of view, the real threat to hunters wasn't a giba's tusks, but the swords and spears of other human beings. But well, we'd never get anywhere if we turned back now.

The building didn't have a sliding door, but rather one using metal hinges. I didn't see a doorknob or handle or anything, so I just placed my hands on the door and slowly pushed it open.

"Welco—" a voice started to say, only to freeze midway.

The old-timer was seated at a reception desk that hid his lower torso from view, and now he was looking at us in astonishment. His skin was yellowish-brown, and he was on the plump side. But even so, he didn't seem to be all that large of a man, even if it was hard to tell for sure while he was seated.

He wore a cylindrical hat, grey clothes, and a similarly colored apron. It was a neat and trim outfit of the sort that I had seen a lot of folks wearing outside.

"...You here for a meal?"

His big, intimidating eyes seemed to be saying, "You couldn't possibly want to

stay, right?” More than fear, that gaze looked to be full of contempt.

“Ah, no, we actually came to visit a man named Kamyua Yoshu who said he was staying here.”

“Kamyua?” the old-timer asked, his eyes going wide again while his eyebrows still made him seem wary.

Then he grumbled, “That damn vagabond...” in his mouth and turned his thick neck around so he was looking back into the store.

“Kamyua! You’ve got guests! Should I let them in?!”

It seemed the inside of the shop was set up as a restaurant. And it wasn’t currently mealtime as the sun had passed its peak, so there weren’t many people hanging around. There were three rectangular tables made from logs and boards, as well as what looked to be chairs made out of logs. The place had the feel of a ski lodge or something, which didn’t make for a half bad atmosphere overall.

The one issue was that the men there didn’t exactly look particularly welcoming.

Their skin and hair colors were all varied, but they all looked strong and tough, and three of the five had on leather chest guards and gauntlets. They also all had swords, axes, clubs, and the like dangling from their hips... and they were all drunk.

I didn’t mind people drinking in the middle of the day at all as long as it wasn’t putting me in any danger, but I had a bad feeling about the gazes being directed our way.

Eyes full of curiosity, contempt, suspicion... and lust.

None of them showed any signs of being afraid of Ai Fa. But in exchange, one of them gave a look like he was staring at something filthy, while another wore a broad grin like Diga Suun’s.

Yeah, I had a really bad feeling about this.

“Hey, Kamyua, you’re there, aren’t you? What’re you doin’, sleeping?!” the old-timer yelled out even louder.

It was then that a charming voice called back, “Coming!”

With that, a youth with flaxen hair came running from the rear of the room. He was a young boy who looked to be around 10, with intelligence gleaming through his light brown eyes.



“Welcome! You’re Ai Fa and Asuta of the Fa clan, aren’t you? I’m Kamyua Yoshu’s apprentice, Leito. Please, come this way.”

Apprentice? Just what sort of apprentice?

His flaxen hair was a little on the long side, and he had an incredibly gentle expression on his face. He wore a sleeveless vest and pants with cylindrical legs. A small cloth bag and a thin dagger hung from his waist, and there were leather shoes on his feet. He had a rather neat and tidy appearance, to such a degree that if we were family, I’d want to warn him not to have anything to do with that sketchy oldtimer.

However, I was a guest, not family, so I just had to let him lead me to see Kamyua Yoshu.

“Hey, if you’re customers, then order something,” the oldtimer at the desk called out.

“Ah, right. What would you like?” the youth turned and asked us.

“Hmm? Ah, this is my first time in a place like this, so I don’t really know—” I started to whisper into the youth’s ear.

“More importantly, we don’t have any coins on us at the moment.”

“Is that so? Understood.”

The youth smiled and turned back towards the oldtimer.

“In that case, we’ll take two glasses of zozo tea. Please add the cost to our lodging fee. And we’ll be at the usual seats.”

“Got it,” the oldtimer replied with a wave of his right hand.

With the stairs to the second floor on our right, the boy, myself, and Ai Fa headed further into the room in that order.

The men drinking together followed us with their eyes as we passed.

Fortunately, though, even as we passed by the table where they were seated, none of them tried to pull anything.

When we reached the wall on the other side there was a doorless entrance, and passing through that we came into another room of roughly the same size

with more seating for customers. The tables there were smaller but there were a whole lot more of them, built pretty much identically to the ones I had already seen.

And at the table farthest in the back, I spied a familiar blond head, belonging to Kamyua Yoshu.

However, Kamyua Yoshu looked to be deep asleep at the moment.

He was reclined in a log chair, leaning up against the wall behind him, and his long skinny legs were thrown rudely atop the table as he slept soundly.

There didn't look to be any other customers around.

"Kamyua, you have visitors! The ones you've been waiting for, from the forest's edge! Come on, please get up!"

The youth sat down in the neighboring chair and then started clapping his hands together right in front of his master's face.

Kamyua Yoshu gave a dissatisfied, "Ugh..."

Sorry to say it, but he didn't even have a single nanogram of cuteness about him.

"Hmm, what is it? I still haven't gotten enough sleep... Huh? Ai Fa? Asuta? Wow, you sure came quick!"

His droopy eyes shot open, and an overjoyed smile crossed his long, slender face.

"Sorry for the shameful display. Now then, have a seat! And Leito, get us some tea!"

"I already ordered it. Now please, put your feet down already."

"Ah, sorry about that."

His leather boots soon disappeared from view, and the boy quickly wiped down the table.

"Please, go ahead."

"Thanks," I replied and took a seat, but Ai Fa looked just a bit hesitant.

Now that I thought about it, I hadn't seen any chairs at the forest's edge.

In spite of that, Ai Fa gallantly swiped back the hem of her cloak and successfully took a seat, looking rather cool as she did so.

"Man, I never would have dreamed you would come right on the heels of yesterday. I'm really glad, Ai Fa, Asuta," he said, letting a big yawn slip immediately afterwards. "Ah, sorry about that. I was working all the way till morning today, so I'm a little short on sleep."

"Oh, so you had some sort of job after that?"

"Hmm? No, I just stayed up all night exploring the forest's edge."

"...Didn't the giiz bite your legs?"

"Giiz are downright cute, compared to the giba and you hunters."

By the way, giiz were large rats that were about the size of weasels. They were nocturnal, and actually looked pretty cute, but they scavenged carrion just like the mundt, so it was said that if they bit you your flesh would rot and fall off.

"So, should I take the fact that you came all the way out here to mean that you're feeling positively about my proposal?"

"It's more like we came to get what we need so we *can* feel positively about it. Well, we also came to town for some shopping, too."

An eye for an eye, and frivolous chatter for frivolous chatter.

After all, I couldn't just keep taking things at this guy's pace.

"Here's your zozo tea," the oldtimer from the desk said, suddenly jumping in.

With that, he left clay cups filled with yellow tea in front of me and Ai Fa.

There was a bit of a zigzagging wave design of gray drawn on the cups. And they were cylindrical with handles, making them sort of like mugs.

"Ooh, the owner's waiting on us personally. Thanks."

"The girl was scared and wouldn't show herself, so I had to take care of it."

The oldtimer glared at both me and Ai Fa.

He really wasn't that tall after all, but he seemed to have fattened up in a good way and looked pretty strong.

"As long as they order something, a customer's a customer. But if this causes any trouble, I'm throwing you out too, Kamyua."

"Have I ever caused any trouble up till now? Your concerns are misplaced."

"...I don't especially care, but this is at least technically a restaurant. If you're going to sleep, then do it in your room. And if you're going to sit here, then order something."

"Ah, that makes sense. Well then, a cup of zozo tea for me and Leito, too. And add on some salted kimyuus meat, too. Enough for one is fine, though."

"Four people, but just enough for one, huh...?" the oldtimer grumbled as he left.

Was that rather improper handling of his customers due to his animosity towards the people of the forest's edge, or something born of Kamyua Yoshu's aggressively relaxed nature...? Well, it was honestly probably both.

As those thoughts ran through my head, Ai Fa brought her nose close to the tea and sniffed at it like some sort of animal.

"...What is this?"

"It's called zozo tea, so it must be made from that fruit that's like a bundle of dried up snakes, right?"

I remembered smelling this scent like Chinese herbal medicine before, too. Maybe it was never an ingredient meant to be thrown into a stew in the first place...

"Do the people of the forest's edge not have a custom of drinking tea? Well, go ahead and think of it as the first step in a cultural exchange between us and give it a try."

"...Kamyua Yoshu, there's no logic behind you offering us your charity."

"Oh come on, you treated me to that wonderful dinner last night, didn't you? This is my thanks for that."

“But that was as payment for the fruit wine you brought. There should be no debt owed between us.”

“...Asuta, what should I do?” Kamyua Yoshu asked, turning my way.

“Hmm,” I uttered as I thought on the matter. “Ai Fa, in that case, it should be fine if we just pay again, right? We just don’t have coins, but if we offer something else...”

Ai Fa tilted her head a bit, then brought out a bundle about the size of her palm that was wrapped in a pseudo rubber tree leaf from inside her cloak.

“It’s dried giba meat. If this is acceptable...”

“Dried giba meat! That’s super interesting! Leito, it’s dried giba meat!”

“Oh wow. Will you let me eat some later, too?”

Ai Fa glared at the pair during that exchange.

With this, we had discovered a second person from town who didn’t avoid giba meat. Of course, he was an acquaintance of Kamyua Yoshu’s so I shouldn’t read too much into it, but I still felt the need to make note of that fact.

By the way, when I sipped the zozo tea, I found that despite the strong aroma it actually went down smoothly, and wasn’t especially bitter.

Sitting in a chair, drinking tea... It actually made me feel a bit nostalgic.

“Now then... Shall we cut to the chase?” Kamyua Yoshu said while placing his elbows on the table, a grin crossing his long, slender face.

3

“Opening a shop in the post town really isn’t all that tricky to do. It’s a bit of a pain to go through the preparations for constructing a new building, but if you’re just selling stuff in that market area with all the stalls, then anyone can do it, as long as you pay a small fee for the spot.”

“A small fee?”

“Right. It’s just one white coin for ten days. That’s a fair price, wouldn’t you say? Well... Even so, I suppose that’s roughly a giba’s worth of horns and

tusks...”

“One giba, a single white coin... Hold on a minute. Um, just how many red coins is a white one worth?”

The one who looked most surprised at my question was young Leito, who was quietly seated next to Kamyua Yoshu.

Well, that was no surprise. I mean, it was like asking, “How many 10 yen pieces are in a 100 yen piece?”

“One white is worth ten reds. In other words, selling ten of those kimyuus meat buns Tara was eating back then would be enough for them to make up for their fee. The post town prospers more and more as those stalls continue to open up, so they really are considerate when it comes to the fee.”

“Hold on a second, umm, umm... One giba is worth 10 meals of aria and poitan, so... Huh? I see. That means we’ve been using roughly one red coin per meal for each person, then.”

“What you served yesterday would be quite a bit for a snack from a stall. Even half that would be more than most, so two red coins sounds about right for the price. If you sell it for too little, then it’ll earn you animosity from other shops.”

“In that case, considering the menu and ingredients I used yesterday, we could get away with roughly half a red coin in terms of expenses? Then by basic calculations, we’d be earning one and a half red coins per meal sold... So I’d have covered our expenses just by selling seven meals in ten days, right?”

“Yeah. You’ll need a stall too, though, so you’ll need an additional white coin for that.”

In that case, I could earn back my expenses by selling 14 meals in ten days. That sounded like easygoing business... At least if the passersby would be brave enough to eat giba meat, that is.

“Normally, meat costs more than vegetables. Plus, everyone else is using more expensive vegetables than aria and poitan. If you were to ask me how much that lady selling the manju was making, I’d figure she probably needs to sell somewhere between 10 and 20 a day. That’s not exactly hard to manage in such a prospering town, though.”

Kamyua Yoshu gave a joyful smile.

“What do you think? Do you get why I recommended having you open up a shop? It’s hard to imagine you failing so easily with that giba meat and your skill, right?”

“So if the shop is successful, it’s possible the townsfolk will acknowledge giba meat’s value and it will soften some of the prejudice towards the people of the forest’s edge? I see, that definitely sounds like a good business plan.”

Mimicking Kamyua Yoshu, I placed my elbows on the table and leaned forwards.

“So... Just what do you stand to gain from all this, Kamyua Yoshu?”

“Hmm? Will you really not be satisfied if I’m not gaining something? Alright, then in that case... How about throwing ten percent of the profits left after the location fee and the cost of the ingredients?”

“It’s not a matter of money. We want to know what your objective is.”

“Like I said, I just feel a one-sided camaraderie towards you all! The people of the forest’s edge are treated like a symbol of terror, and are paid far too little for their work as hunters. If those two points could be ultimately resolved, I’d feel truly satisfied, from the depths of my heart.”

Then, his unusually colored eyes turned Ai Fa’s way.

“Perhaps what I’ve said since last night has made it sound like I pity the people of the forest’s edge, but that wasn’t my intention, Ai Fa. I’m really just fond of you all. As I’m not one of your comrades, all I can hope to do is offer you this ingenious idea that came to me. Can’t you at least accept those feelings?”

“...I never felt like you were pitying us. Rather, if I had to say, it felt more like you were mocking us.”

“That’s good! Wait... Huh?”

“It’s the norm for folks not to trust you, isn’t it? I don’t think you need to worry about it, Kamyua,” the young boy said with a smile, despite his harsh words.

And yet the man who he had said that about just said, “Yeah, that’s true,”

with a laugh, so nobody bothered interjecting.

“Hmm... I see...”

“Is something still bothering you? Just like I’ve said multiple times now, the only ones who feel unconditional fear towards the people of the forest’s edge and giba are the citizens of Genos. And on top of that, the threat posed by the giba isn’t like some unheard of disaster, but more that of a common pest nowadays, so that fear has no founding to it. Plus, lately it’s the people of the forest’s edge who are feared more than the giba.”

Kamyua Yoshu’s eyes moved from Ai Fa back towards me.

“Having said all that, even if someone from the forest’s edge opens a stall, there may not be too many folks willing to approach it. But, no matter what perspective someone might look at you from, your appearance is that of a person from the city. And so, if you’re the one selling giba dishes, people will naturally be curious, even if they are hesitant. Plus, I have no doubt that people from the south and east won’t be all that reluctant to try it. I’m already confident about the taste, so if that’s how things play out, I believe that eventually word of mouth will make it around to the folks from Genos.”

“Right...”

“To be perfectly honest, even I don’t believe this will be enough to wipe away the prejudice faced by the people of the forest’s edge,” Kamyua Yoshu said, his gaze narrowing as he smiled.

When he smiled like that, his clear, penetrating gaze reminded me a bit of Granny Jiba’s.

“People fear the people of the forest’s edge, who have eyes like beasts, strength normal men could only dream of, and are proudly independent and isolationist. And that was a fear cultivated over 80 years. Plus, in many ways it’s true rather than being some sort of misunderstanding. But I’m not especially concerned. It’s not like I particularly wanted to see the townsfolk and the people of the forest’s edge smiling and joining hands.”

“What does that mean...?”

“I’m fine with the hunters of the forest’s edge being proudly independent.

And the peace about town doesn't suit them in the first place. Plus, I've got no interest in seeing them fall prey to corruption... However, it irritates me seeing folks look down on them as something lesser. If the hunters of the forest's edge are going to be feared I don't want it to be out of the terror of something evil, but rather the awe of something holy."

I didn't know what to say to that.

"And so, I want to start by crushing the misconception about you all being 'lowly giba eaters.' I wish to remind them just who it is that's responsible for protecting the Genos fields from giba, and in turn supporting the prosperity of the domain."

"...If you always had that sort of look on your face when talking to people, I'd probably have been ready to trust you without a second thought." Then, I continued on hesitantly, "Deep down, I don't believe that you're lying. It's just, I can't really see why you have such deep feelings about the people of the forest's edge... Um, is it that serious of a matter for the people of this continent, for someone to change the god that they worship?"

Once again, Leito looked shocked by my words. However, there were no changes to be seen in Kamyua Yoshu's piercing gaze.

"I believe it is. But well, that's something that only people who've experienced it could understand."

"Is that so? But... It's already been 80 years since the people of the forest's edge left the southern forest behind them and moved to the Morga forest. The current people of the forest's edge wouldn't understand how you felt, right?"

"That's true, naturally. That's why my feelings towards the people of the forest's edge will always be one-sided... I mean, it's been 80 years. There can't be any of your people who have lived longer than that, right?"

Granny Jiba was probably the only one in all of the forest's edge. I wasn't about to bring up her name when I still didn't know if I could trust this guy, though. And so, I just ambiguously replied, "Who knows?"

"...You said you weren't born on this continent, so naturally you must not worship any of the four gods, right, Asuta?"

“Huh? Yeah, I guess that’s true. I suppose I’m technically a member of the forest’s edge though, so officially that puts me under the western god.”

“Right. I suppose that’s another reason you’re a good fit for the forest’s edge. The people of the forest’s edge switched from worshiping the Southern God Jagar to the Western God Selva, but in actuality, they never really worshiped a god in the first place... No, what they worship isn’t a god, but the forest. The forest is the absolute presence in their lives, after all. Perhaps it was that honest, brave way of living that charmed me.”

And then, the strange light from Kamyua Yoshu’s eyes was hidden behind his eyelids.

A silence that was difficult to describe filled the air... until a third party came and shattered it.

“Here, your zozo tea and salted kimyuus meat.”

A rather large wooden plate was plopped down atop the table.

The oldtimer from the desk had brought our order out.

As the man turned to leave in a huff, Kamyua Yoshu saw him off with his usual casual smile back in full force.

“Asuta, give it a try if you’d like. If you made a living as a chef, then you must have some interest in what sort of cooking you can get here in the post town, right?”

“...I had a kimyuus manju from that stall, too.”

“That so? I figure this is a different taste than a manju, though.”

My gaze drifted from Kamyua Yoshu to the table.

The dish atop the large plate looked like it was made with cooked meat and veggies.

It looked to have hardly any moisture to it, and the whitish meat and various vegetables were coated in a clear, thick sauce.

From what I could pick out just by looking, it seemed like chunks of aria and pula, as well as bits of boiled down chatchi.

As for the smell, there was a refreshing aroma about it that reminded me a lot of lilo.

And lastly, in the corner of the dish were several of what looked like gyoza wraps made from white dough piled up. I guess the idea was to wrap everything up in that and then eat it.

It didn’t look or smell half bad.

“So, go ahead. If you’re not hungry, just a bite is fine. I can’t say that just a little zozo tea is enough to pay you back for that wonderful dried meat, so please give it a try.”

Well, I did want to taste it, if only out of pure curiosity.

After Ai Fa gave me permission with her eyes, I scooped up a bit of that doughy substance with a wooden spoon.

Then I calculated out the difference in the cooked ingredients and the dough and scooped up two spoonfuls worth of the meat and veggies to place on top, figuring that looked about right.

I wrapped it up like a little crepe, then took a bite...

Well, it certainly was salty.

Almost all of the taste came from the aromatic herb.

The aria had grown mushy, the sweet chatchi had just been passed over the flames, and the pula was bitter... And then there was the light kimyuus meat, which reminded me of chicken tenders.

It wasn’t an especially bad pairing.

How should I put it...? It was an incredibly simple taste.

They must have heated up meat that had been salted for preservation together with vegetables, right? The only real issue I could figure was that the chatchi would have come out with a better texture if they had heated it a little more thoroughly.

It was just... The thought of wanting to eat this badly enough to pay for it made me cock my head in bewilderment.

“Just so you know, that’s the most popular dish here at this inn. It’s salty, so it pairs well with booze. And the price was three red coins, if I recall correctly. During the day folks generally seek their snacks out and about, but once night rolls around this place gets pretty lively. And everyone looks pretty darn satisfied while eating that.”

Kamyua Yoshu grinned like a Cheshire cat.

“For the most part, all cooking here in the post town is like an extension of that sort of home cooking. In fact, the ones to make that were the wife and daughter of the inn’s owner, so the job of ‘chef’ only exists within the stone walls here in Genos.”

“...I see.”

“What do you think? Do you think you can make something that can compete with the taste of this cooked salted meat and those manju?”

“Are you trying to stir me up? I’d at least like to think I’m not stupid enough to fall for that sort of provocation.”

Is this the right time? I thought to myself as I finished off my serving of salted kimyuus meat and the rest of the zozo tea.

Then, I whispered in Ai Fa’s ear, “Is there anything you still want to ask?” but naturally, she just silently shook her head.

“At any rate, I’ll consult with my clan head on the matter. Then, we’ll discuss with some of our friends at the forest’s edge, and if there don’t seem to be any problems... Then I’ll start thinking positively about all this.”

“How cautious! I’m sure that’s one of your charms, right?”

My shoulders shrugged as I thought to myself, *You’re the one* making *me so cautious in the first place.*

“Kamyua... If the time comes when I’m prepared enough to open up a shop in the post town, it’s alright if I come consult with you again, right?”

“Yeah. Or you can skip over me and just start negotiating directly if you want. The old guy who runs this inn, Milano Mas, is also one of the folks in charge of that stall area, after all. At any rate, you should just go ahead and come here to

The Kimyuus's Tail."

"Thank you. I still don't know just how things will play out, but talking to you has given me a whole lot to think about. Even if I don't end up opening a shop, I'm still glad we had the chance to speak."

"I'm grateful to hear it... Are you heading back already? Well then, I leave the rest up to you, Leito. I'll finish off this salted meat, then take another nap."

"Right. Well then, shall we get going, Asuta and Ai Fa?"

I stared blankly back at the smiling youth.

"Going where? We were just planning on finishing up our shopping and then heading home."

"It won't take long. It's just, apparently a girl named Tara and her father wished to thank the two of you. Her father runs a stall, so please allow me to lead you there."

Tara was the name of the girl we met the first time I came to this post town. She got caught up in the commotion of Doddo Suun drunkenly running wild, and Ai Fa and I more or less saved her.

But that was already ten days past. It was just plain embarrassing, the idea of her dad thanking us now.

"Go ahead and meet them. Tara's a good girl. And I'm sure she'll be a real beauty down the line, so there's no harm in forming a bond with her now."

Naturally, that ridiculous statement hadn't come from the youth, but from his master.

I'm not exactly Hikaru Genji, you know, I thought to myself with a strained smile, then glanced over at Ai Fa, and... For some baffling reason, her eyes were shooting a truly chilling glare back at me.

Seriously, just what sort of guy do you think I am?

"Well then, excuse us."

"Yeah, I look forward to the day we meet again."

We left the rear room, seeing along the way that the number of other

customers really hadn't grown, then headed for the exit.

The men from before were still drinking away in the restaurant. And one of them in particular looked at us with noticeably drunker eyes than before.

"Hey, you black-haired kid! Just how'd you make that giba eater woman yours? You mind teaching us the trick to it?"

Oh man, looks like they weren't going to let us just pass on by this time around.

This wasn't heading in a good direction. Insulting me is one thing, but involving Ai Fa... It was getting pretty hard to keep my cool.

"She must've realized she could save up coins quicker by hunting down a man rather than giba, right?! Hey, giba eater, how about I buy you for the night for two red coins?"

I turned back to face the men. But the two things that happened next made sure that my yell never escaped my throat.

Ai Fa, who was walking behind me, grabbed my arm, and young Leito in front of me calmly stated, "Please stop. These people are my master's guests. I'll take any insult towards them as an insult towards my master. Are you alright with that?"

His boyish soprano of a voice clearly still hadn't undergone puberty, but it was completely devoid of all emotion.

I couldn't see the expression on his face as he was looking at the men, but in exchange, I could clearly see the look in their eyes.

The two men who had said such vulgar things were completely frozen in place, their bottles of booze held up in the air.

As for their faces... Their expressions had frozen too with their eyes wide open, like they had encountered some sort of wild beast in the forest.

"Hey, what is it?" the other men asked, jostling their friends' shoulders.

Young Leito cast them a sideways glance, then shot me a smile.

"My apologies. Well then, shall we get going?"

He really was his master’s apprentice, huh?

As I gave a sigh and started walking again, Ai Fa said, “Hey,” and jabbed me in the back.

“I told you this before, but don’t go losing your temper when you lack the power to so much as protect yourself. You really are overly hasty at times.”

“...You’re hasty too, when hamburgers are involved.”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

With that, she jabbed me several more times in the back, and we finally left The Kimyuus’s Tail.

4

When we got back outside, the sun was still high in the sky, and the streets were still packed with people.

“You said you were planning on shopping, but what are you going to buy?”

“Right, I wanted to get a metal pot. And they should be selling some in those stalls, too.”

“A pot, is it? A big one?”

“Well, a decently sized one. About this big.”

I drew out a half sphere in the air, with a diameter of 60 centimeters and a depth of 30.

“That certainly seems like it would be heavy. In that case, is it alright if I lead you to Tara’s stall first? It’s at the far end of the area, after all.”

“Ah, right, um... Do you mind, Ai Fa?”

“Do as you please,” Ai Fa responded, her face remaining expressionless. However, I got the feeling that she was starting to look just a bit tired.

I was a bit concerned, so I whispered, “What’s wrong?”

“Despite all this, my impression hasn’t changed. I don’t believe that man is trying to trick us, but how should I put it...? He feels like a complete and utter

unknown.”

“I see,” I responded, satisfied with that answer.

I didn’t feel like Kamyua Yoshu was trying to trick us, either. He really did have strong feelings about the people of the forest’s edge.

Rather, it was more like it was making me feel ill at ease because he felt *too* strongly.

That oldtimer’s not the only problem, either...

I puzzled over the matter in my head as young Leito led us along the stone highway.

Will opening a shop with giba cooking here in town really work out?

I just kept on walking forwards, my gaze focused on Ai Fa. It was true that not everyone showed openly negative feelings towards them, but it was a fact that the people of the forest’s edge were seen as heathens here in town.

Kamyua Yoshu carefreely stated that we should just start by targeting the travelers and folks who weren’t from the Genos domain, and then we’d be fine. But would it really be that simple?

If it was just a business failure, then all we would lose would be coins. But it would be a serious issue if our rash actions led to the gulf widening between the post town and the forest’s edge.

And even if Kamyua Yoshu wasn’t personally trying to trick us, it was still important to keep the possibility that he misjudged the situation in mind.

I’d really like a chance to ask the opinion of a neutral party from here in the post town, if at all possible...

As I troubled myself over that matter, we finally arrived in the area with all the stalls.

I spied a familiar woman making up manju for children waiting at her stall.

It seemed that this time just past when the sun hit its peak really was the time for a snack. I consciously looked around to observe, and found that all of the shops selling snacks in the area were positively packed with people.

I spied a young fellow biting into a white doughy substance wrapped around light-brown meat and green vegetables as he walked. Off to the side of the road were men drinking and eating what looked like a bird leg. And hearing some commotion, I glanced towards the source and found an outdoor eatery set up under a rather wide roof, where people happily chatted away while eating soup from wooden bowls.

"...What are you darting all about for?"

"Hmm, y'know... Investigating the market."

I still didn't know how all this would play out.

But if we wanted to make sure it ended up at the best possible result, then I figured it was smartest to gather as much information as possible.

And besides, I was probably the only person from the forest's edge who could do such a thing, anyway.

I'm sure Kamyua never would've come up with a crazy idea like opening up a shop in the post town if there wasn't someone like me at the forest's edge.

For example, I'm sure the women of the Ruu clan could create a dish on the level of that salted meat dish from before with just a bit of practice.

However, it was hard to imagine a person of the forest's edge starting up a business. Trading horns and tusks for coins, then using those to buy food... Sure, that was at least technically a proper form of business, but I doubt anyone from the forest's edge saw it that way.

And besides, handing the fruits of their harvests over to a specialist in such matters was inherently different than dealing with some unspecified number of customers.

Naturally, if I can be of help in that way, then I'm ready to do so as much as possible.

If Ai Fa and Gazraan Rutim believed it to be the proper path, then I'd plunge forwards without hesitation.

So that they wouldn't make a mistake in their decision, I decided to take in the sights and sounds that would be difficult for them to notice, and accurately

convey that information to them.

“Ah, that’s the shop. Thank goodness. It looks like Tara is there too.”

I looked up with a “Hmm?” when Leito said that, and noticed we were at the edge of the booths.

Beyond that, the highway continued on through the vegetation, while on the left hand side, the stone walls surrounding the castle town could be seen in the distance.

As I thought to myself that we also came out about this far last time, a young girl’s voice called out from our left, “Ah! Asuta! You really brought him, Leito!”

It was Tara.

Today she was in an orange tube dress, and was waving at me from underneath the roof of a certain shop.

Yes, a certain shop.

It had a large cloth laid out atop the ground with the vegetables lined up on top of it, with the only structure to it being an unreliable-looking roof, making for an incredibly plain shop... And it was also the place where Ai Fa and I purchased aria and poitan before.

Next to the young girl was a large man with a bit of a belly on him, wearing a nervous smile.

I shared a look with Ai Fa, then moved forward alongside young Leito.

“It’s been a while, Asuta! Thanks so much for back then!”

“Ah, I didn’t do anything worthy of your thanks. Plus, you helped us out after that, too.”

“No! If you weren’t there, I would’ve been squished alongside my manju! So thank you!”

Tara’s dark brown hair reached down to her shoulders, and her similarly colored eyes sparkled brightly. She was an energetic girl who looked to be around eight years old.

Her father next to her certainly did have a similarly colored moustache and

hair, and they both also had yellowish-brown skin.

It seemed like a pretty common color combination around the post town, so the resemblance hadn't really stood out to me.

And actually, the people of the Ruu clan all had really varied hair and eye color, so I had been questioning how much was tied to genetics in this world, and so I hadn't really taken notice at all.

At any rate, this was our second meeting.

The oldtimer stood up, removed the white cloth wrapped around his hair, then bowed his bushy head (with a bit of white hair mixed in) to me and Ai Fa.

"U-U-Um, apparently, you saved Tara the other day... T-Thank you so much. I-I-I very much wanted to offer my gratitude, but, um, I had you come all the way out here..."

His plump face was positively dripping in cold sweat.

And yet, even though he was so afraid of the people of the forest's edge, he still wanted to offer his thanks.

"No, it's all fine. It looked like we were going to be dragged away by the guards, but then Tara testified on our behalf, and we were set free. We owe your daughter a lot too."

"N-N-No, not at all..."

He was larger than the oldtimer from the inn, and his face made him look pretty largehearted. Considering he had said he grew the aria himself, he must have spent half his time selling and half his time farming.

He was a trueborn Genos citizen, so maybe it was only natural that he held such fear of the people of the forest's edge... But still, it was hard to bear seeing him looking like that in front of his daughter.

As for Tara, she had been staring in puzzlement for a while now.

"About your daughter being exposed to danger..." Ai Fa suddenly said.

"Gyah!" the oldtimer squealed, grabbing hold of Tara's shoulders and shrinking back.

Tara also seemed a little uneasy as she looked at Ai Fa.

“...The cause was me failing to exercise discretion when beating down a drunkard. I knew she was down below his feet, but I thought I needed to get the scoundrel about to draw his blade under control as soon as possible, so I hit him. If Asuta hadn’t hurried to aid her, she may have ended up pinned under the man and getting injured.”

Then, Ai Fa silently bowed her head.

“I was lacking in attentiveness. And for that, I would like to apologize.”

“N-N-No, that’s...”

“Sir, you don’t need to be so on edge. These folks aren’t as wild as you may be thinking. Just a short while ago they were being vulgarly heckled by drunks, but I’m the one who lost my cool first,” Leito interjected with a smile.

He lost his cool? It didn’t look that way to me...

“Also, Asuta here may be opening a stall near here. If that happens you’ll be neighbors, so I think it’s best to clear up any such concerns now.”

“Huh?! Asuta, you’re opening a shop?!”

Tara was actually the one to overreact, rather than her father.

“No, nothing’s decided just yet, but... If I do, it’ll be around here?”

“Yes. Things are already full along that stretch, after all. You would be a newcomer, so that would mean you’d start out here at this northern tip.”

“Hmm... So are you a newcomer too, oldtimer?”

“Huh? N-No, I’ve already been here for 20 years. As you move closer to the bustling center, you have to hand over a greater gratuity to the folks managing things, so I just stayed out of all that.”

The oldtimer was clearly flustered, but I could also tell that he was earnestly trying to steel his nerves.

He really didn’t seem like such a bad guy, at his core.

“I still don’t know if I really will be opening a shop, but if it does end up happening, I hope we become good neighbors. And I’ll be sure to stock up on

ingredients from here if the time comes, too.”

“W-What sort of shop would you be opening?”

Ah, right. This may be a valuable chance to hear the opinion of a Genos resident completely unrelated to Kamyua Yoshu.

Well, in actuality Kamyua Yoshu may have deliberately set the stage for this chance too, but that would be thinking too badly of him, right?

At any rate, it was time to investigate.

“Actually, I was thinking of selling dishes made with giba meat... What do you think?”

The oldtimer’s eyes went wide in shock.

“I-I don’t think... something like that would sell, right?”

Hmm...

He looked rather surprised, or should I say astounded, but I couldn’t say I felt any nasty feelings coming from him. But at least for now, it didn’t seem as if I was saying something like, “I want to open a shop serving tarantula cuisine in the middle of the shopping district.”

“I won’t be creeping out the people around me? Like, you don’t think, ‘Don’t try selling that crap near me!’ then?”

“T-That’s not really for us to decide... It’s just...”

“‘Just’?”

“I-It’d be a problem if it stunk.”

“It shouldn’t give off much of a smell. The stink of giba meat is something you would only notice when eating it, and besides, it wouldn’t be there even in that case when it’s prepared properly.”

“Giba are those bad animals that mess up fields, right? Are they yummy?” Tara asked, overflowing with curiosity.

Them being “bad” was just based on the way they inconvenienced us, and they weren’t at fault... But there’d be no point in trying to give such a lecture here and now.

“Who knows? I think it’s super delicious, but that’s just my personal preference. It’s certainly really quirky, so there may just be some folks out there who hate it.”

“Hmm... That’s amazing. I want to try it.”

“D-Don’t be ridiculous...” her father started saying, and then he looked away from us again.

“Sorry. We’re this far into the conversation, but I still haven’t given an introduction. I’m Asuta, and I’m being looked after by the Fa house at the forest’s edge. Ai Fa here is the clan head. If you don’t mind, could you tell us your name, too?”

“...M-My name’s Dora.”

Tara and Dora, huh? It was hard to say if that was easy to remember or not, but the name sure seemed to fit his rounded and almost cute appearance.

“Dora, is it? We’re still uncertain about whether or not we’ll open the shop. If we sold nothing at all and took a big loss that’d be a problem, and more importantly, it would feel inexcusable if we were to cause trouble for everyone here in the post town. So if it’s alright with you, could we hear your earnest opinion? Like if it’d be a problem for us to open a shop like that, or nobody would ever eat it. We’d like to have opinions to reference when making our decision.”

“I-It wouldn’t be a problem. As long as there are no strange smells, it’ll be fine. T-The only other thing... is fights could occur...” he said, mumbling and trailing off at the end there.

Still, he went and gave a proper answer.

He must have a pretty open and frank personality by nature. I sensed that back when I said the aria was rotten and he got angry, too.

“Fights, huh? If I open a shop, will there be folks from around town who will find fault with that?”

“F-Finding fault... with a person of the forest’s edge...”

He was seriously mumbling.

“What do you think? To be honest, there were folks coming after us in an inn just a bit ago, so that matter has me a bit concerned, to be honest.”

“R-Really? I can’t even imagine it.”

The oldtimer sure seemed awful frightened of the people of the forest’s edge.

Meanwhile, I sensed nothing but contempt from those guys before.

I guess people really did vary, even when raised in the same environment, huh?

And Tara even said she’d like to try it.

For a while she’d been glancing over Ai Fa’s way, as if she was trying to figure out just what sort of person this scary looking lady was.

“Well then, what about the cooking itself? Do you think that you’d die before you ever want to eat giba meat?”

“I-I at least don’t want to eat it badly enough to pay for it. After all, folks say it’s tough and stinks. I don’t feel any need to go out of my way to confirm that.”

“If it was free, would you try it?”

“I-If I had to say...”

“You don’t think it’s disgusting or filthy?”

“G-Giba don’t scavenge up rotten meat like mundt and giiz, right? We hate giba because they target our fields, but that’s all there is to it.”

Then, he seemed to work up his nerves and looked towards Ai Fa.

“T-That’s why... I feel gratitude and respect to you all, risking your lives to take them down. B-But you... Y-You all... You eat those ferocious giba, and you’ve gained a terrifying strength. There are a lot of old folks who think that way, and...”

An emotion other than just fear flickered in his eyes. Could it... Could it be anger?

“...And in truth, the people of the forest’s edge really have done terrible things.”

Ai Fa just silently stared back at him.

The blood had drained from the oldtimer's yellowish-brown skin, and he started to tremble from fear.

"T-They've stolen crops, attacked travelers, and kidnapped girls from around town... I know not everyone from the forest's edge is like that, but it's a fact that folks like that do exist. In fact, that man you beat down by the roadside was like that, too, wasn't he? And as long as folks like that exist..."

We won't be able to see eye to eye.

That may have been how he intended to finish that sentence, but he didn't voice it.

Ai Fa slowly, calmly shook her head side to side.

"I personally have nothing to be ashamed of... That's all I wanted to say."

So, she wasn't going to deny it, huh?

Stealing crops, attacking travelers, and kidnapping girls from around town... They went that far, did they?

I was past just being angry, to such a degree that I was starting to feel overwhelmed.

How could there be such a huge difference between fellow people of the forest's edge?

Ai Fa and Gazraan Rutim were cut from the same cloth, but they... How had they, the clan that was supposed to lead their people, fallen so far?

I truly, honestly, from the depths of my heart, just couldn't understand it.

"There really are all sorts of people out there, both when it comes to townsfolk and people of the forest's edge, right?"

I turned around in shock towards the source of that voice, only to find young Leito smiling back at me even now.

It drove in the fact once again that this boy really was Kamyua Yoshu's apprentice.

"Now then, it's about time that I headed back to Kamyua, but what will you

two do?”

“Ah, we’ll be leaving too. We don’t want to interfere with your business any further... Thank you, Dora.”

“Not at all...”

“Well then, farewell. Asuta and Ai Fa, I’m greatly looking forward to your giba cooking, too, so please give it your all!” Leito left us with a nod.

Ultimately, my thoughts were still left a big disordered mess.

5

Roughly an hour later, we were standing once again in front of the Rutim house. And naturally, we were carrying a stupidly huge pot with us.

“Ooh, Ai Fa and Asuta, what are you doing here with that pot?! Did you come here to cook at my place?!”

“Dan Rutim! You’re already back from the forest?”

It hadn’t even been three hours since the sun had hit its peak. And yet, the head of the Rutim clan had already removed his cloak and blades by the time he had greeted us.

“There’ve been a great many giba around lately. We had already gotten our horns and tusks for the day, and then one of the young folks from a branch family got injured just a bit, so we turned back early! So, what’ve you got for me today?”

“Ah, no, we just came to talk to Gazraan Rutim...”

“Oh, is that so?” the clan head responded, his large shoulders slumping in disappointment.

His head was bald with a dark brown beard, and his potbelly jutted out. Dan Rutim closely resembled an arabian genie or Budai or something, and he was looking plenty lively again today.

“If you’re here, Dan Rutim, then maybe it’d be good to have you hear us out, too. The truth is, there’s something we’d like to discuss.”

“Well, I guess I’m up for talking with you...” he said, breaking out in a childish pout.

I wish he wouldn’t steal my clan head’s specialty like that...

“Ah, Asuta and Ai Fa. So it really is you! How did your discussion with Kamyua Yoshu go?” Dan Rutim’s son (who looked nothing like the man) asked, appearing from behind his father.

I hurriedly gave him a bow.

“Sorry for disturbing you so many times in one day. Um, is Ama Min Rutim...?”

“She went to the Ruu settlement along with the other women. She said she wanted to learn to cook a delicious meal as soon as possible, but as a result, I got left behind.”

“Ah, sorry about that too...”

“Like I said, you don’t need to worry about troubling me. Please, come inside. There’s no problem with that, right, clan head?”

“Yeah...”

The Rutim clan head sure sounded like a little kid when he said that.

At any rate, Ai Fa and I handed over our blades along with our metal pot, and were once again welcomed into the Rutim house as guests.

“...And well, that’s about how things went.”

The explanation took a good while this time around.

With his arms crossed, Gazraan Rutim replied, “Hmm... In other words, your impression of Kamyua Yoshu hasn’t really changed, then? However, you sensed a strong attachment to, or perhaps even a fixation on, the forest’s edge... Yet you didn’t believe he was trying to trick you.”

“Right. On top of that, I also did a thorough investigation of the post town. I believe there really shouldn’t be any big issues that arise from opening a shop there, and it really is possible it could be successful... I won’t know if it really will lead to giba meat gaining value or not till I give it a try, though.”

After we said goodbye to young Leito and old man Dora, we stopped by a

number of stalls to further my investigation.

As a result, I learned that the snacks at the shops in the area all cost between one and three red coins, they sold between 20 and 50 per day, and the busy period was a bit after the sun hit its peak.

I could put up a fight under those conditions... Or at least, that's what I thought.

Gazraan Rutim continued on, "Hmm... In that case, I don't believe there should be any issue. What do you think, clan head?"

"I've got no clue. Why does someone from the city of stone give a damn about the future of the forest's edge? Folks from there should just keep on gathering up stones and building their roads to the ends of the earth. More importantly, Asuta..." Dan Rutim said with a sulky look, staring my way with upturned eyes. He really was striking an eerily close resemblance to my clan head. "You're talking about making food for those folks from the city of stone, but you won't make any for me?"

"Ah, no, you see, we just want your opinion on that matter... Is there any problem with someone in my position going and opening a shop in town?"

"No idea. The one to decide that should be the head of the Fa clan, right? Why're you bothering to ask my opinion?"

"Ah, that's of course true, but we also wanted to confirm whether other members of the forest's edge would be opposed to the action of opening a shop in general. And also... The Suun clan manages all dealings with the city of stone, don't they? I was also wondering if it'd be alright to just go ahead and do it without involving them."

"The Suun clan...?" Dan Rutim questioned, his goggle-eyes giving way to a glare. "Who gives a damn what those fools think?! If they try to complain about it, then we Rutim will show them a thing or two! So, you want to point a blade towards the Suun, do you, Asuta?!"

"Don't go looking so excited! I'm here discussing things with you like this precisely because I *don't* want to be the spark that sets off some giant conflict!"

"How boring..." Dan Rutim replied, acting apathetic once again.



Then Gazraan Rutim just bluntly stated, “You needn’t worry about that matter. The Suun clan only handles dealing with the Genos castle. You would need to go through them if you wanted to open a shop in the stone walls, but if it’s just in the post town, it shouldn’t be any problem.”

“Is that so? But still... It’s just such a ridiculous idea. Does it really not brush up against any of the laws or taboos of the forest’s edge?”

“There shouldn’t be any issue there, either. In fact, the agreement for us living here at the forest’s edge says we cannot gather the blessings of the forest from Mount Morga or farm our own fields, and must focus on simply hunting giba. Put another way, the only thing the city of stone allows us to do is sell giba.”

“I see...”

“And also, Asuta, this is a bit of a diversion, but the Rutim currently face a bit of a problem.”

“Huh? What is it?”

“We can’t use up all of our meat.”

His handsome face broke out in a strained smile, which was not like him at all.

“The banquet at the Ruu settlement used up an awful lot of meat, but we don’t have occasions like that very often. We’ve been bloodletting and dissecting roughly two per day, and the branch families already have their storage overflowing with meat as a result. It’s so much that we’ll have to just start leaving all the meat out in the woods from tomorrow on.”

“Ah... That definitely makes sense.”

We had an excess of meat back at the Fa house from the giba Ai Fa had hunted, too. Since it would only last half a month, or 20 days at maximum, even when preserved with pico leaves, we’d been making a massive amount of smoked meat, but it still showed no signs of decreasing.

“If we could exchange that meat for coins, it certainly would improve our lives. And also... It feels like a shame, leaving meat that could be truly delicious if it was just prepared properly for the mundt. The meat from giba we screwed

up the bloodletting on should be plenty for them."

"We'll keep on bloodletting, even from tomorrow on! Even if we have too much meat, there's only so many ribs, after all!" the clan head yelled out, despite remaining slumped down.

His son gave another strained smile, then nodded.

"...In that case, from tomorrow on we'll be discarding all the meat but the ribs in the woods. The leg and shoulder and back meat, which will be properly bloodlet and prepared."

"Man, that really *is* a waste!"

"Yes. And yet, we can't go giving it to members of another clan. If we did, then powerless clans may give up on gathering horns and tusks entirely, and just decide to eat nothing but meat," Gazraan Rutim stated, his expression tightening a bit as he leaned forwards. "Asuta. We intend to pass on the techniques we learned from you to the Min, Lea, and other related families. And I believe that eventually, it's knowledge that should be possessed by all the people of the forest's edge."

"Huh? Even the Suun clan?"

"Of course. After all, if it resulted in them diligently hunting giba, then that would be the best possible result."

I see. I still must not have been a proper member of the forest's edge, as I couldn't think of the Suun clan as anything but an unforgivable foe.

"But doing so at present would be dangerous. Powerful clans like the Suun are one thing, but this knowledge shouldn't be granted to small clans not under the Suun or Ruu just yet."

"Huh? But why?"

"Because the meat is simply too delicious. Take a small family that had never tasted torso meat before and simply thrown it away, if they were to learn of the flavor... I fear the danger would exist that they lose out to their own weakness and not hunt many giba, again, giving up on horns and tusks to instead just eat meat."

Was such a thing really possible?

There could be folks out there who hated the idea of eating pungent torso meat, so they'd been desperately hunting a great number of giba. And as a result, the taste of delicious meat could destroy that drive. Could that happen...?

It may well be possible.

At the very least, if Gazraan Rutim was bringing it up, the chance of it happening was greater than zero.

And of course, as someone who wasn't a hunter, there was no way I could fault those folks for their weakness.

"I believe that is what it means for knowledge to act as a poison."

"Poisonous knowledge, huh...?"

"Yes. If you use too much of a strong medicine, it will act as a poison. I believe that is how your strength can become a poison, too."

Those words caused my heart to skip a beat.

My strength, a poison...

"That's why I believe we shouldn't spread this knowledge to any small clans unrelated to us just yet. But if it becomes such that giba meat can be exchanged for coins in the post town, those people could still get ahold of aria and poitan by selling meat. Then they could eat proper meals and live proper lives, growing stronger as hunters."

"Right..."

"Then, your strength will serve as a medicine for us all, Asuta," Gazraan Rutim said with an encouraging smile. "And so, if the time comes that the two of you find your path leads you to opening a shop in the post town, then I'll be hoping for your success more than anyone. And I'm certainly willing to lend you my aid towards that goal... As a friend."

"Thank you... Sincerely. I'll think it over tonight and come to a conclusion. And when I do, you'll be the first one to know, Gazraan Rutim."

Was I really qualified to have such a great man call me friend?

If I wasn't, then I'd like to strive to earn that right.

Still... Back when I first met him, I never imagined Gazraan Rutim would become such a big part of my life.

It was all down to the bonds between people. My meeting Ai Fa led to meeting Rimee Ruu, then the Ruu clan, and then Gazraan and Dan Rutim.

And Kamyua Yoshu, too...

Ai Fa and I had to start by determining if his presence was medicine or poison.

I worked up my nerves, deciding that I had to discuss it with my clan head.

"Seriously, thank you so much. I'm really glad I talked to you, Gazraan Rutim."

"It makes me proud to hear you say that, Asuta. Are you leaving already?"

"Yes. Sorry again for bothering you multiple times in one day."

"Wait, you're seriously leaving?!" Dan Rutim roared. "There's not much time till the sun sets, right? And the Fa house is far, isn't it? So you should just stay here in the Rutim house till morning!"

"Ah, no, that's too..." I started to argue, but then I came back to my senses a bit.

It would take over an hour to get back to the house from here. There was still some time till sunset even so, but I may not actually have enough time to dry out the poitan in the sun. And unless I used that yam-esque gigo or took the time to make a stew, I still hadn't come up with a way to make liquid poitan any easier to eat.

"Asuta, the Rutim women don't seem to have returned from the Ruu settlement yet. And they only just started commuting there yesterday, so they haven't had much of a chance to learn the techniques just yet... If you don't mind, could you man our stove for the night?" Gazraan Rutim stated, though I don't know if it was due to his father's expression or mine.

"...Please let me have a quick discussion with my clan head," I said, making as serious of a face as possible before leaning in close to Ai Fa's ear. "Ai Fa. If we

head home for the day now, we may end up having to deal with pure poitan broth for the first time in a while.”

Ai Fa maintained her usual serious look, gave a single nod, and drew close to my ear.

“I’d hate that.”

And so, it turned out that I was manning the Rutim stove for the day.

6

Surprisingly, the main Rutim house actually wasn’t all that big of a family.

Aside from Dan Rutim, Gazraan Rutim, and Ama Min Rutim, the only ones living in the house were the former clan head, Ra Rutim, and the youngest daughter, Morun Rutim.

However, that wasn’t to say Dan Rutim hadn’t been blessed with children. He had another son and two more daughters in addition to Gazraan and Morun Rutim, but they had all found partners and moved out from under his roof.

Apparently, the second son was living with his wife just next door, whereas the daughters married into one of the branch families and the Lea clan. That meant that until Ama Min Rutim married in, there were just four people living here.

And since the whole Rutim settlement was currently short on women, that meant the main and branch families were joining together to take care of the day’s work, manning the stove included.

“Of the 25 folks in the Rutim clan, 11 of them are women, right? In most houses, the women would hold the majority by a bit.”

“That just goes to show how tough the Rutim men are! Plus, the main Ruu house is taking way too long when it comes to marriage! They have seven kids, but only the oldest son is married!”

Dinner in the Rutim settlement sure was lively. Well, the main one making all that noise was the clan head, though...

The former clan head, Ra Rutim, was the tall and lean old man who had led their clan at that banquet, which meant he must have been the Rutim elder. I figured he had to be under the age of 70. His head was bald, and he had a long white beard and a piercing gaze like a hawk... Apparently, he was also the man who had once been married to Granny Jiba's daughter.

This was my first time meeting the youngest daughter, Morun Rutim, and she was apparently 15. She had a bit of a round physique and a charming face, and well, she somehow looked a bit like her dad. She may have only been 15, but she really seemed like she would make a good mother in the future.

The elder wasn't very talkative, but the other folks were all friendly and easy to deal with, and the clan head was especially noisy. It made for a real harmonious dinner, without any of the tension I had faced when dealing with the Ruu clan.

"Today we learned how to bake poitan, but we didn't have the time to do it ourselves, so this is a big help. Asuta, Ai Fa, thank you," Ama Min Rutim, who we had only just been able to say hi to in the morning, said with her usual gentle smile.

Ama Min Rutim had given off a refreshing neat and tidy impression to start with, but now that she was married, she somehow seemed even more gentle. It was getting harder and harder to remember that she was the same age as me.

On top of that, she had cleanly chopped off her blackish brown hair behind her neck. Yes, she was wearing her hair boldly short, which was a little rare here at the forest's edge.

Lastly, there was the single piece dress wrapped around her healthy figure, neither too full nor too thin, which served as proof of her married status.

"Man, that sure was good! Rib meat's always tasty, but this baked poitan sure is something else, too! Now that I've had this, it's like I couldn't even get that heated up poitan broth to go down my throat anymore!"

Of course. In fact, that was exactly how Ai Fa and I ended up accepting the offer to man the Rutim stove.

Anyway, we ended up smoothly preparing a dinner of rib and thigh meat

steak, baked poitan, and giba, aria, and pula soup.

We continued to chat for a short while afterwards, and then the folks living there started to return to their rooms.

“Ai Fa, Asuta, we have two rooms to spare, but are you alright sharing just the one?”

“Yeah. We have all sorts of things to discuss, after all,” I responded in a totally natural tone, but something bothered me a bit when we were shown to the room.

It was a room that was about 10 meters squared in terms of size, without any proper furnishings to speak of.

There was unsurprisingly a fur rug spread out at our feet, but there was also a single bit of cloth matting laid out at the back of the room, which may have been the source of my discomfort.

“Ah, you need another set of bedding, right? I’ll go get it,” our guide to the room, Morun Rutim, stated.

However, Ai Fa replied, “I don’t especially mind. I don’t normally use bedding anyway, so this won’t be an issue.”

“Is that so? Well then, please excuse me,” Morun Rutim said with a smile, and then she left.

We had been supplied the room farthest in on the right, and there was just one vacant room between us and the newlywed’s room.

“Man... This is a strange feeling, somehow, isn’t it?”

“What is?” Ai Fa asked as she walked right on in, placing the candlestick she had borrowed from the main hall by the window.

And then, she sat down atop the bedding.

The bedding had been laid out near the window, so her actions were totally natural.

I closed the door behind me, then plopped down atop the rug in front of Ai Fa.

A private room.

Bedding.

Someone else's house.

What was it? It felt like I was just as close to Ai Fa as usual, but my heart rate seemed to be weirdly on the rise.

At any rate, I did that little ritual where you write out "calm" on your palm and then gulp it down to ease the tension.

"What are you doing?" Ai Fa questioned, but I had no idea how to answer that.

"Well, we gathered up all sorts of information over the course of the last two days, so how are you feeling after everything, Ai Fa?"

Ai Fa looked to be thinking a bit as she started to let down her long hair.

As her blonde hair flowed over her shoulders and chest, Ai Fa responded, "I... don't think it should be a problem."

"Really?"

"Yes. Even if you happen to fail, all that will be lost is coins. And I can make up that much of a loss by hunting giba... Fortunately, it's possible to hunt a truly shocking number of giba at the moment."

"Hmm..."

"The only thing that bothers me is that it was that Kamyua Yoshu man who raised the idea."

"You really just can't trust that old-timer, huh?"

"More than that... I cannot understand him. I can read neither his thoughts nor his feelings. And it seems like the more that we talk to him, the more confused I get."

Then, Ai Fa leaned forwards with a bit of an uneasy look in her eyes.

I almost reflexively leaned back, but fortunately I managed to stop myself just in time.

It wasn’t as if Ai Fa had come in unnaturally close. If I pulled back now, it’d probably cause Ai Fa to feel suspicious or upset. Heck, I’d probably feel hurt, myself.

But still, the pounding in my chest wouldn’t calm down.

“That man ate giba meat of his own volition. It was my first time seeing such a person from the city of stone. I was of course completely surprised, and I thought it may ease my distrust of the man... but instead it only grew stronger.”

“I see. I can’t say I really get how you’re feeling there. But well, I can totally get not understanding him. Saying it’s not that you can’t trust him, but you can’t understand him may just be the perfect way to phrase it.”

“You feel that way too, Asuta?”

“Yeah, I do.”

“I see... I’m glad,” Ai Fa said with a relieved sigh. I didn’t usually see her like that. “If you didn’t think that way, then I may not have been able to understand you anymore, either... So I’m glad.”

“R-Right. But well, after hearing what Dora and Gazraan Rutim had to say, I don’t think there should be any serious issue with the act of opening a shop in and of itself. Regardless of Kamyua Yoshu’s intentions, we’re free to act as we please... right?”

“That much was clear from the start. No matter what we may do, the responsibility will always fall on us and us alone.”

“Hmm... I’d hate to cause you issues by going forward with it, though.”

With that, Ai Fa’s face shifted from being incredibly serene to slightly annoyed.

This was a lot more like her, but had I gone and said something I shouldn’t have?

“Asuta, you’ll be selling cooking made with the giba meat from my hunts, and the ingredients obtained from those tusks and horns, will you not?”

“Yeah, though I intend to contribute this time around, too. But there’s naturally no way I could ever do it without you.”

“In that case, why are you acting as if our positions are different?”

Her expression made her look more frustrated than angry.

It was as if her blue eyes were uncertain as to just what emotion they should display.

“When you manned the stove for the wedding, that was a personal agreement between you and the couple. But this time, do you not intend to tackle this matter as a member of the Fa clan? Do you plan on taking everything on by yourself again? If that’s the case, then why do you profess to be a member of the Fa clan?”

“S-Sorry. Did it somehow come across like I was treating you like a stranger? I mean, I was born in another country, so I’m sure how I treat family is a bit different than how you do it here at the forest’s edge. But I wasn’t trying to make light of you, Ai Fa.”

I tossed aside the embarrassment I was feeling before and leaned forward without even thinking.

We were separated by no more than 30 centimeters, and Ai Fa was staring firmly into my eyes as if searching for something.

“...Your happiness is my happiness.”

“Yeah.”

“Your suffering is my suffering.”

“Right.”

“If that weren’t the case, then what point would there be to you being part of my house?”

As she said that, Ai Fa suddenly averted her gaze.

If we had our usual relaxed mood between us, her lips would be pouting around now... but instead, they were quietly forming words.

“If we can’t understand one another on that point, then there’s no point to us being part of the same house. Why exactly did you turn down the invitation to join the Rutim, then?”

“That’s because I want to be with you. Sorry... Back where I come from, it’s normal to not want to cause trouble for your family. I didn’t think it would cause you to feel badly.”

Wanting to do something to soften her pained expression, I took Ai Fa by the hand. Her fingers weren’t soft but also hadn’t lost their smoothness, and I felt them ever so gently grip my hand back.

“I feel happy when you’re glad and pained when you’re sad too, Ai Fa. I don’t think we’re feeling differently deep down, so could you please forgive me? I’ll try to take care not to make you feel bad.”

Ai Fa was silent.

“If we just take the time, we’ll come to understand one another, right? I don’t care if we were born in different countries or worlds or whatever, I want us to really know one another, Ai Fa.”

“...Do we have such time?” Ai Fa whispered. “There’s no telling when I may meet my end in the forest. Nor is there any knowing when you may disappear from this world... So do we really have that time?”

“We do. All the time till we die or disappear belongs to us. So we can just keep on trying our hardest till that time comes, right?”

I tightened my grip, and Ai Fa looked my way as if in response.

I couldn’t quite make out the emotion in her eyes as she stared at me.

“If you worry about stuff like that, isn’t it like saying it’s ridiculous to think about tomorrow? I’d hate living like that. What matters most is the here and now, but I don’t want to treat tomorrow and all the rest of my future as secondary.”

“I... understand all that,” Ai Fa said, her mouth moving in a bit of a strange way. It was like she was laughing, or crying... Yeah, it was a truly complex, vague expression, like she was unable to control her own emotions.

“There’s no point to you telling me that at this point. As if I could be a hunter without even knowing that much, you fool.”

Then, Ai Fa did something unexpected: She bumped her forehead up against

my right shoulder.

“H-Hey, Ai Fa...?”

“Don’t look at my face for a little while. I’ll be done soon.”

It wasn’t as if she was crying, like she’d done a while back. No, she just pressed her forehead up against my shoulder and stopped moving.

I could feel her warmth through my shoulder and fingers.

Her long hair reached all the way down to my crossed legs.

She had said she hadn’t done sacrificial hunting for a while, but the smell of her hair really was still sweet.

A few seconds later, Ai Fa suddenly lifted her face, and somewhat roughly shook free from my fingers.

“...So, what are you thinking, Asuta?”

She had been hanging her head down, so her long hair hid her eyes. However, her mouth had the same gallant expression as always.

“My opinion is just as I said before. What are your thoughts on whether or not you should open a shop in the post town?”

“Right, I... I think I’d like to give it a try,” I earnestly replied, still a little worried about how Ai Fa was doing. “Just like you said, Kamyua Yoshu is just impossible to understand. And I also haven’t experienced or truly seen the suffering of living in poverty, so I don’t think I can truly understand that, either. But... It pissed me off the way the townsfolk look down on the people of the forest’s edge even before we met Kamyua Yoshu, and I also want to teach them how delicious giba meat really is.”

“Right.”

“Plus, there are folks like Tara and Dora in the post town, too. Even if we don’t end up smiling hand in hand, I think there’s still room to meet each other part way. And I believe this is a good chance for that, too.”

I scratched my head a bit as I talked.

“Well, I do still have doubts about whether or not it’s alright for an outsider

like me to be so involved with the future of the forest's edge... But if that's going to happen, I want it to be in a good way. So as long as I have the approval of folks like you and Gazraan Rutim, I think I'd like to take on the challenge."

"I see. So you still think of yourself as an outsider, do you? Sometimes, that irritates me so greatly I feel like it could kill me," Ai Fa bluntly stated, then turned away in a huff.

Her tone and actions were the same as always, but I still couldn't see her eyes, so I really couldn't tell what she was feeling.

"You are a member of the Fa clan. You live here at the forest's edge, so refer to yourself as a person of the forest's edge."

"Right. But anyway, I really think I'd like to give it a try. I don't know how it'll turn out, but I want to take on the challenge and see if my skills will be enough."

"...Then it's decided," Ai Fa quietly responded, still facing away. "I will keep hunting giba as I've done up till now, and prepare the meat and coins. You will use that to carry out your work."

"Got it... I'll give it my all, as if my life was on the line."

"Right. Just know that you shall not be permitted to shirk your duties manning the stove in order to treat townsfolk to your cooking."

"I'm not treating them, I'm selling to them."

If Ai Fa was going to behave like normal, then I should do the same.

That was what I thought, so I responded in a deliberately cheery tone, "And now that I'm taking on this challenge, I've got a whole lot to consider. It goes without saying that I need to figure out what dish I'll go with, but I also need to carefully calculate out the ingredients, plus how to transport them and my pot to the post town is also a tough problem. This whole thing's gonna be easier said than done."

"What, you've already thought things through that far? Are you sure you weren't planning from the very start to open a shop no matter what anyone said, Asuta?"

“Of course not. But it’s fun to think it over more and more. I think I’ll have to try talking to Gazraan Rutim again tomorrow.”

“You certainly are a calculating man,” Ai Fa threw out there, rolling on her side atop the bedding.

So she’s sleeping there after all, I thought to myself with a strained smile.

“Well, I’ve got to get my thoughts in order a bit, too. Since I’m taking on this challenge, I want to be successful for sure.”

I stretched out atop the rug, facing towards the ceiling, and Ai Fa called out, “Asuta.”

“What is it?” I replied, and then she sat up and kneeled atop the bedding, pulling it down just a bit.

“This bedding thing feels surprisingly nice to sleep on. You come here too and rest.”

“...What?” I questioned, tilting my head.

Ai Fa laid down on her side again, and then stretched out both arms.

“It feels nice to sleep on. They went and prepared it, so there shouldn’t be any issue with using it.”

“N-No, you go ahead and use it if that’s what you want. I’m fine just sleeping atop the rug.”

“...Do you not trust my words?”

“That’s not it. I mean, everyone used bedding back where I came from, so I’m plenty aware how nice it is.”

“Then come here.”

“No, no, no. That bedding’s too small for the two of us, right? Please, don’t worry about me and just get some sleep.”

“...Why are you refusing so firmly?” Ai Fa quietly muttered, still facing the ceiling. “Did I do something to hurt your feelings?”

“That’s not it at all! It’s just back in my country, as long as they’re not a child and parent or husband and wife, two family members would never sleep

together atop the same bedding.”

“...This isn’t your old country. It’s the forest’s edge.”

“Uugh...” I mumbled.

I didn’t know if it was intentional or what, but Ai Fa’s eyes were still hidden behind her long hair, so it was incredibly difficult to read the expression on her face.

Maybe her eyes actually hadn’t regained that perfect calm, and were flickering with unease... The thought made my heart ache.

Was this yet another trial someone was forcing upon me?

It sure was a fitting challenge, if so!

“...If you hate the idea that much, then just do as you please.”

Ai Fa turned her whole body towards the wall, so I could no longer see her face at all.

It was time to make a decision.

But well... No matter how I thought about it, Ai Fa had firmly declared that she didn’t want to take me as a husband, so there shouldn’t be any misunderstandings from this.

And to start with, I was only conscious of it because this thing was laid out on the floor, as we normally slept together super close anyway. Thinking of it that way, it was just like moving a mere couple dozen centimeters closer.

If that small of a difference in distance would bring Ai Fa peace and relief, then what need was there for me to hesitate?

I got my breathing in order, held my heartbeat back as much as I could, said, “Excuse me,” and then got atop the bedding.

Ai Fa didn’t move.

While taking care not to look too much at her beautiful back, I gently laid down on the bedding.

Well, it really was decently soft and comfortable. If you asked me, I honestly longed more for a pillow, but well, I wasn’t about to go demanding such luxury.

At any rate, as my thoughts raced through scheduling everything out for opening a shop in the post town, I decided it was best to get to sleep early for today and closed my eyes.

In that very instant, Ai Fa suddenly rolled her whole body to face me.

“Oh... So you came after all, Asuta?”

“Y-Yeah. I mean, you went and invited me, after all.”

Ai Fa was using her right arm as a pillow and lying on her side, and now she was staring right at my face.

Her eyes didn’t have a hint of sadness or unease about them. No, they just looked happy.

“You should have just listened to what I told you from the start...”

Ai Fa just looked so earnestly joyful at the moment that I was finding it hard to even quip back.

I’d seen Ai Fa mad and sulking an awful lot, but expressions like this were rare... Actually, this may be my first time seeing one since we met.

As I was busy being all confused about how to feel, Ai Fa quietly started talking.

“Asuta. Your strength when it comes to cooking is immeasurable. Even so, no one can say for certain if you really will find success the way that Gazraan Rutim described.”

“Yeah... Of course that’s the case.”

“Still, no matter how things turn out, I will have no regrets. You simply need to keep on mustering your own strength as you’ve done up till now.”

“Right, that’s what I intend to do.”

“...I’m proud of you. I find such great joy in having met you, and welcoming you into the Fa Clan.”

With that, Ai Fa closed her eyelids.

A smile of such pure joy crossed her face.

“Well then, I’m going to sleep. We can discuss the rest tomorrow...” she said, drifting off into sleep incredibly quickly as that sentence trailed off.

Her face was so remarkably at ease, she almost looked like a small child.

That was my line...

As that thought passed through my head, I just couldn’t bring myself to look away from that adorable sleeping face and close my eyes, kicking off a sleepless night for me.

Chapter 3: Day of Speculation

1

Our Fa clan had decided on opening a shop in the post town.

Though with that said, there was still a whole ton of stuff we needed to consider first. In fact, there was so much to consider that we were at a loss as to where we even had to start.

However, after thoroughly thinking over that matter too, I came up with three main problems.

In brief:

-Could this be done alongside my work at the house?

-What should I do about carrying supplies?

-How much should I be aiming to sell it for?

Those three key points.

As long as those matters remained unsolved, I couldn’t even begin figuring out my menu.

To be honest though, I already had an idea of what I wanted to do in regards to the menu, so all that was left was to calculate it all out backwards and form a plan, I figured.

First up, could this be done alongside my work at the house?

My lifestyle continued to be rather disorderly, but the tasks assigned to me were ultimately concentrated in the morning and before sunset. If I reassigned the time around when the sun hit its peak that I’d been using to experiment for work and the commute, then it seemed like it’d work out.

It was obvious, though, that the more time I spent preparing my dishes, the less time I would have for work.

I’d need to construct a careful plan so that work could progress smoothly.

Next, the method of carrying supplies.

This was a tough one.

If the plan was to sell hot cooking, then that would require carrying a metal pot and firewood to the post town. And for that I'd need someone to help, but I couldn't count on Ai Fa for that. After all, she had her work as a hunter, so I couldn't ask her to hang about the post town. In that case, it took an hour just getting there one way, and it would require two round trips. And obviously, I couldn't ask her to sacrifice her hunting work just to help me carry stuff.

So that meant I had no choice but to count on a part-timer.

At any rate, it would be a bit dicey trying to run a shop all on my own, anyway. I'd have to leave now and again to use the restroom, and the post town wasn't exactly my home field, so leaving the stall empty could prove dangerous. After all, you never know where some thug who hated the people of the forest's edge may be hiding.

And so, at the very least I'd need one person assisting me.

Lastly, how much should I be aiming to sell it for?

This was a pretty tricky one, too.

In my mind, as long as I didn't come out in the red that'd be fine, but thinking of the future, I couldn't go selling it too cheaply now.

One of my main goals was getting folks to acknowledge the value of giba meat, so at the very least, I'd like to price it around what the other meat dishes in the post town were going for.

Plus, if I didn't, I could throw off the prices in the marketplace. After all, if giba meat was going for too low of a price, it could end up strangling the other meat sellers out of business.

Thanks to that, I reached the conclusion that I should go with the same sort of price and size as those kimyuus manju.

All that was left was to calculate out how much of a profit I'd make after subtracting the cost of my ingredients.

With those thoughts in mind, I went to ask Gazraan Rutim his opinion first

thing in the morning, and I seemed to have left him quite bewildered as a result.

“My deepest apologies, Asuta. I can’t understand what you’re saying at all...”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“Ah, it’s not that I don’t understand the meaning of the words themselves, but even if you ask about profits and prices and hours spent working... I really just don’t know what to do with all that, or how to help you.”

It seemed I had over-explained a bit, there.

It really didn’t make any sense bringing up work hours and price setting to Gazraan Rutim. I just had to work all that out by myself.

“Sorry, you’re right. Um, the point I really wanted to discuss with you was that I need someone to help out in order to open the shop. I’d have trouble carrying a metal pot stuffed full of ingredients all on my own, and I’d also like to have some help around the shop. I believe my only option is to ask a woman of the forest’s edge to assist me, but do you think it would be possible to buy that time and labor with horns and tusks?”

With that, a questioning look appeared on Gazraan Rutim’s earnest face. It really was an unusual expression for him.

“I believe that should be possible, of course. But wasn’t Ai Fa going to be working alongside you when it came to opening a shop in the post town?”

“Huh? No, Ai Fa has her work as a hunter, so that wouldn’t be possible. And if she were to stop hunting giba, then we really would end up going broke.”

“But if you earn coins in the post town, can’t you use those to purchase aria and poitan?”

“If the business is successful, but if it fails, we won’t get a single coin. Actually, we wouldn’t even have the giba meat to sell in the first place without her hunting...”

“We Rutim could provide that. Just like I said yesterday, we have more meat then we can possibly use.”

“Right. And if the time comes when the business is a success, then I was

thinking we'd start counting on you. But what we need at this stage is coins to buy the vegetables we'll need for my cooking."

I kept on talking, still unable to read how Gazraan Rutim was really feeling at all.

"Selling cooking made with giba meat in the post town is going to be incredibly hard. As such, I have to keep in mind the worst case scenario that I don't sell even one over those ten days. If that happens, we could lose all the horns and tusks that Ai Fa has stored up. And so, I believe there's no path forwards but to have Ai Fa continue her work as a hunter... Plus, I don't believe Ai Fa has any intention of ever shirking that duty in the first place."

By my side, Ai Fa nodded.

Gazraan Rutim gave a small sigh, then said, "That's true. I believe it's just as you say, Asuta. You firmed up your resolve to open a shop in the post town while facing the possibility of your horns and tusks being wiped out, didn't you? I was naive in my thinking... But unfortunately, the Rutim clan is shorthanded when it comes to women, so we can't go lending anyone out to another clan. Just as I mentioned yesterday, the Rutim women are few in number..."

"Is that so? In that case, I guess the Ruu are the only other ones we can discuss it with... Considering Donda Ruu's attitude, though, I'd imagine that'll be a bit tricky. Well, if it comes down to it, I guess I'll just have to come up with a menu where I can handle transporting everything on my own."

"That's hopeless," two voices said in sync.

"W-What is?"

Ai Fa moved her face in close, her anger clearly showing.

"Think about if you happen to succeed, then. You would be wandering around the post town with those coins all on your own, wouldn't you? Do you really think you are capable of protecting yourself from the ruffians around there?"

"Huh...? Well, that may be true, but isn't shopping in the post town considered women's work? If that's alright, then I should be—"

"So you think you're stronger than the women of the forest's edge?"

It felt like the word “Shock!” must’ve just popped up above my head.

Naturally, I wasn’t confident I could carry more than Mia Lea, but I at least wanted to believe I wouldn’t lose out to Reina or Lala Ruu.

“It’s just as Ai Fa says. But with that said, even if you were stronger than the women of the forest’s edge, that still wouldn’t change how dangerous it is.”

“W-What do you mean, Gazraan Rutim?”

“No one from the post town would dare point a blade at a person of the forest’s edge of their own volition. Even if we were discussing a weak child or elder, it was already established several decades ago just what would happen if someone from the city of stone were to harm a person of the forest’s edge.”

Gazraan Rutim’s tone was calm, but what he had said was seriously intense.

Had some sort of huge incident happened back then?

“...But even if you wear the clothing of the forest’s edge, your appearance is still that of someone from the city of stone. If a ruffian in the post town decides your outfit is just for show, then you would be in great danger.”

“Right...”

“On top of that, there’s also the possibility of running into members of the Suun clan in the post town. That matter actually worries me even more.”

Ai Fa gave a big nod in response to Gazraan Rutim’s words.

“I’ve of course thought of that, too... But even if they are part of the Suun clan, would they really openly try to pull something so awful in the middle of the day?”

“...Doddo Suun drew his blade in the post town in the middle of the day, didn’t he? And he did the same at my wedding banquet, too.”

“Yeah, well... That’s true, but... But they wouldn’t be let off if they actually cut someone, right?”

“Of course not. Neither the laws of the city of stone nor the forest’s edge would forgive such an action. And if such a thing were to happen, I would make sure the culprit paid for their crime, even if it cost me my life.”

As he said that, Gazraan Rutim leaned forward, seemingly unconsciously.

“But even if judgment is cast upon the culprit after you’re gone, that wouldn’t make up for it at all. There’s no way trading your safety for the life of some ruffian would be a fair exchange, right?”

The distress in Gazraan Rutim’s eyes and the irritation in Ai Fa’s showed me just how short-sighted I had been.

Apparently, my sense of danger really had been lacking.

“Of course, no matter how much of an outlaw one may be, they aren’t going to do that which can’t be undone in front of others so lightly. If they did, it would clearly lead to their own destruction as well. But try thinking about it... If you commute to the post town each and every day, eventually there will be a moment when nobody’s watching. Would it not be simple for a ruffian from the Suun clan to simply lie in wait alongside the path between the forest’s edge and the post town? And if that were to happen...”

“H-Hold on a second! In that case, wouldn’t it be just as dangerous even if a woman from the Ruu or Rutim clan was accompanying me?”

“No. As they are now, the Suun clan lacks the guts to try that. If they were to harm someone under the Ruu clan, Donda Ruu would surely unleash all the anger he’s been holding back up till now, after all.”

As he said that, there was a more intense light in Gazraan Rutim’s eyes than I had ever seen from him before.

“If that time came, the Suun clan would surely be destroyed. And at the same time, a great deal of blood would be shed by the Ruu clan and those under them... It’s possible this very settlement could even meet its end.”

“...Right.”

“The head of the Suun clan is well aware of Donda Ruu’s personality. That’s why I’m sure he must have actually been annoyed at his sons for meddling. After all, the Suun clan’s head values protecting their current carefree lifestyle above all else.”

“...And they crashed the banquet like that even so?”

“Yes. Because they’re big enough fools to even neglect their clan head’s orders.”

That was the first time I had ever heard this earnest young man clearly speak ill of anyone.

This really was a morning of firsts.

“But as I see it, even they don’t have the resolve to lead the forest’s edge towards destruction. Ultimately, even Doddo Suun drawing his blade at the banquet was solely a means of intimidating you, Asuta. Like I said before, I think they lack self-control when it comes to the Fa clan, who are not under the Ruu.”

“Yeah...”

“Even so, Ai Fa is capable of protecting you. That’s why I didn’t feel any threat from the Suun clan, but if Ai Fa won’t be acting alongside you... I believe you do indeed have no choice but to make a request of Donda Ruu. If you can hire a woman from the Ruu clan, you will naturally be safe.”

“Right... But will there really not be any danger there? I mean, I wouldn’t be exposing that Ruu woman to danger in the process, would I?”

“You wouldn’t be. I fear such an incident leading to the destruction of our forest’s edge more than anyone, I swear that on my life.”

There wasn’t so much as a hint of hesitation in Gazraan Rutim’s gaze.

An oaf like me was one thing, but surely the Suun clan couldn’t trip up someone as mature as this. His gaze was just so firm that I couldn’t help but believe that.

That was enough for me to shore up my resolve, but Ai Fa’s gaze was still burning with frustration by my side.

“Asuta, why are you so indifferent when it comes to protecting yourself? There’s no way I would ever let someone as weak as you head to the post town on your own, right?”

“Please don’t stress that point so hard. I’m already painfully aware of how weak I am...”

“I can’t help it. A hunter has their own job, and so does the chef who mans

the stove. And the Ruu, Rutim, and Fa clans all have their own roles, too. And I believe that even if we aren't all under the same clan, we should support each other's faults so that we can hope to all live better lives."

With that, Gazraan Rutim smiled for the first time in a while.

"And Ai Fa, is it not the custom of the Fa clan to not rely on others and instead take everything on yourselves? You and Asuta seem quite alike to me, in the way that you push onward towards your goal without thinking of your own safety."

Gazraan Rutim really was quite the man.

As for why I couldn't help but think that... Hearing that, Ai Fa was pouting and looking incredibly displeased.

I figured this was probably the first time Ai Fa had shown a face like that to anyone but me.

And as I admired Gazraan Rutim's greatness... at the same time, for some reason I also felt really jealous (or something like that).

I couldn't help but sigh as I pondered just how petty I was.

2

We headed towards the Ruu settlement, aiming for a time before the sun hit its peak, when Donda Ruu would be awake. We were in a group of four including the newlyweds, and were carrying our new pot.

Ama Min Rutim had asked to come along with us because she said she wanted to see Kota Ruu.

"Didn't you come to the Ruu settlement just yesterday, though?"

"That was to study cooking. I didn't get a chance to see Kota Ruu."

"After this, don't you having cooking lessons today, too?"

"That's right. If the other women all come for them and I don't, then I'll end up the worst cook among all the Rutim women. Or would you be just fine with that, Gazraan?"

“But...”

“And besides, if I don’t go with you now, then I won’t even see your face till dinner. If you don’t mind that either, though, then I can head right on back to the Rutim house.”

“I’m not especially telling you to head back or anything.”

That sort of newlywed talk went on for 30 minutes as we walked.

All I could think was, *Thanks for all that.*

At any rate, after that we arrived at the Ruu settlement.

It had only been three days since the banquet, but somehow it felt like it had been quite a while longer.

The women of the branch families were busy with all sorts of work, but when they noticed us, they all waved and bowed. I mean, I had spent six days here, so the place sort of felt like a second home to me.

“Oh, my, what’re all of you doing here?! And you’re carrying a pot, too! You know the banquet ended a while ago, don’t you?” Mia Lea Ruu greeted us in front of the main Ruu house.

She looked surprised, or perhaps I should say taken off-guard, but afterwards she broke out in a joyful grin. That smile somehow felt really nostalgic to me.

“We came to discuss something. Is Donda Ruu up?”

“Yeah. He’s chewing on dried meat in the main hall. Jiza and Ludo should be with him, too... Well then, allow me to take charge of your steel. Do you mind just leaving your pot there?”

“Right.”

Ai Fa and Gazraan Rutim handed over their blades, and I passed my knife to Mia Lea Ruu.

“Now then, welcome to the Ruu house! Clan head, you’ve got visitors!”

We stepped through the door and found Donda Ruu and his sons there in the middle of the hall.

“Huh? Oh, it’s Asuta! What are you doing here?!” Ludo Ruu asked, hopping to

his feet when he noticed us.

Meanwhile, the clan head and his heir also slowly turned our way. They... didn't look to be in an especially good mood.

"What's this, another gathering of good-for-nothings? This smells like nothing but trouble to me," Donda Ruu said, a surly look on his face that called to mind a wild beast.

Gazraan Rutim, meanwhile, gave a single bow.

"My apologies. Could we have just a bit of your time, Ruu clan head Donda Ruu?"

"Hmph..." Donda Ruu grumbled, seating himself to be at the head of the group.

Jiza and Ludo Ruu also sat down so that they were facing us.

"Mia Lea Ruu, I came to visit Sati Lea and Kota Ruu. Are they around?"

"They're in their room. Yes, let's leave this bothersome talk to the men."

After laying our blades down next to the clan head, Mia Lea Ruu led Ama Min Rutim down the right hallway and disappeared.

"It's almost time to head into the forest, so please allow me to go ahead and explain... The truth is, the Fa clan made a request of the Rutim for aid on a job, but we were unable to help out, so we've come to ask your Ruu clan."

"A job...?"

"That's right. Asuta, could you explain?"

"Right. The thing is, I was thinking of opening up a shop in the post town."

"Huh?!" Ludo Ruu loudly questioned. "What do you mean?! Hey, Asuta! Are you planning on leaving the forest's edge?!"

"No, the idea is ultimately to open a booth for selling giba meat dishes as a member of the forest's edge... It may sound completely absurd, but that's the plan. And I'd like to have a woman helping me out with the work, so... We came to ask if you had anyone we could borrow."

Donda Ruu looked displeased to start with, so I didn't spy much of a change.

Even if that wasn't the case for Jiza Ruu, I just plain couldn't read his expression.

As for Ludo Ruu... he cradled his stomach and broke out laughing.

"What the heck is that? You're saying you're gonna have *townsfolk* eat giba? Those guys who call us 'giba eaters'? You're funny, man! Seriously, how'd you come up with such a crazy idea?"

"It'd take way too long to explain... What do you say, Donda Ruu?"

"...Are you the one who thought up this idea?" Donda Ruu asked, suddenly cutting to the core of the matter.

I naturally sat up straight.

"I'm not the one who came up with it. The one to recommend it was Kamyua Yoshu, that man from the city of stone."

"I figured it was something like that. So, that aloof man appeared at the Fa house just as he declared, did he?"

"Yes. However, I'm by no means trying to conspire with him. I don't know what he was thinking when he raised the idea, but after talking it out, I figured it sounded reasonable and decided I wanted to take on the challenge."

Donda Ruu didn't have as furious of a reaction as I had expected. In fact, if I had to say, I felt more of a restless air about Jiza Ruu as he sat there silently.

"I served him my cooking at the Fa house, you see. And then he said that it'd be a waste not to sell such delicious meat. Plus, if giba meat could be exchanged for coins, it would bring a whole lot more prosperity to the forest's edge. So I would need to open a stall in order to teach the townsfolk how delicious giba meat really is, right? Then, we visited the post town and investigated whether or not this crazy idea really was possible after all. One thing led to another, and so here we are."

And then, I earnestly told of what I had thought and felt on that second day, just as I'd done with Gazraan Rutim.

About how it seemed like we could do it without earning all that much opposition from the townsfolk.

How it seemed possible I could sell giba cooking if I did it well.

And about how we couldn't tell what Kamyua Yoshu was really thinking, but that he appeared to hold an attachment or even fixation towards the people of the forest's edge deep down, and that he didn't seem to be trying to trick us.

"What a hard to understand old-timer... But still, it's true that your cooking is crazy tasty! I'd love to see the faces of those townsfolk as they eat giba meat, too!"

"Shut up, Ludo," Donda Ruu scolded, sounding displeased.

Well, he may have sounded that way, but his expression remained perfectly calm.

I was starting to think this may work out, when Jiza Ruu called out, "Asuta," in a low voice. "It's only natural for you to act as a merchant in town. No matter how I look at you, that's where you belong... And yet, wouldn't it be far simpler if you just went ahead and lived in that place instead?"

"Right. That may be how things seem to you, Jiza Ruu, but as I told you before, I like it here at the forest's edge. If you told me I had to give up on either living here or opening a shop in the post town, I'd obviously give up on the shop in a heartbeat."

I heard a "Hehe," and turned to look where it came from, only to find Ludo Ruu staring off into the distance and laughing. He looked downright giddy, somehow.

"It doesn't seem like anything but a farce to me..." Donda Ruu grumbled. "I can't imagine folks from the city of stone happily chowing down on giba, or something as insane as being able to sell giba meat for coins ever coming to pass."

"Yeah, I don't know what kind of results I'll get, either. But even so, I want to take on this challenge."

I leaned forwards just a bit so that I was staring right into Donda Ruu's daunting face.

"However, Ai Fa and I can't take it on alone. I'd be short on hands just for

running the shop itself, and I'd also have to deal with the danger of coming and going to the post town. Considering I have no idea when I might run across someone from the Suun clan, I thought it best to make this request of the Ruu clan... That's the basis of our request, so won't you please consider it?"

"Hmph..."

"I won't go so far as to ask you to trust I'll be successful. This much should be obvious, but I'll pay up properly regardless of how things turn out. After discussing the matter with Gazraan Rutim, I decided I would pay six red coins per day, or the equivalent of both a horn and tusk from a large giba put together."

I had been told that it took two women half a day to peel a pelt. For that, they would get the equivalent of two horns and tusks, or between eight and twelve red coins.

Kamyua Yoshu had said roughly 10 red coins, but after checking with Ai Fa and the others, I found out that the value really did change based on size.

And so, I had arrived at that number on the assumption that I would be borrowing one woman's help for around half of the day.

"However, there's discord between the Fa and Suun clans, so please keep that fact firmly in mind. Gazraan Rutim said that just having someone from the Ruu clan at my side would be enough to prevent any wrongdoing from them, but you never know what scum like Doddo Suun may do under the influence of alcohol."

"We don't need you to tell us that. Don't go underestimating the women of the Ruu clan, you brat."

"Clan head..." Jiza Ruu spoke up.

Donda Ruu held up a hand, commanding him to stop.

"A horn and tusk worth for loaning you a woman for half a day, huh? That's not such a bad deal. And we Ruu do have an excess of women at the moment..."

"Right."

“I’ve got one condition, though.”

“A condition...?”

“If it turns out you’re plotting something with that blond aloof fellow, then I’ll be taking that right arm of yours.”

A chill ran down my spine.

And even though I didn’t look her way, I could sense bloodlust from Ai Fa for a second there.

“If you accept, then I’ll loan you a woman.”

“...I’m not personally plotting anything. However, I honestly have no idea if Kamyua Yoshu is.”

“If he’s up to something, then I’ll just take his head. Then if you were his accomplice, that’s when I’ll take your arm.”

A heavy silence hung in the air.

I audibly gulped down my saliva.

“I’ll swear on whatever you want that my thoughts and feelings on the matter don’t extend beyond what I already told you, personally. But... on the off chance that Kamyua Yoshu is plotting something, it’s possible that I may not be able to prove my own innocence clearly when that comes to light.”

“I’m not expecting all that. If you get tricked by him too, then I’ll just laugh at you for being a foolish kid... alongside Gazraan Rutim, as well as the Fa clan head.”

“Right,” Gazraan Rutim calmly responded, while Ai Fa just silently glared at Donda Ruu.

Sure enough, I could see a deep anger burning in her eyes.

“Do you two trust this brat’s words?”

“Of course. If I didn’t, I wouldn’t be here in this place.”

“What about you, head of the Fa clan?”

“...My response goes without saying. What sort of clan head couldn’t even

believe in the people under her?”

Even her voice was quaking with anger.

Donda Ruu, on the other hand, looked calm and composed.

“In that case, we’ll just say if these two keep on believing in your innocence until the bitter end, that’ll be good enough. And if the time comes when both of them decide you’re a traitor, that’s when I’ll go ahead and take your right arm.”

“If that’ll satisfy you, then I’m willing to make that promise,” I replied, wiping the sweat from my brow. “I promise you that I will never betray the people of the forest’s edge.”

“You swear your right arm on it?”

“I do.”

In that instant, Ai Fa called out, “Hold on,” in a pointed voice. “This shouldn’t be down to Asuta personally, but the whole Fa clan. If such an unthinkable thing were to happen, the fault would lie with the clan head, yes?”

Ai Fa’s eyes had finally started blazing with the look of a wildcat again, while Donda Ruu just silently stared back at her.

“If such a shameful thing were to occur, you should take my right arm, not Asuta’s.”

“Hey, Ai Fa—”

“I have no use for your arm, head of the Fa clan,” Donda Ruu stated, cutting my words off with a serious tone of voice. “There’s no way that someone like you would ever plot something alongside a man from the city of stone. That brat was born in another country, though. What I want to know is his intentions and determination.”

“But...”

“You’ve already given your answer, haven’t you? All I’m asking is if this child is trying to deceive us here and now. If he’s not, then there’s no need for the brat and his arm to be separated.”

The light in Donda Ruu’s eyes grew just a bit stronger as he stared at Ai Fa’s

angry face.

“Are you trying to trample all over the kid’s resolve? Or could it be that deep down, you doubt his intentions...?”

Ai Fa rose halfway to her feet, but I hurriedly grabbed her arm.

“Calm down, Ai Fa. I’m not betraying you all, so nothing’s going to happen.”

This was probably a necessary step. After all, the Ruu clan head had the future of the forest’s edge on his shoulders, so he probably couldn’t go trusting me so lightly.

And yet, Donda Ruu had entrusted things to Ai Fa’s and Gazraan Rutim’s judgment.

Even if he couldn’t trust me personally, if his brethren from the forest’s edge could... It was a decision that felt earnest and even pleasant to me.

However... It sure was a bad habit he had, voicing the idea using such harsh words.

Still, I was satisfied.

Ai Fa silently stared at my face for a bit, then before long she sat herself back down. She cast her eyes still swirling with anger downwards and bit firmly on her lip.

“...The agreement has been made,” Donda Ruu muttered in a low voice. “Well then, who should I be loaning you...?”

“Ah, the work will involve carrying ingredients and my pot, as well as helping to man the store. So the work would need someone with enough strength to walk a mountain path while carrying heavy luggage.”

“Hmm...”

“I don’t mind if they’re from the main or branch houses. I leave it up to you to pick out who will do it.”

As I said that, I could feel dark clouds starting to build up inside.

I hadn’t met Reina or Vina Ruu even once since the night of the banquet.

Vina Ruu wanted me to take her somewhere far, far away.

Reina Ruu, meanwhile, wanted me to leave the Fa house and become a member of the Ruu.

Unfortunately, I wasn't able to grant either of their wishes.

Still, I didn't want to keep avoiding them forever, and I wanted to try rebuilding a peaceful relationship with them. I just had no clue as to how I'd bring that about.

Just who would he choose?

I felt my heartbeat rising as I waited, until Donda Ruu finally muttered, "Vina, then."

3

And so, after all those twists and turns, I found myself standing in the post town for the third time.

This was after I had my discussion with Donda Ruu in the main Ruu house.

Yesterday morning we left the Fa house and visited the Rutim, went to the post town, returned to the Rutim house and spent the night there, visited the Ruu house, and then went back to the post town again. It really had been a hectic two days.

Anyway, this was my second day in a row coming to the post town.

I found that little by little, I was starting to grow accustomed to the disorderly layout of the town.

However, it wasn't Ai Fa who was currently standing by my side.

It was now the fourth day since the Rutim wedding. Ai Fa naturally couldn't keep shirking her hunting duties any longer, so she returned to the Fa house on her own with the pot.

In exchange, I had Vina and Ludo Ruu here with me instead.

We really did make for a strange trio.

"Hehe! It's been a while since I've been to town! It sure is just as suffocating as always!" Ludo Ruu merrily proclaimed.

“I love the post town. It’s just, it’s tough to relax when everyone’s staring at me...” Vina Ruu said, sounding like she was in a pretty good mood, too.

Even now, I could still clearly recall the sight of her in Shin Ruu’s kitchen begging me with tears in her eyes to just not get together with Reina Ruu. But now as she was walking down the stone highway alongside her brother, she had an even brighter, more relaxed smile on her face than usual.

Meanwhile, I was feeling a bit exhausted.

In order to bring the plan in my head to fruition I needed to visit the post town, so Donda Ruu ended up loaning me these two to take Ai Fa’s place, a favor I was sincerely grateful for. However, Donda Ruu had added the condition that I should have Ludo Ruu meet with Kamyua Yoshu.

It must have been a measure to feel out the unknown presence known as Kamyua Yoshu at least a little.

Anyway, the question of whether or not this group could meet with Kamyua Yoshu without causing some sort of incident was a worry that was weighing heavily on me at the moment.

“B-But Ludo Ruu has his duty as a hunter, right?” I had tried asking, but apparently the Ruu clan had called off heading into the forest for the day.

The reason why was simple: There were too many giba about.

There were so many that they had captured over two day’s worth just yesterday, and on top of that, several men from the branch families as well as Darmu Ruu had gotten injured.

Now that they had lost Ryada Ruu, they couldn’t exactly keep pushing themselves overly hard and risk losing any other hunters. And so, they decided to take a day off, which was apparently when we came to visit.

It was an urgent situation that impacted more than just the Rutim.

I was worried about Ai Fa’s safety in continuing to head out into the forest, but naturally she just gallantly replied, “It’s nothing to worry about. Actually, it may be a sign that the giba have been steadily moving south. The houses surrounding ours are all small and can’t hunt down all the giba, so perhaps the

giba who have eaten all the food in their area have started moving on down.”

“I see...”

“And if they keep on moving south, eventually they’ll start ransacking fields. They may cause a lot more damage than usual this time around.”

Ai Fa’s voice was matter of fact, but sure enough the flames of anger were burning away in her blue eyes.

“Even so, all I can do is hunt the giba where my blade can reach, carrying out my own work... So Asuta, you carry out your work, too.”

“Got it.”

With that, Ai Fa and I headed our separate ways.

And so, I ended up here in the post town with the eldest daughter and youngest son of the main Ruu house...

“Ah, look, it’s a totos! Its face looks just as ridiculous as always! Hey, what do you think it tastes like, Asuta?”

“U-Um, Ludo Ruu, could you be a little quieter—”

“It’s like a dream, being able to work with you for 10 whole days... Thank you for this wonderful job, Asuta.”

“I-I mean, it’s still a job, y’know? So work hard, okay? And hey, make sure you keep your private and professional lives properly separated!”

We had only just arrived in the post town, but I was already in the midst of this whole commotion.

The number of gazes on us now was on a whole other level compared to normal, too.

By the way, Ludo Ruu was of course in his hunter’s ensemble, complete with fur cloak, but Vina Ruu was a little different today. She had a slightly transparent veil on her head, something like a shawl around her shoulders, and a single cloth with whirling patterns on it wrapped around her waist and extending on down to her ankles.

“It’s proper manners for women. Can’t go exposing skin to folks who aren’t

our brethren, after all...”

That idea was all well and good, but unfortunately such thin fabric had no hope of concealing the sublime contours of Vina Ruu’s body.

On top of that, the way that you could see her cleavage through the upper portion of her outfit, or her feminine legs through the slits in the cloth, only made her seem more sensual than if they were all merely exposed. Well... thanks to that, she was currently gathering more gazes from overwhelmed men than we were getting looks of fear and contempt.

“Wonder if we’ll run into those fools from the Suun clan? If one of them goes and draws a blade, I’ll break both their arms!”

“Hey, cut it out! I’m begging you, don’t cause a commotion, Ludo Ruu!”

“Huh? Do I look like a big enough fool to go starting something on my own?”

He may not have looked like a big fool, but he sure did look to be overflowing with the stuff it took to kick something off.

Ludo Ruu was attracting a lot of attention with his loud voice and actions, but even so, Vina Ruu wasn’t losing out either.

But... the emotions pointed towards Ludo Ruu were a bit different.

Ludo Ruu was like the norm when it came to the forest’s edge. Personally, I didn’t have even a hint of a negative impression about him, like finding him overly noisy or dangerous, instead seeing him as being energetic and carefree.

Perhaps this town full of people and buildings was just too cramped for him, though.

I’m sure this boy was the type to need some space to stretch his limbs.

“Ah, it’s someone from Sym! They sure are dark-skinned! Is he a magic user too?”

That said...! At least don’t go pointing and yelling at people you don’t know!

“L-Let’s get going! At any rate, the first thing we’ve gotta do is meet with Kamyua!”

We hurried along towards The Kimyuus’s Tail, with me practically dragging

the two of them.

“Geez... We stood out way too much because you caused a fuss, didn’t we, Ludo...?”

“What’re you saying?! It’s because you’re swaying around that huge butt of yours, Vina!”

“Cut it out, Asuta’s listening...”

Now that I thought about it, this was actually the first time I’d really seen these two have a conversation. That wasn’t enough to calm me down, but still, I wouldn’t mind getting my fill of seeing them interact at the forest’s edge.

“Welco— Oh, it’s you again,” the owner of The Kimyuus’s Tail, Milano Mas, greeted us, the look on his face growing sour again.

“Ooh, so this is an inn?” Ludo Ruu said while looking around nervously with eyes full of curiosity.

“Um, is Kamyua Yoshu here?” I questioned.

“Not today. I don’t know if he’s got work or is just playing around, but he’s been out since this morning.”

Is that so?

I felt relieved, but on the other hand, it’d be a problem if I couldn’t carry out my agreement with Donda Ruu.

As I was pondering that predicament, suddenly young Leito popped out of the back of the dining hall, where we had been yesterday.

“Asuta, welcome back! Who are these people...?”

“Vina and Ludo Ruu, from the forest edge’s Ruu clan.”

“Oh, from the Ruu clan?” Leito repeated with a smile.

It seemed he had already heard the name from Kamyua.

“...Who’re you?” Ludo Ruu questioned, his eyes narrowing a bit.

“I’m Kamyua’s apprentice, Leito. I’m pleased to make your acquaintance.”

“Apprentice? What sort of apprentice?”

“As a bodyguard, of course.”

I still didn’t know the full extent of that job, but from what I understood it involved making sure travelers were safe, so it definitely included fighting.

“Kamyua is out setting things up for next month. He left early in the morning, so I can’t imagine he would be out too terribly late.”

“I see. In that case, we’ll come again once we’ve done our shopping,” I replied, then I turned to face Milano Mas. I had business with this old-timer today, after all. “Um, I heard from Kamyua that this shop managed spaces and rented out stalls, but would you rent one out to someone like me?”

“Huh?” Milano Mas questioned as he turned to face me. “I’ll rent them out to anybody, provided they pay up. But just what are you even planning on selling?”

“Ah, the truth is, a bit of giba meat cooking.”

Instantly, the old-timer let out a displeased sounding snort.

“It’s up to you what you sell, but you’d better not go getting some strange stench all over the stall. If you do, you’ll have to buy it outright. Are you okay with that?”

“I can’t go so far as to say my cooking won’t make any smell at all since it does use meat, but are such things not allowed?”

“There’s no problem when it comes to kimyuus or karon. But if that giba stink seeps into it, it won’t be usable afterwards, right?”

He threw out another new noun for me there. Just what sort of animal is a karon, I wonder...?

“Man, you sure do go on and on, old-timer. You don’t even know how tasty giba meat is, but you’re still prattling on? If you’ve got some sort of problem, then you should at least try it first.”

The man’s thick eyebrows raised when he heard Ludo Ruu’s words.

“In that case, have you eaten karon or kimyuus? I’m sure you’re just grateful for stinky giba meat because you haven’t, right? If you don’t want me prattling on, then don’t go bringing stuff like that into town!”

Ludo Ruu's expression still looked composed, but I still felt like I probably needed to chime in.

"Um, I know that people's tastes vary, but there's no point in having an argument over foods that the other side hasn't tasted, right? And I've tried kimyuus meat multiple times now, but I don't think giba meat falls short of it, personally."

"You come from a town to start with, don't you...?"

"Yes. I wasn't born here in Genos, though."

"I can tell that just by looking at your pale face. So you say that giba meat's tasty, even so?"

"If I didn't, I would never think of opening a shop and selling it, right? I ate all sorts of different meats back where I came from, too, but giba meat would still compete for first or second on my list."

"Ridiculous... Did you eat mundt or giiz meat before eating giba or something?"

It seemed like this really was going to be rough going.

But as I thought that, Leito interjected, "Um, Kamyua gave me some dried giba meat. I ate that yesterday, and it was different than karon, but I still thought it tasted good."

Naturally, that dried meat had been properly bloodlet beforehand, so I was glad to hear he liked it.

The old-timer, meanwhile, was furrowing his brow and looking doubtful. Before long, though, he shook his head and looked like he had given up.

"...Anyway, as long as you don't get any strange smell all over it, then this is just business. I'll loan out as many stalls as you want. With the fees for the stall and the space combined, it works out to two white coins in total."

"And with that I can do business for ten days, right? By the way, about how big will the stall be?"

"If you go out and look, you should see plenty of stalls that I loaned out. This place's name is written on their signs."

“Got it. Well then, I’ll come talk to you again in the near future.”

It was best that I just went ahead and retreated already.

“I’ll see you again when Kamyua’s back,” young Leito called out, and then I took my two companions and left The Kimyuus’s Tail.

“That was amazing... You really are from town, Asuta...” Vina Ruu said, nonchalantly drawing in close to me. “I don’t think I could handle someone like that at all... I’m not Ludo, but I could definitely see myself slapping him without even thinking...”

“Um, you know you’re set to help me run the shop, right?”

“Right... If it’s for your sake, I’ll put up with any shame.”

Shame, she said.

Would I really be able to work together with her for ten whole days? I couldn’t help but be concerned about the future...

“Well anyway, for the time being, let’s take care of the shopping. Hmm...? What is it, Ludo Ruu?”

“No, it’s just... That kid from before...”

“Ah, you mean Leito? He’s a bit of an oddball too, isn’t he?”

“More than him being an oddball... I feel bad for him.”

“Feel bad for him? Why?”

I could see feeling sorry for him because he’s an apprentice to such a weirdo, but Ludo Ruu hadn’t even met Kamyua yet, so he shouldn’t know anything about that.

“Well, whatever. It’s got nothing to do with me. Anyway, let’s get going. I wanna look at the blades and stuff, it’s been a while.”

And with that, our incident-filled journey recommenced.

It really was a strange feeling, strolling through the post town alongside these two.

“First up, we’ve got to exchange our horns and tusks for coins. Are you going

to finally use up those blessings you extorted out of us, Asuta?”

“Extorted?! Yeah, I had intended to use them, but these actually aren’t the ones that I got from you all.”

There was a necklace made with ten horns and tusks dangling from my neck. However, they weren’t the ones I had received at the Ruu settlement, but rather ones that Ai Fa had given me.

I had been planning on paying for the initial supplies for the shop using horns and tusks I had earned, but when I said that Ai Fa looked incredibly displeased.

“You intend to take everything on yourself, don’t you?”

“That’s not my intention! I mean, these ten alone won’t even cover the initial expenses, right? But even so, I don’t want to have all the cost fall on you this time around.”

“...I’m the clan head.”

“I get that, but... Put another way, if I don’t pay even a single coin of the expenses, I’ll feel like I’ve thrown the whole burden onto you.”

With that, Ai Fa started thinking. Before long, she pulled a necklace out of her cloak and adjusted it so that it had ten horns and tusks, then held it out to me.

“Give your necklace to me in exchange for this one.”

“Right... So, what are you thinking?”

“If your business in the post town ends in failure and we lose coins rather than gaining them, then I’ll buy aria and poitan with these horns and tusks I’m holding onto for you.”

As she talked, Ai Fa carefully stored away the necklace she had received from me.

“But if your business is a success and you gain a great many coins, then this necklace will end up back around your neck.”

“Ah... Yeah, that sounds fine to me. But you—”

“You already taught me last night just how frustrating it is, feeling like you’re leaving everything up to someone else,” Ai Fa said with a scary look on her face.

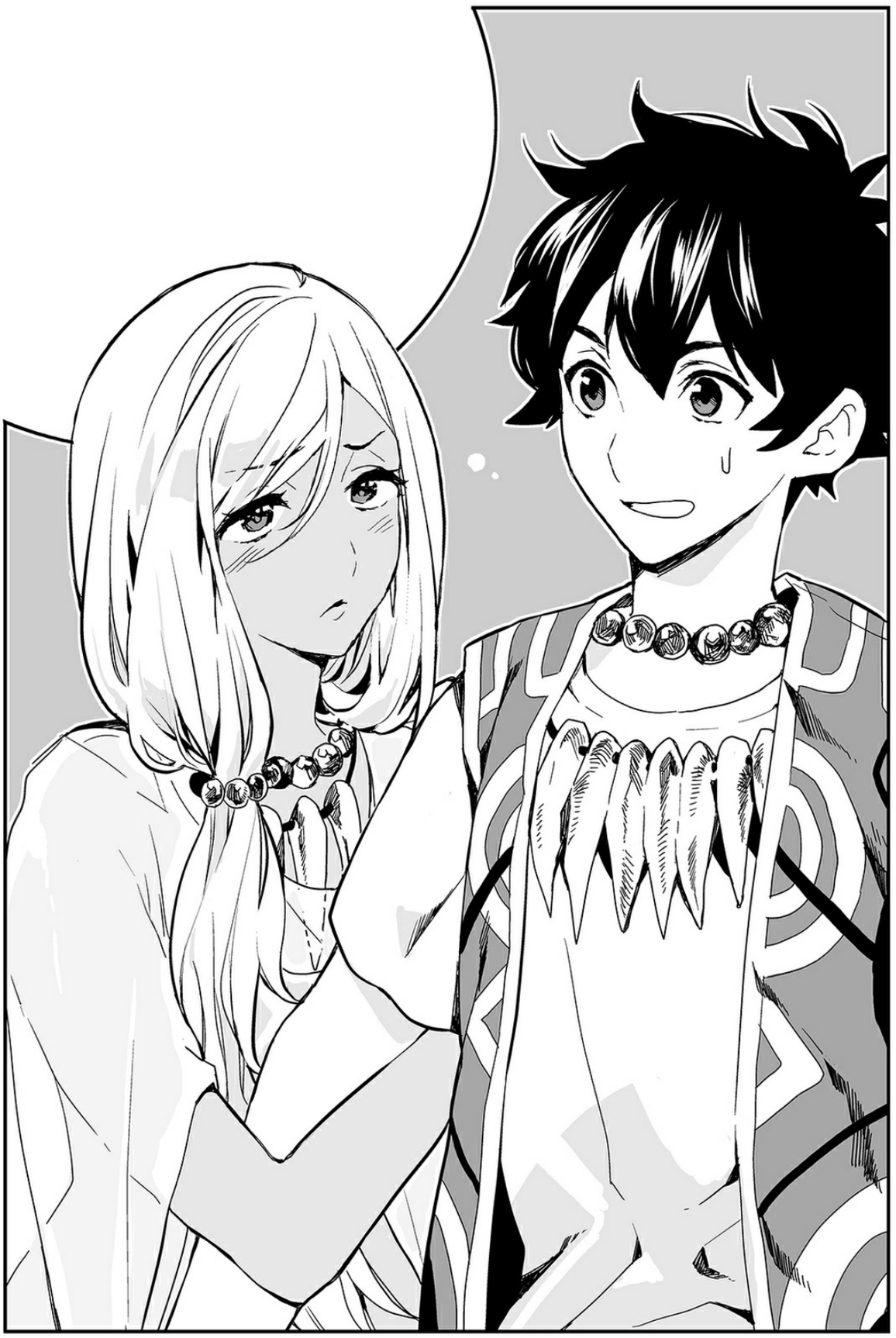
“In that case, you shouldn’t have any issue with this... You didn’t truly want to exchange the blessings you received from Granny Jiba and the others for coins, right?”

“Y-Yeah. I’m surprised you knew, though. I don’t remember discussing that with you.”

“I can tell that much just by looking. I have absolutely no clue as to why you think that way, but... Well, as long as you’re not causing anyone trouble, there’s no need for you to force yourself to suppress your feelings like that,” Ai Fa said, with a somewhat gentle look in her eyes at the end there.

“What are you thinking about...?” I was asked, and suddenly my right arm was wrapped up in warmth. “It couldn’t be that you’re feeling lonely being separated from your beautiful clan head, right...?”

Vina Ruu had wrapped herself all around my right arm as we were walking through the post town.



I tried to pull my arm away in a panic, but she really was a person of the forest's edge, so it didn't budge an inch.

"Hey! Like I said before, you have to keep your private and professional matters—"

"I get all that. But it's not work for today, right...? We just came here together to town because we each had shopping to do..."

Right, which is why Donda Ruu had said I didn't need to worry about paying her for today.

"B-But Ludo Ruu is right here, right? Is it really okay to be doing stuff like that?" I whispered to her, only for her to shoot me her signature sensual sidelong glance.

"Ludo wants you to marry into our family anyway, so it's totally fine. Hey, what did you think of my dance?"

"Dance?"

"For the banquet. I danced my hardest, just for you..."

Huh? What was she talking about?

I don't recall a lively event like that at the banquet.

"After all the meat was gone, the unmarried women danced, right? Doing that draws a whole lot of attention from the men, so normally I wouldn't ever do it, but I gave it my all for you, Asuta..."

After all the meat was gone...

That must have been around when Ai Fa and I were talking to Gazraan Rutim. After receiving my payment, I fell asleep while talking, then Ai Fa carried me back to the vacant house.

So does that mean the dancing all happened after I fell asleep, then?

"It couldn't be... Did you not see...?"

"Huh? Ah, no, you see, I was just so busy that day, so I fell asleep right after I finished working."

Vina Ruu stared blankly at me for a moment before casting her gaze downwards, then she squeezed my right arm tight.

She was insanely strong, as if she was a giant madarama snake or something.

And yet, though it was impossible to explain, I was also feeling a very soft sensation.

“That’s just awful... You’re just terrible, aren’t you, Asuta?”

“Owww! That hurts! You’re going to break it! Hey, Vina Ruu!”

It hurt like hell, and I was also touching places I really shouldn’t be.

Considering we were standing in the street in the middle of the day, this was bad.

“You better not tell Reina that, no matter what...”

“Owww! Huh...? What’s that about Reina Ruu?”

“Her dance was like a blazing inferno... She’s such a mature girl, so I never imagined she had such intense emotions hidden inside. She must have had her heart stolen by you, too...”

Vina Ruu smoothly slipped away from my arm, then gave a little sigh.

“I figured if you weren’t going to take me far away, I could at least just take you as a husband, but that’s no good either... If I did that, then I’m certain that Reina would hate me...”

Then, she shot me a pained sidelong glance.

“What a sinful man you are...”

I don’t recall committing any sins.

Still, it certainly was true that Reina Ruu had special feelings towards me.

Now that I failed to respond to those feelings in her wanting me to join the Ruu clan, just how would I interact with her, and what sort of relationship would we have?

I lifted my gaze up towards the clear blue sky, but naturally, I found no answers written there.

4

While I may have been cradling a question I couldn't find an answer to in my heart, I still had work to do.

And that meant first off, exchanging the horns and tusks for coins via that old person with a smile like a toad.

"What, is that all, Asuta?"

"Yeah. We just bought aria and poitan, after all. Thanks to that, this should be plenty for now."

I currently held six red coins in my hand. I had chosen the biggest horn and tusk I had available and offered up those, earning me my war funds for the day.

"You guys sure are amazing, though. Guess that's what you should expect from a family of 12."

The pair from the Ruu clan had exchanged five giba's worth of horns and tusks for coins. They received six coins for that too, only theirs were white coins, which were worth ten times as much as red.

"Hehehe... This will only buy us three days' worth of food, though."

"Huh? Then, you come to town once every three days?"

The answer was yes. Or sometimes when they had the people to spare, three of them would come and buy five days' worth.

Since the Fa house had just the two of us we could buy food for up to 20 days, but they had six times as many people as us, so that was their limit.

From doing the math, three days worth for them would be 108 aria and 72 poitan.

Meanwhile, 20 days for the Fa house was 120 aria and 80 poitan, so it wasn't all that different.

"We've got to get the fruit wine dad drinks, too. I don't get how that stuff's supposed to be tasty at all."

"That leaves five reds... Which other vegetable should we buy today?"

I had thought the same when I did so with Ai Fa, but it really did feel like an incredibly fresh experience, discussing shopping about town with the people of the forest's edge.

And honestly, I couldn't help but smile seeing the eldest daughter and youngest son, their heights not all that different, happily chatting away. The pair sure did smile an awful lot, which only made them feel more and more out of place considering the looks of fear and contempt we were getting from the folks about the post town.

Ludo Ruu doesn't give off the same sort of violent aura as the other men unless he turns it on, and looking at his face it's actually pretty cute, so I can't imagine finding him scary at all.

I had been all nervous about Ludo Ruu's actions at first, but somehow, it now seemed stupid worrying about stuff like that.

Ai Fa was Ai Fa, and Ludo Ruu was Ludo Ruu. I knew just how wonderful of a person he was, and what other people thought wasn't about to change how I felt.

And so, I decided to stop worrying about people staring.

"Well then, want to go look at vegetables? There's this old-timer with a shop at the northern tip who—"

"Ah! Hold on a second! The weapon shops! They might have something interesting, so let's go check!" Ludo Ruu yelled out, pushing through the crowds towards one stall in particular. Well, actually, it was less like he was pushing, and more like the crowd was pulling back around him.

"Sorry. He's already 15, but he's still such a child... Though I suppose a woman like me who's hit the age of 20 without even marrying doesn't have any room to talk..." Vina Ruu said with a smile. In a way, it actually may have been the most charming expression that I'd seen from her yet.

As I approached the stall, I thought to myself, *If she gets that much happiness from being with her family, then she doesn't need to be so fixated on the outside world...*

Ludo Ruu, meanwhile, was going, "Ooh!" like a child as he grabbed one of the

bladed weapons. “What is this, a hatchet? It looks like it’s meant for killing people or something.”

“Hahaha. Advancing forces need to clear their way through the forest when in war, too. So if they run into the enemy in the middle of that, they can charge right into battle with that, right?” the ivory-skinned old-timer replied, the expression on his face stiffening a bit.

Ludo Ruu had called it a “weapon shop,” but Genos was far removed from the enemy nation of Mahyudra to the north, so the place never saw actual war. And so, what the shop actually sold were hatchets, axes, knives, and other such bladed tools used as part of everyday life.

“Ah, is this a cooking knife?” I asked, only for the old-timer to look a bit troubled. The expression on his face seemed to say, “What’s a pale kid like you doing dressed in the clothing of the forest’s edge?”

“Yeah, for vegetables.”

It was a size smaller and thinner than my old man’s knife, but it still seemed to have a rather nice cutting edge. I’d seen a lot of knives in the Ruu and Rutim kitchens, but seeing them here at the market really was a different, enjoyable sort of experience.

My old man’s knife is already 20 years old. The next time it gets any significant damage, it’ll probably end up unusable. I can use the knife I’m borrowing from Ai Fa for cutting meat, but eventually I’d like one for vegetables, too.

“...That one costs four white coins and five reds,” said the old-timer, speaking with a bit of restraint in his voice.

Hmm. Roughly four giba’s worth, huh?

If the time comes when we’re living prosperous lives or whatever, then I really would like to buy it.

“Thank you. Ludo Ruu, isn’t it about time we got going to check out the vegetables?”

“Huh? Hold on a second,” Ludo Ruu said, and he started stepping away from the stall. And he was still gripping the hatchet with its thick blade in his hand.

“H-Hey, wait!” the old-timer yelled out, but Ludo Ruu still stood dauntingly in the middle of traffic.

“Sorry, but please don’t come near me!” he yelled out loudly, but none of the passersby would approach a man from the forest’s edge to begin with. And so, the people around him looked a bit annoyed, but they all detoured around the hunter.

“That goes for you too, Asuta and Vina, alright?” Ludo Ruu added, then he swung the hatchet down. Next he swung it back upwards, then all around with a *fwoosh, fwoosh.*

He was slashing so fast that I half expected to see scorch marks hanging there in the air.

The owner of the weapon shop had gone pale as a sheet. The passersby, too. Some of them just froze in place, while others went ahead and made a quick about-face.

Despite all the fear and discomfort being directed his way, Ludo Ruu just kept on swinging around the hatchet, then at last loudly proclaimed, “I like it! I feel like I could smash a giba’s skull in one blow with this thing! How much does it cost, old-timer?”

“E-Eight white coins.”

That would be six giba’s worth even using big horns and tusks, huh? That sure was quite a price.

Considering you could get roughly 60 meals worth of aria and poitan for that price, it went to show just how reasonable the prices on those ingredients really were.

“Got it! Asuta, hold onto it so nobody else buys it! I’ll be right back!”

With that, he thrust the hatchet into my hands and then took off running like the wind.

The sea of people stepped back around him like he was Moses parting the Red Sea.

“He really is a child...” Vina Ruu said with a smile, but I couldn’t imagine a

child ever managing to swing around a hunk of steel like that.

It was one centimeter thick, 10 centimeters wide, and the length of the blade itself looked to be around 30 centimeters, making for a meaty hatchet with a slightly curved cutting edge. It felt like it weighed enough that it'd have to be measured in kilos. Yeah, I could certainly see this thing shattering a giba's skull.

Why is he able to swing around something like this even though he's littler than me...?

The physical strength of a hunter sure was frightening.

At any rate, Ludo Ruu came running back and bought the hatchet, so it was dangling from his hip when we finally stood before a stall where vegetables were sold. Naturally, it was old man Dora's shop.

"A-Ah, welcome!"

The old-timer's smile twitched when he saw I was with a hunter of the forest's edge other than Ai Fa, but he energetically greeted us even so.

"Ah, yes, so it really was this place. There aren't many shops that sell aria and poitan in bags, so I thought that may be the case..."

Apparently this wasn't Vina Ruu's first time here.

"Could we get 100 aria and poitan?"

"Got it. The aria will be two white coins, while the poitan will be two whites and five reds."

"Huh? Isn't that a lot of poitan?" I questioned, whispering into Ludo Ruu's ear.

"That's because dad and Darmu eat a whole lot of them," the boy replied.

Right, Ai Fa had said that three aria and two poitan a day was the bare minimum to live a healthy life, but it seemed the men of the Ruu clan ate enough for three or four people.

"There, 100 each of aria and poitan. Please check them over," Dora said, plopping down the bags, and the siblings began happily checking away.

I decided to carry out my own objective in the meantime.

"Hey Dora, there's a few things I'd like to ask you."

“O-Oh, what is it?”

“This tino, do people eat it raw?”

Tino was a vegetable like a rose made out of lettuce. It was about the same size as a head of that more familiar vegetable, but its taste and texture was a bit closer to cabbage.

“Of course they do. I prefer it cooked, though.”

“I see. Is it normal to heat up this tarapa before eating it, too?”

Tarapa was about the size and shape of a pumpkin, but it was bright red. It was packed in tight on the inside like a pumpkin, too, but it had some strong sourness to it, and when you heated it up and dissolved it, it tasted just like a tomato.

“That’s right. There are folks who eat it raw too, but it’s just too sour unless you cook it with other vegetables, right? I like to heat it up along with aria.”

“Because aria is real sweet, right? If you chop up the aria finely first and then fry them before cooking them, that’ll draw out even more of the sweetness.”

The old-timer’s eyes went wide in surprise.

“Y-You sure are knowledgeable about vegetables, aren’t you?”

“No, not at all. I don’t even know which vegetable you can eat raw. Ah, by the way, are aria eaten raw?”

“Yes, of course.”

“And then, there’s... gigo, huh? Do you sell gigo here?”

“We don’t. My soil’s not suited to growing it. If it’s gigo you want, Granny Mishil has thick, tasty ones that are real popular.”

“Huh? Which shop is that?”

“I-It’s in the central area, between a leatherworker and a cloth seller. A little old lady runs it by herself, so you would know it as soon as you saw it.”

“Got it! Thank you!” I replied, smiling without even thinking.

In response, the old-timer broke out in the gentlest smile I had seen from him

yet.

“Alright, it all adds up. Are you not buying any, Asuta?”

“Ah, right. I’ll take two tino and three tarapa, please.”

“Huh? Three tarapa?”

“Right. I was thinking of using it for the shop I’m opening. Ah, by the way... It’s probably best to eat tarapa the same day as you cook it, right? Also, if you cut a fresh one in half, how long will what’s left over last for?”

“Hmm, if you cook it, then it’ll probably last for two days at the most. And if you cut one and leave it out, the moisture will drain from it, but if you just add water when cooking it, it’ll taste the same.”

“I see. You’ve been a huge help. Thanks a ton.”

Tarapa and tino were both bulky, so the five together were enough to fill up a bag.

By the way, tarapa cost one for a red coin, while that same price got you two tino.

I had two coins left in my war funds.

All that was left was buying gigo and fruit wine, and then we’d be done.

“Hmm, what should we do...? Should we just buy tino again...?”

“Tino is stupidly big! Let’s go with something smaller.”

“Then how about pula...?”

“We don’t need any pula.”

“Then what...? I like tino...”

“Let’s go with chatchi, chatchi! It was crazy tasty in that stew!”

“But you need to heat it for a very long time to get it soft like that, right...?”

Chatchi was a vegetable with a texture a whole lot like a potato.

In their giba stews up till now they had just used a strong flame for a short period of time, so the surface was all goopy while the inside was crunchy, which apparently didn’t make it all that tasty.

“It’s fine. I think it should come out like the stew if you just make your soup by heating it up slowly over a low flame. Also, don’t add it after it starts boiling, but heat it up from the start,” I interjected, causing Ludo Ruu to jostle Vina Ruu’s round shoulder as if bragging about his victory.

“See, that’s what Asuta says! So let’s go with chatchi!”

“Alright, alright. I’m fine just as long as it comes out delicious. Um... so we shouldn’t add it once it’s boiling, but instead put it in before lighting the flame...?”

“Yes.”

“Hehe!” Ludo Ruu chuckled, getting his elder sister in a headlock.

“Oww, that hurts...” Vina Ruu complained, wriggling her body in a sensual manner.

These two got along even better than I had thought.

“Huh? There aren’t any chatchi, though. Do you not sell them here?”

“I-If you want chatchi, try Granny Mishil’s place,” the old-timer replied, looking towards Ludo and Vina Ruu with upturned eyes. “Y-You two are rather different, aren’t you? That’s the first time I’ve seen people of the forest’s edge being particular about vegetables.”

“Hmm? I hate pula! You should sell chatchi instead of that stuff!”

“I-It grows on trees, so it’s hard to raise it from scratch.”

“Hmm. There really are all sorts of vegetables, huh?”

Ludo and Vina Ruu were acting the same as always, but the old-timer’s expression had clearly changed. He looked surprised, perplexed, and... happy?

He had openly displayed quite a bit of fear of the hunters of the forest’s edge, but for some reason, he was now staring intently at Ludo Ruu’s face. Was he really that happy to hear what vegetables a person of the forest’s edge liked and hated?

The words, “When it comes to food, there is no good or bad taste,” had seriously upset me. Maybe this old-timer had been cradling similar feelings for a

long time now.

As those thoughts ran through my head, a girl's voice called out from behind, "Ah! It's Asuta!"

It was Tara. The little girl was holding a kimyuus manju in her hands as she came running on over my way.

When she noticed Vina and Ludo Ruu, though, she suddenly froze in place.

"Huh? What's with the runt?"

"Ah, she's this old-timer's daughter, Tara. I mentioned her before, right?"

"Oh, the kid that you saved, and then she helped you out?"

Ludo Ruu blithely strode over towards the still frozen Tara.

It was a sight that made you feel nervous just to watch, like a nearly grown German shepherd approaching a kitten.

The look of wonder from before had been wiped clean from the poor old-timer's face, and he had gone completely pale.

"You sure are a runt! You're just about as tiny as little Rimee. How old are you?"

"E-Eight..."

"The same as little Rimee, huh? But you're so skinny it makes you look smaller than you should."

Ludo Ruu crouched down, and looked back and forth between the girl's face and the manju.

"Something smells good. Is this thing tasty?"

"...Yes."

"Hmm..."

"D-Do you want a taste?"

Tara had been preciously cradling the manju in both hands, but now she nervously held it out towards Ludo Ruu.

Ludo Ruu, meanwhile, tilted his head a bit.

“Is it alright?”

“I-If it’s just a bite!”

“Ah, got it. Then I’ll take you up on that,” Ludo Ruu replied, then bit into the manju without even using his hands. The way he was going at it, it almost seemed like he was going to bite into Tara’s fingers, too.

Horrified, the old-timer let out a voiceless scream.

Ludo Ruu barely even chewed the manju before swallowing it, then ruffled his yellowish-brown hair, and stood up.

“Hey, it’s not tasty at all.”

“R-Really?”

“Not in the least. Asuta can make way tastier cooking, you know?”

“I-Is that true?” Tara questioned, turning my way with a look on her face that made it seem like she was smiling and crying at the same time.

I gave a single sigh, then stepped closer to her.

“Well, everyone’s sense of taste is different. I don’t know if it’ll meet the taste of everybody from around town, but, actually, I’ll probably be opening a shop around here soon.”

“Really?! You have to let me try some!”

“Well, it’s a shop, so I’ll be selling it... But I’d love to have you and your dad try it and give your impressions.”

“Yeah!”

She really was a cute little girl.

Ai Fa wasn’t around right now, so I could have this warm interaction with her without getting shot a strange look, too.

As that thought was running through my head, though, I turned around and found Vina Ruu standing in front of the stall, staring intently at me and Ludo Ruu.

The female mind truly was a mystery.

“Well then, we’re going to get fruit wine and chatchi. What about you, Asuta?”

“Right. I’ll get fruit wine too, plus some gigo, then I’ll be done.”

“Ah, gigo! We’ve got to buy gigo too, Vina! The baked poitan won’t taste like that without it, right?”

“It’ll be alright. Even after buying ten bottles of fruit wine, we’ll still have five coins left...” Vina Ruu started to reply, just in time for the sudden appearance of the last member of our cast.

“Hey there, Asuta. What an honest pleasure, getting to meet you three days in a row. Have you finally made up your mind?”

It was Kamyua Yoshu. He had approached us with his long cloak dangling down, not making so much as a sound as he slipped through the crowd.

“I heard from Leito and came looking. And sure enough, here you are at Dora’s place.”

“Right. My business here is done, but I’m glad we ran into you, Kamyua.”

I glanced out of the corner of my eye at Ludo Ruu, but the boy had the same look on his face as always. However, he was tapping away rhythmically at the handle to the hatchet dangling from his hip.

Vina Ruu also smoothly stepped closer, stopping diagonally behind her brother.

“Ah, these two are—”

“Vina and Ludo Ruu of the Ruu clan. I heard from Leito. I figured it would be bad if we missed each other, so I left him back at the inn.”

He was wearing the same aloof expression as always. And his purple eyes, like those of both an old man and a child at the same time, happily looked back and forth between the two siblings.

“I believe I’ve likely already met you once at the Ruu settlement, Ludo Ruu, but allow me to properly introduce myself once again. My name is Kamyua Yoshu, and I make a living keeping travelers safe as a bodyguard. I don’t really have a proper home, but well, this post town has been acting as my

headquarters, and I'm a wanderer from the west."

"Huh," Ludo Ruu replied, sounding utterly uninterested. His fingers were still tapping away at the hatchet's handle, though.

"I heard from Milano Mas, too. Sounds like there won't be any problem with you renting a stall."

"Right. Now I just need to finish up the menu, then I think I'll be ready to move forward with opening the shop."

"So you've finally made up your mind, huh? I'm so glad! If it means I get to eat your cooking, then I'll be coming to see you each and every day."

"I'll give it my all effort to prepare a menu worthy of that."

With that, I had finished my business with Kamyua Yoshu.

Noticing that, Ludo Ruu nonchalantly said, "Kamyua Yoshu. I have a message for you from my father, Ruu clan head Donda Ruu. Will you receive it?"

"Of course! Let's hear it!"

"'The forest's edge will wipe away its own disgrace. If you go sticking your nose where it doesn't belong, it'll get bitten off along with the rest of your head.' That's all."

"Understood. I'll control myself," Kamyua Yoshu replied, bowing and generally looking like he was putting on airs.

Ludo Ruu's expression didn't budge, and he just glanced over my way.

"Well then, let's go buy the chatchi and gigo. If we waste too much time dawdling around, the sun will end up setting."

"Right. Well then, Kamyua, sorry since you just went through the effort of finding us, but we still have shopping to take care of, so..."

"Ah, don't worry about it! After all, when you open the shop, I'll be seeing you daily for at least ten days straight. I'll be praying your business is a success, Asuta."

"Thank you."

With that, Kamyua Yoshu slipped away just as smoothly as he had appeared.

Kamyua vaguely felt a bit like a ghost today, somehow.

“That man pisses me off...” Ludo Ruu suddenly threw out there.

“Huh?”

“My blade is for cutting giba. I don’t especially want to use it to cut people, but... Guys who I couldn’t cut even if I wanted to make me angry. Especially when they’re from town.”

“L-Ludo Ruu? You mean...?”

“Me and Darmu would be no match for him. Even Jiza may not be good enough. Dad’s probably the only one who’d have a real chance to take that skinny guy’s head.”

As he said that, Ludo Ruu ruffled his yellowish-brown hair, and then he gave a childish “Tch” with his tongue.

5

Roughly a day later, I finally made it back to the Fa house. It really had been over 24 hours since I’d been there last.

The friendly pair of siblings were standing on either side of me. It was important that Vina Ruu grasped where the house was for our work in the post town, and even more importantly, they were also concerned about what moves the Suun clan may make.

“Hmm, doesn’t look like there are any fools getting drunk in the middle of the day around,” Ludo Ruu said as his piercing gaze glanced over our surroundings. He was carrying the heaviest load of the three of us. “Still, to think you’ve gotta cross that huge ravine to get to the post town from the Fa house. Now I get why you need a hand.”

“Right. If we were traveling from the Ruu house, it wouldn’t be so much of a struggle.”

There were numerous routes to get from the settlement at the forest’s edge to the post town. The shortest path from the Ruu and Rutim houses didn’t have a rope bridge and just took 40-50 minutes, making for a rather agreeable route.

But it took nearly an hour just to get from the Fa house to the Ruu settlement, so I hesitated at the idea of using that route. So in that case, even if it meant carrying luggage over that rope bridge, going that way cut down on the amount of effort needed.

On the way back today, we treated a bag of vegetables as if it was my metal pot to simulate transporting one. As a result, we found that as long as I could work up the courage, the two of us could safely make it over the rope bridge.

It was just that on our initial try today, it took me quite a bit of time to work up that courage and determination. Vina Ruu kept a relaxed, friendly expression on her face the whole time, but I couldn't help but worry that I may have been hurting her respect for me as a shop owner.

Well, I don't know if it was fortunate or not in the end, but no matter how much unbecoming terror I may have displayed, I never spied much of a difference in Vina Ruu's sensual flirtatious glances.

"Well then, I'll see you later. I'm looking forward to when we start working together..."

"Give my regards to Ai Fa, too. And hey, let us enjoy your cooking too now and again instead of only ever feeding it to folks around town, alright?"

With those parting words, the siblings departed.

Ludo Ruu was carrying 70% of the load, but Vina Ruu still had a bag full of 100 aria on her back. Even so, she kept on walking along lightly and easily without even missing a step, unsurprisingly.

It really was just like Ai Fa had said: I shouldn't go around underestimating the strength of the women of the forest's edge. They must have just been built differently, whether it was down to a different quality of their muscles or density to their bones or whatever. After all, it seemed that even a woman of Vina Ruu's height was stronger than I was.

There was no helping that, as we had grown up in completely different circumstances, but I still couldn't help but sigh.

Will my constitution improve at least a little bit too by eating giba each and every day like I have been? I pointlessly pondered while walking towards the Fa

house.

The sun was currently positioned halfway between its peak and sunset. That meant there was still plenty of time left for baking poitan.

I needed to prepare a delicious dinner for Ai Fa, who was out chasing giba in the forest. With that thought in my mind, I readjusted the bag stuffed with tarapa and tino, as well as the giant burdock-esque gigo, which had been cut to a size of around one meter in order to be sold, then opened the door.

When I did so... I saw Ai Fa's cloak hanging from the wall.

"Huh?"

Was she already back this early in the day?

Well, it wasn't all that strange if she took down a giba early on, so she had to be around here somewhere.

"Ai Fa, are you here?" I called out, heading towards the pantry.

I opened the door... and Ai Fa wasn't there.

I went ahead and stored the fruits of my battle today in there, then checked in the storage rooms to either side.

Sure enough, she wasn't there either.

"Hmm?"

The new pot was left there properly, next to the stove.

I couldn't see anything out of the ordinary other than that, though.

No, wait... Looking closely, her cloak was hanging there, but her blades were missing.

Ai Fa would only take her knife off her person when she slept, but she leaned her sword up against the wall alongside her cloak when she returned home.

Just what was going on, here?

She took off her cloak, but she was walking about with her blades. I only ever saw her like that when she was heading to wash stuff in the morning.

Was that where she was, then?

No, but the water jug and pots were still in the room. Plus, she never washed stuff after the morning, anyway.

Getting more and more nervous, I went flying out of the house.

Was she drying out pico leaves in a sunny spot?

No, I didn't smell anything like that in the air.

On the other hand, a suspicious offensive odor was filling my nostrils.

It had a bit of the smell of oxidized metal to it, too... Yeah, it was the smell of blood.

Suddenly, a chill ran down my spine.

Where...?

Where was that smell coming from?

From behind the house.

My knees felt like they were about to start quaking, so I gave them two or three hits, and headed around the house.

It's fine... I shouldn't be thinking such ominous things. Even if the Suun clan were ruffians, even they wouldn't go and do something so stupid when the sun was high in the sky like this.

Something stupid...

No way. I don't ever want to imagine it.

Before I even realized it, my heart was pounding in my chest and my breathing had grown violent.

It was fine.

Nothing crazy had happened. There was no way that it could have.

I questioned myself so much it was growing repetitive as I rounded the corner, stepping out behind the house. And then...

There was a pure, white skinned giba dangling there.

...

“Ah, so you’re back, Asuta?”

Ai Fa was seated with her back against the wall so that she was facing the dangling giba.

I stomped forwards and stopped right in front of Ai Fa, bent down, and grabbed hold of her smooth shoulders.

“Don’t... Don’t startle me like that!”

Ai Fa’s eyes suddenly went wide open.

“Asuta... were you crying?”

“I’m not!”

Suddenly, I headbutted her. Despite her giving an annoyed sounding “Ow,” I kept on grinding my head forwards.

“What? What is it? What has you so out of sorts, Asuta?”

“Shut up! I was so worried I thought I would die... Why are you skinning a giba?! I smelled blood and it had me seriously scared!”

“It’s a hunter’s job to skin a giba, isn’t it?” Ai Fa responded in a pouty voice.

At this close of a distance, I couldn’t see the expression on her face.

“The Ruu and Rutim men carry out such work, so it makes no sense that I cannot do the same. And so, I was practicing on a giba I had hunted. I’ve seen you do it countless times by now, after all.”

“Then... Then at least tell me first... I thought my heart was going to explode...”

“As I said, just what has you so out of sorts?”

“...Your blades were gone and I smelled blood, so I thought something might have happened and some real nasty thoughts started running through my head.”

I gave a deep sigh, our foreheads still pressed up against one another.

“My blades are here. Even without you worrying about me, I’m well aware that you never know when or where those scoundrels may appear. Preparing

for that is only obvious.”

Ai Fa sounded like she was in an incredibly bad mood.

“So, were you picturing the men of the Suun clan chopped to bits? After all, those scum would never get the better of me.”

“I know that, but...”

“...Do you understand how I feel at least a bit now?”

I suddenly pulled my head back, while Ai Fa averted her gaze and pouted her lips.

“My fear in welcoming a powerless man like you into my clan is far beyond that. If you can understand that much, then control your temper at least a little better.”

“...Right.”

“On top of that, why did you not only have such a misdirected worry, but then go so far as to yell at me? Don’t you have any words of gratitude to your clan head for taking on such time-consuming work?”

“No, um... I was wrong.”

“I wasn’t seeking an apology.”

“...Thank you?”

Ai Fa then stood up with a “Hmph.”

Her pout gave way to a frown, and then she haughtily folded her arms.

Could it be... that she had imagined me with sparkles in my eyes, jumping up and down while proclaiming, “What’s this? You’re amazing!”

Ai Fa was currently sulking childishly enough that I figured that had to be it.

I gave one more sigh, worked up my nerve, and then stood up.

Then, I roughly rustled her blonde hair while saying, “Good girl,” only to get a strong blow to the solar plexus.

“I don’t know the fine details of what comes next. What do I do after slitting open the abdomen?” Ai Fa said from above as I struggled with having forgotten

how to breathe.

“Owwww... So you mean you’re intending to dissect it, too?”

“The Ruu men do that too, don’t they?” she replied, making a scary face with wrinkles forming atop her nose. It was the first time in a while I had seen her looking like a wildcat.

“Alright, I get it. Then I’ll teach you, but... If I have you do all that, then the work left for me will dwindle away, won’t it? Do you intend to just keep taking on more and more of the burden?”

“What are you saying? What about the time while you’re at the post town, then? Are you saying you’ll come back to the house and then have time to both prepare the giba and bake the poitan? Because I’ve got no interest in chugging down that plain poitan soup ever again.”

I thought it over again.

In actuality, I had planned to bake the poitan for the shop along with the portion for dinner in the morning. But even so, it generally took me between three to four hours to dissect a giba at best. So whether it would be a little or a lot, that would interfere with me preparing dinner.

Ai Fa really was thinking ahead better than I was. Or more accurately, she had more fully considered what me opening a shop would do to our workload.

The feeling that I shouldn’t rely too much on Ai Fa may have still been strongly lingering there inside of me. By my values, that didn’t seem like it was wrong, but... This wasn’t my world, it was the forest’s edge. And it definitely *was* wrong to try to just force through my sense of values.

I shouldn’t let her spoil me, but I also did need to lean on her. Otherwise, we surely wouldn’t be able to share our happiness together.

“Got it. What you said makes sense. If you’ll take on the skinning and dissection, then I’ll work hard on some other stuff instead.”

“Hmph.”

“You’re just far too reliable of a clan head. I’m working like a madman so that you won’t toss me out.”

“Don’t say such foolish things. All I’m doing is work that any hunter would,” Ai Fa said, drawing her knife while still sulking a bit. “You’re the only one who can do your work, though. Strive your hardest and make a delicious meal.”

“I know. But still...”

I really did think that Ai Fa was doing work that only she could handle, too.

Before the sun hit its peak, she carried out her work as a woman, and then afterwards she did her duty as a hunter. And I’d have to imagine that Ai Fa was probably the only person doing that here at the forest’s edge.

6

“Well then, I’ve done all sorts of calculations,” I said, deciding to lay out the plan I had constructed in my head to Ai Fa now that we had eaten dinner. “The ingredients I’ll use are aria, poitan, tino, tarapa, and gigo mixed into poitan. Thinking purely on profits, maybe it would be best to just stick to the cheaper aria and poitan, but I think it would be hard to get folks from around town to try it like that. And so, I decided to try to appeal to them.”

“Hmm.”

“And like Kamyua Yoshu had said, this isn’t a dinner, but a midday snack, so I don’t think I need to worry about the daily intake needed of aria and poitan or anything. And so, I’ll mostly use the aria as seasoning, and only one poitan each. I’ll be using tarapa and tino in exchange, so the nutritional value shouldn’t be all that different from that manju I ate.”

“Hmm.”

“So I tried roughly calculating the cost of ingredients for one dish, and it looks like it’s about 0.65 red coins. Half a day’s worth of aria and poitan works out to 0.55 red coins, so it’s not all that crazy of a number. And so I think it’s best to use a variety of ingredients to improve the overall taste and presentation.”

“...Hmm.”

“On top of that, if I’m creating 10 meals a day while spending that amount on ingredients, I’ll end up with quite a lot of excess tarapa. Even if I make 20 meals

in one day, I think I could manage with just 1.5 tarapas. In that case, the tarapa is the most expensive item, so if I make 20 meals in one day, I should be able to keep the unit cost under 0.6 red coins per unit. And if I go up to 30 or 40 in a day, then the price of the ingredients will gradually decrease."

"......Hmm."

"Then there are the other sundry expenses. The location and stall fees for ten days add up to two white coins, which converts to 20 red, and then there's the pay for Vina Ruu, as well. That's nothing to sneeze at when you add it up. A horn and tusk a day is equal to six red coins, so ten days means 60 of them. That makes the initial expenses 80 red coins. So right now, I calculate that I'll need to sell at least 40 meals in order to not end up in the red."

"Hmm."

"Then, adding in the fee for the ingredients at that highest rate of 0.65 red coins, we won't go in the red if I sell 60 meals in this ten day period. If I think of that as six meals a day, it sounds like a pretty meager goal. But if I can't even sell that much, it will mean the taste of giba meat just can't break through to the folks of the post town and they'll just keep on avoiding it. Even if I don't do much selling in the first few days, though, I'll just have to bear it and hope that the word of mouth spreads."

"...Asuta."

"Even if I just sell one or two for the first few days, if I just aim to sell 20 on each of the last three days I'll come out in the black, so I don't think my odds are too bad. After all, my research showed that most places were selling between 20 and 50 meals a day there. And I'd just like to reach that bare minimum number."

"Asuta. Asuta."

"But even if I think I've got a real fighting chance, I still can't deny that it's a gamble. This isn't just a battle of tastes, but to see how much I can overcome the prejudice against the people of the forest's edge, so there's a risk that if things go badly I might not even sell a single one. So for the first few days I'll prepare a conservative ten per day, keeping the costs down so—"

“Asuta!”

“Huh? What is it?”

When I looked, I saw that Ai Fa looked like she was practically clinging to the wall, tilting her head, and glaring my way.

What the heck? Her legs were actually seated in a proper ladylike fashion rather than with one knee up in the air, which was really cute.

“...Do you have some sort of clear purpose behind making me suffer so?”

“Hmm? What do you mean?” I asked back, tilting my head.

It was hard to tell because it was dark, but Ai Fa seemed like she was tearing up a bit.

“I don’t get what you’re saying at all! My head just keeps hurting worse and worse!”

“Ah, was it hard to understand? Sorry about that. So to simplify...”

“Enough already! I leave it all to you! My head is pounding!”

It was such an explosion of irritability that it called to mind Lala Ruu.

Even for someone who showed off as much emotion as Ai Fa, this was unusual.

“B-But you told me to explain, right? And since we’re both involved in this, I really do think it’s best that you grasp the fine details, too...”

“I said enough already, geez! My head won’t stop aching!”

Geez?! Did she just say “geez”?!

W-W-W-What should I do? Was Dan Rutim’s childishness contagious or something?

Before my panicked eyes, Ai Fa pressed her head up against the wall and collapsed on down.

“My head hurts...”

“Gah, are you alright?! Hey, Ai Fa!”

I scooped up the now limp Ai Fa and cradled her in my arms.

When I held my hand up to her forehead, she felt just a bit feverish.

“A-A fever from overloading your brain? Hey, are you in pain? Should I get you some water or something?”

“I’m fine... Just stop talking so loud...”

Ai Fa knitted her brows in pain, then closed her eyes tight.

“Don’t move from that position... My head hurts...”

“G-Got it.”

I quietly waited for Ai Fa to revive, cradling her body atop my knees.

Naturally, I wouldn’t get all stirred up considering the circumstances, but we were normally never this close, so the feeling of Ai Fa’s warmth certainly made it hard for me to relax.

“Are you alright...?”

“...A little longer,” she replied, tightly gripping my t-shirt.

Her chest wrapped in cloth in the style of the forest’s edge was moving greatly up and down.

She really did look like she was in pain.

“Sorry. I really did over-explain the details, huh...? I guess there’s no need for you to worry about the financial calculations. I mean, I don’t know how to hunt giba or anything, so I guess just leave the money stuff to me.”

Rather than reply, Ai Fa just kept rubbing her head against my chest.

Did her head still hurt?

“Even if I screw up, I’m prepared in order to keep the losses at a minimum. I don’t want to waste even a single one of those treasures you risked your life hunting giba to gather.”

“...How many horns and tusks will we lose if you fail?” Ai Fa asked, seeming to have mostly settled back down.

Feeling a bit relieved, I replied, “If I don’t sell even one up to the bitter end, 12 giba’s worth at worst. It’s pretty unbelievable, right?”

“It is.”

“Yeah, it’s just crazy. But from that, two heads’ worth go to the location and stall fee, while the rest is split in half between the ingredients and what I’m paying Vina Ruu. So the only place I could really cut would be the ingredients.”

“...Right.”

“I hardly saw any shops selling dishes that were just meat in the post town. There was a place that sold bird legs cooked up with just a bit of vegetables, too, but that was apparently meant to pair with alcohol. So I think that in order to compete, I need to come up with something that seems like a proper snack... If I was just focused on the money, though, I could try selling grilled and dried meat.”

“There would be no point to that. We’re living just fine, so you don’t need to worry about money problems,” Ai Fa said, jingling her necklace with her open hand.

Between that and the ones she had in the inner pockets of her cloak, she must have had at least 12 giba’s worth. That only made sense, considering she was taking down a giba every other day despite us being a clan of only two.

However, that was also proof that the number of giba in the forest had started multiplying, and that the danger Ai Fa was exposing herself to was growing in turn. Ai Fa was challenging the post town to a fight, using those horns and tusks she risked her life to obtain as her bet.

To bring prosperity to the forest’s edge... For the sake of her brethren whose names she didn’t even know, out there suffering like the Fa clan once had.

“I cannot speak with words that strongly rouse one’s will the way that Gazraan Rutim can. But... I will have no regrets, even if we lose that many horns and tusks. So just muster your own strength, Asuta, the way that you did when facing off with Donda Ruu, and when you agreed to cook for that wedding banquet.”

“Yeah. I’ll do the best that I can, with my pride as a member of the Fa clan on the line. Is your headache really alright...? How about taking it easy and turning in early for the night?”

“...Right,” Ai Fa replied, not moving.

“Um... Do you think you’re going to lie on the floor?”

“If I’m too heavy, then I’ll lie down there.”

I mean, even if you were heavy, it’s a super comfy sort of weight. And I didn’t exactly feel like forcing you to get off if you didn’t want to...

“...When will you open the shop?”

“Four days from now. The Ruu clan will be going to buy stuff again in three days, so I’ll tag along then and take care of the preparations for the shop. Until then, I’ll be using trial and error to see if I can’t improve anything about the dish I prepared today. Actually, you didn’t say anything but, ‘it’s tasty,’ so do you have any other thoughts?”

“None.”

“I see... What’s tastier? That, or a regular hamburger?”

“...They’re both delicious.”

“If you absolutely had to chose one?”

“Are you trying to make my head hurt again?” Ai Fa said, sounding angry and turning over atop my lap. However, now she wasn’t facing outward, but towards me instead. “If they say that tastes bad, then those townfolks’ tongues have all gone rotten. So if that happens, just give up on opening a shop and only cook for me.”

“That sounds like a pretty happy life in its own way. But first, I have to give it my all to try to succeed.”

“Right,” Ai Fa said with a nod, then she pushed her head up against my chest. “Your happiness is my happiness, Asuta.”

“Yeah.”

“So your success... gives me pride,” Ai muttered, positioned like she was whispering right into my heart.

...It’s fine.

All sorts of problems were sure to pop up after I opened the shop. That was

just how reckless of a fight we were taking on.

How much of the preconceptions of the post town could I overturn, faced with 80 years of prejudice and descrimination against giba and the people of the forest's edge?

At the very least, I wanted to try to do whatever I could.

For the sake of the people most precious to me, and the place where they lived...

I felt proud, being able to call myself one of them.

Suddenly, I realized that Ai Fa had fallen asleep in my arms.

...As long as you're there for me, I'm sure I'll be fine, I thought to myself as I felt that pleasant warmth and weight up against my body.

Chapter 4: A Giba Meat Restaurant in the Post Town

1

The preparations to head forth into battle had been completed.

The cooking was packed into the metal pot, which was then covered by a large cloth with pseudo-rubber tree leaves sewn onto the back to keep out water, and finally held together with fibaha vines. All in all, it gave off an incredibly sturdy impression.

The baked poitan, tino, and aria were each wrapped up in their own clean cloths and placed inside a bag meant for vegetables.

A large wooden spatula meant for stirring, a small spatula for dividing things up, the chopsticks I made out of grigee wood, two plates, and my kitchen knife were all stored in the same bag.

The other bag, meanwhile, contained plenty of firewood, a small hatchet, and lana grass for starting a fire.

The red coins for making change and the white ones to pay Milano Mas were already in a cloth bag dangling from my hip.

Everything was perfect.

I had already completed my morning work of cleaning up after last night's dinner and gathering herbs and firewood, and the time was right midway between daybreak and when the sun hit its peak.

Now, I just needed to wait for Vina Ruu to arrive.

"It's finally time," Ai Fa said.

"Yeah, it is," I replied.

"First, you have to make it through these ten days."

"Yeah. I'll give it everything I've got, like my life depended on it."

“You’ll be doing this for ten days.”

“If it ends after those ten days, then there won’t be much purpose in having done it.”

“So you’ll be spending half a day with the eldest daughter of the Ruu for all that time...”

“Hmm?”

“Well, give it your all.”

“Yeah, I will!”

“There’s also your agreement to have relations with her.”

“No! There’s nothing like that at all!” I said, turning around in astonishment and facing Ai Fa. “W-Why are you throwing something like that out there, all of a sudden? You didn’t so much as bat an eye when it got decided that Vina Ruu would be helping me out, did you?!”

Ai Fa’s expression remained composed as she slapped down her hand on my shoulder and said, “Don’t get so worked up. It was a joke.”

“Uggggh...”

“You just carry out your work, and I’ll carry out mine.”

Ai Fa’s expression remained just as calm and composed as always, but her eyes took on a very gentle light.

“...I’ll be awaiting your safe return.”

◇

Vina Ruu arrived right at the agreed upon time, and then together we used a grigee pole to carry the metal pot over that terrifying ravine and into the post town.

Our first stop was The Kimyuus’s Tail.

The place’s owner, Milano Mas, then led us around back and introduced us to the stall we’d be sharing both good times and bad with over the next 10 days.

It had wheels on it, so it could be moved around. It was two meters high, five

meters wide, and 80 centimeters deep. Naturally, the frame was made out of wood, and it had some leather stretched out overhead to ward off the rain. There were wooden planks serving as walls on the front and to the sides, coming up to around my stomach, while on the back wall there was a section that could be pulled open like a door.

When I opened the door, I found that it was hollow inside, with clay densely packed along the reverse side of the walls.

And enshrined inside was a deep-bottomed basin that called to mind a charcoal brazier. I could definitely light a fire in there to heat up my pot.

There was a countertop with a round hole over the brazier that I set my pot into, which fit perfectly so as to not leave any gap.

Then there was an opening for ventilation by my right foot where the smoke could escape.

It was an incredibly simple setup, but well, simple wasn't a problem.

"...Make sure that you don't get it filthy or break it," Milano Mas said with a surly look on his face, despite it being so early in the morning.

"Right," I replied, trying to sound friendly.

Vina Ruu, meanwhile, feigned ignorance and looked away.

"Alright, then follow me."

We went out on the street, with Milano Mas leading the way.

This was my first time visiting the post town before the sun hit its peak, and it seemed to be about 30% less bustling than it was in the early afternoon. Even so, Vina Ruu and I were still getting an incredible amount of stares as we pushed the cart along. And they were all full of discomfort, surprise, and distrust, questioning what people of the forest's edge were doing with a stall.

Yellowish-brown skinned people.

Ivory-white skinned people.

Dark-skinned people.

Light-skinned people.

There really were all sorts of different folks staring our way.

I was a foreigner in the clothing of the forest's edge, while Vina Ruu was a member the forest's edge but also like sex appeal incarnate, so we made for quite a pair. Perhaps there wasn't a person alive who could just ignore the two of us pushing along a cart.

"Oh, this is just awful... It seems like even more people are staring than usual, somehow..."

"It's fine. I mean, it's perfect advertising for us, isn't it?"

With this, the rumor that people of the forest's edge are opening some sort of shop should at least spread to every nook and cranny of the post town. It was fine if half the folks who heard about it just ridiculed the idea, or even if they were afraid of it. I just had to pray that this got us at least a few more people to gather around the shop.

We left the area with the inns and moved into the part of town where the stalls were laid out. Most of the shops had already started opening up for business.

The folks running the shops started looking our way alongside the passersby.

In fact, the only ones we passed by who kept calm looks on their faces were the totos birds.

"Hey there. So you're really doing it, huh?" someone suddenly called out along the way. It was the vegetable seller, Dora.

"Yeah. I'll be working nearby for the next ten days at least, so I look forward to being your neighbor."

Milano Mas hadn't stopped walking, so I had to bow my head as I kept on pushing the cart.

I saw that the old-timer's smile had grown a lot less stiff as I glanced over his way while continuing on further north.

We really had been led all the way to the farthest reaches of the stalls. It was the absolute upper tip of where the forest had been cleared away to the side of the highway to open up space.

Facing north, we were on the right hand side of the road.

If just two or three more shops opened up, the stalls would end up running into the grove of trees. Well, if that happened they would probably keep on clearing away more space, but at any rate, we really were right at the very end.

There weren't exactly a lot of people passing through. In fact, the space out in front of us was completely empty.

The old-timer next to us had some sort of questionable accessories laid out atop a cloth, and when he saw us, he gave a childish open-mouthed stare.

"The rules are just like I described to you yesterday. You need to pay special attention to the ones that say that you can't yell out to try to draw in customers, and that you can't light a fire outside of that basin. And if you see anyone else doing either of those, make sure you tell me."

"Got it. Thanks so much for everything."

"Hmph... Then there's just the matter of the sign. Hey, what should I write on it?"

"Huh? The sign?"

Sure enough, there was a sign on the stall, but aside from the symbols or whatever that apparently said "The Kimyuus's Tail" on the lower right, it was completely blank.

"If you don't write anything on the sign, then nobody will even know what you're selling, right? So what should I write?"

As he said that, Milano Mas took a small cloth bag from his waist and started loosening the strings with his teeth. Inside was a green gooey liquid, as well as a small stick that looked sort of like a brush. It had a bit of a sharp smell, but also a touch on the grassy side. Maybe it was some sort of plant-based paint?

"Then... I guess it's got to be 'Giba,' right?"

"That's all you've got, huh...?" Milano Mas said with a sigh, then he dipped the brush in the paint and started drawing out large symbols. With the ellipses and curves to it, with four lines stretching upwards, the symbol sort of looked like a giba's horns and tusks.

“Ooh, it’s nice and giba-like, isn’t it?”

“...Make sure you bring the stall back to the shop each day. I’ve got to check if there are any scratches on it, after all.”

“Right. We plan on bringing it back before evening.”

Milano Mas gave one more, “Hmph,” then went ahead and left.

The old-timer next to us, meanwhile, was still staring vacantly.

“Now then, shall we go ahead and get ready?”

With Vina Ruu’s help, I started off by freeing the pot from the vines sealing it shut. Then when I removed the cloth and psuedo-rubber tree leaf covering from on top, Vina Ruu went, “Ooh! I think I smell tarapa. Is this for a stew...?”

“Ah, no. We can’t spare that much time and ingredients, so this tarapa is just for the sauce.”

Despite having said that, I used two whole tarapa, so roughly sixty percent of the large pot was full of pure red sauce.

I had heated up the tomato-like tarapa together with diced aria and fruit wine, then adjusted the taste with salt and pico leaves, making this deluxe tarapa sauce.

“Well then, time to light the flame. Vina Ruu, could you open that bag?”

“Right!” Vina Ruu replied, then I lit a fire in the basin using lana grass while glancing her way out of the corner of my eye.

The pot was completely cold, so I started off by getting the fire nice and roaring.

Considering the size of the basin and the distance between the opening and the pot, the net heat transferred would probably be even less than those simple stoves from the banquet, so for now I decided I just had to go with a strong flame until the whole of the pot was good and heated.

I threw in as much firewood as I could carry at once, but at this rate, what we had probably wouldn’t last us through the day. So in that case, I’d need to gather firewood from the grove behind us. That’s why I brought along the

hatchet.

I estimated we'd be working for just a bit over five hours.

It was between dawn and when the sun hit its peak when we left the house, so it would be midway between the sun hitting its peak and sunset when we got back. Then I needed to deduct the two hours for transit, and I could start calculating.

According to my internal clock, dawn was at 6 AM, the sun hit its peak at noon, and sunset was at 7 PM, so the shop would be open from around 10 AM to 3:30 PM.

"Hmm, I know it's odd to say it now, but it really is a strange feeling... I never imagined even in my wildest dreams that I'd ever be selling anything here in the post town..."

"I agree, but well, the amount of time we've spent at the forest's edge is completely different, so I guess you feel it even stronger."

Did Donda Ruu perhaps know of Vina Ruu's adoration of the world outside the forest's edge and choose her to help me out as a result?

No wait, I guess if he knew how she felt, he wouldn't want to let her go out like this, right?

Well at any rate, Vina Ruu's expression today was bright and sunny, and she seemed even more innocently excited than the last time she accompanied me to the post town.

"But will we really sell anything...? There aren't really many people around, are there...?"

"Well, we are on the very tip of the post town, after all."

People coming to the post town from the north, or folks leaving that way. Those were the only folks we saw periodically passing through, and hardly any of them looked interested in shopping.

"Well, it's just the first day, so let's give it our all, but not get overeager. After all, today and tomorrow are ultimately just our debut."

There was no way there wouldn't be rumors spreading about people of the

forest's edge selling giba meat cooking. Just how many people who heard that would have their curiosity get the better of them and come check out the shop, though? That was going to be the first crucial point for us.

As the tarapa sauce had started making a cute sputtering sound, I took a wooden spatula from Vina Ruu and started stirring it around.

"Vina Ruu. I'd like you to take over the stirring later, but I'll be sinking a lot of hamburgers down in the pot, so you'll have to take care not to crush them."

"Got it. Still, it sure is a wonderful smell... I feel like I'm even starting to get hungry, in spite of the time..."

"Ah, if you think you want something to eat, then go ahead and have one as a taste test."

With that, Vina Ruu's eyes started to sparkle.

"Is it really alright? But aren't these meant for selling...?"

"Well I mean, it'd be bad if you didn't at least know the taste of what you're selling. And so, I made sure to make extra just for that."

Without a moment's delay, Vina Ruu started fishing through the bag lying off to the side in the stall, then she stood up and slinked on over next to me. I had a very bad premonition, but she just grabbed onto the excess fabric by my waist.

"I'm so happy... Thank you, Asuta..."

"I-It's nothing. It's just part of the job, after all."

It was the same back when we were preparing for the banquet, but it seemed that Vina Ruu also wouldn't go and do anything outrageous while we were working. I suppose that went for the people of the forest's edge in general, too.

In that case, maybe she'd end up doing pretty well as my work partner after all.

"Alright, looks like it's almost nice and hot. Well then, I'll be counting on you to stir."

I laid out a black grigee cutting board on the work stand set up next to the basin, alongside the aria, tino, a wooden plate, and my kitchen knife.

The tino was like lettuce but shaped like a rose, with gently overlapping layers. However, its texture was closer to that of cabbage, so I tore off one of the leaves and started dicing it.

As for the pseudo-onions, the aria, I carefully cut them into thin slices.

Once I had finished cutting both of them up, I moved them over to a plate and loosely mixed them together.

Finally, I also laid out the baked poitan I had taken out of the bag out on the work stand, finishing off my preparations.

“There’s nothing all that tricky to it, but you should memorize how to make them too, Vina Ruu.”

“Oh, my... Those certainly are rather small poitan...”

“Yeah. I only used about half of a poitan for each of them.”

They were normally using two poitan each at the Ruu house, which should have made for a diameter of around 30 centimeters. And I was using a fourth of that, so that meant that these came out at 14-15 centimeters at most. I also mixed in gigo so it came out fluffier than usual, with a thickness of around 1.5 centimeters. All in all, they came out looking like adorable cream-colored english muffins.

“First, you heap plenty of tino and aria on top of one of these little poitan. For a rough estimate, you want it to be just a bit thinner than the poitan itself, I suppose. Then you add the hamburger on top.”

As I said that, I scooped a hamburger out of the pot with the spatula, and Vina Ruu went, “Oh, my...” in surprise. That was probably because the hamburger was a perfect circle rather than its usual elliptical shape.

From eyeballing it, I’d guess it weighed around 800 grams, and had a diameter of 12 centimeters and thickness of three centimeters.

I took that patty coated in tarapa sauce and placed it atop the diced tino, then added another poitan on top.

With that, I had a complete giba burger of the sort we’d be selling at the shop.

“It’s simple, right? Well, dig in.”

I took the stirring spatula from Vina Ruu and handed her the giba burger in exchange.

“Somehow...”

“Yes?”

“Somehow, it looks incredibly tasty...”

“It is. I’m a big fan, personally.”

“Since it’s not dinner, can I go without saying the prayer...?”

“It’s probably fine, right? I’m not exactly an expert, though.”

Vina Ruu stood staring at it for a moment at a loss, looking like she thought it would be a waste to just eat it or something. She seemed to make up her mind before too long, though, as her sensual lips opened wide and she bit into the giba burger.

“Please take care not to drop any, alright? It’s probably best to hold it sideways.”

Vina Ruu gave a nod and just kept on chewing away.

This had already been established when Ai Fa taste tested it, but the women of the forest’s edge holding onto a hamburger with both hands and happily stuffing their cheeks really did make for a charming sight.

Ai Fa was usually so cool and composed, so her adorableness was off the charts when she was like that, but Vina Ruu, who was like a bundle of mature appeal, certainly didn’t lose out in that regard.

Soon enough, Vina Ruu finished her taste test, then tightly grabbed hold of the cloth at my waist while still looking down a bit.

“It was tasty...”

“R-Really? Glad to hear it!”

Was Vina Ruu somehow even more charming when she was acting a bit childish rather than shooting flirtatious glances and wriggling her body? Well, I suppose even if I analyzed that, nobody would stand to gain anything from me doing so.

“What do you think? Will they sell?”

“I don’t know, but... I think if they don’t find this tasty, then these townsfolk aren’t worthy of eating giba meat.”

She had the same impression as Ai Fa.

Well, I didn’t quite think that myself, though.

I chose this giba burger as my first tool to try to overcome the bad image giba meat had of being smelly and tough, but well, it was what they call a curveball. As long as there aren’t any other shops serving hamburger here in the post town, it would probably surprise people, but if I wanted people to really know the true deliciousness of giba meat, I really would need a simple dish like steak or something.

Also, the hamburger patties took time to make, and I could only bring 12 at most in the pot. If I transported the cooked patties in a different container and prepared more sauce on location, I calculated I could probably manage upwards of 40, but still, this was ultimately just my first step towards overcoming the post town.

Coming up with hamburgers when thinking of light snacks may have been an incredibly simplistic idea, but it seemed like it was common for snacks in the post town like those kimyuus manju to use meat, vegetables, and some sort of carbohydrate batter in combination, so I thought it best to follow along with something similar.

Also, judging from those manju and that salted meat, it seemed there was no real worry of the townsfolk avoiding soft meat like Donda Ruu, and the way you could eat them by hand was a plus for snacks.

Then there was the fact that tarapa gave off a pretty strong smell. Since it wasn’t permitted to call out to people to try to drum up business, that made smell an even more important tool than usual. When combined with the aria and fruit wine, the aroma of the tarapa sauce was sure to powerfully arouse the appetites of folks passing by.

If these giba burgers attracted enough attention, I’d step up my menu... Which is to say, I’d switch to a simpler menu and try to get the deliciousness of

giba meet across in steps.

Just how much progress would I make in these first ten days, though?

Personally, I was thinking if I was selling between 20-30 by the final day, I could justify introducing a new dish for the next ten days and would consider that a big success.

For today, I kept things on the safe side and just brought enough ingredients for ten, but if I could sell out all of those on our first day, I'd already consider that a huge success.

"Alright, then I guess it's about time to get this battle started!"

The moment I declared that, I heard something hit the leather roof to the stall. Then suddenly, it started raining so hard it was like the sky was coming crashing down.

Even as she let out a shriek that sounded totally lacking in urgency, Vina Ruu hurriedly got the bag in under the roof.

It was the sort of sudden squall I was already accustomed to from living at the forest's edge. Well, it was only around an hour's walk to get here, so I suppose it made sense for the same sort of weather to occur in the post town.

However...

When the squall stopped just as suddenly as it had started, even the occasional passersby we had been seeing had completely disappeared without a trace.

2

"Hmm! I see!" was about all I could think to say.

Naturally, the townsfolk must have been used to this guerrilla style rainfall, too. As soon as the rain started to come down, folks all either took off running down the road or took cover under the nearby trees, so I think the damage must have been minimal.

And it really was impressive how the old-timer with the accessory shop next

to us immediately gathered up the cloth and his goods and took off running into the woods to our rear.

Then, when the rain ended, everyone started popping back up with looks that said “good grief” on their faces... But at least here at the upper tip, the number of passersby had noticeably dropped.

Looking to the left of the stall, south down the road, the crowd seemed to have revived to what it had been beforehand. But over here where there were few people looking to shop to begin with, everybody seemed to have run off somewhere, and it was completely quiet and deserted.

“There’s nobody left, huh...?”

“Well, it’s a literal calamity from the heavens, so there’s not exactly anything we can do about it. And besides, the real fight was always going to be from when the sun hit its peak onwards, so for now let’s take it easy and recharge our spirits.”

Thanks to Vina Ruu’s quick actions, none of the firewood got wet. No water got into the pot, either. We hadn’t taken any critical damage, so now was the time to focus on turning things around.

“So we’re going to stand here the whole time till the crowds pick up when the sun hits its peak...?”

“That’s right. Waiting is part of the job, too.”

“I feel bad somehow, being paid so much just for doing this...”

“You’re looking at it all wrong. Even putting aside carrying everything, I never would have managed stirring the pot and adding the firewood and everything all on my own. Plus, we’re only just getting started.”

With that said, though, it would still be around two hours till the sun hit its peak. It really would feel pretty empty, just managing the fire in the meantime. Perhaps now would be a good time to secure the extra firewood, but it just didn’t feel like the best idea to do so right after the rain. I felt like if I just waited an hour or two the fallen branches would dry out, and I could just gather them then.

In other words, I just wasn't motivated.

"Hmm... Do you feel like just chatting a bit?"

"Ah, yes."

"Who do you get along with in your family, Vina Ruu?"

"Is that really an interesting topic...?"

"It is to me, at least."

Vina Ruu gave a small sigh, starting to fiddle with the tips of her chestnut-colored hair.

"I suppose the ones I have the most lively conversations with are Rimee and Ludo... Oh, but it's the most fun being with Darmu."

"Ah, Darmu Ruu?"

"Yes... He can be untalkative and angry about stuff... but it's cute seeing him get all mad, too."

"H-Hold on a second! Now that I think of it, you were older than him, right?"

"Yes, but just by a year..."

Now that I thought about it, I had been thinking of the boys and girls separately, so I hadn't really considered who was older overall. But well, I guess the order between Vina and Darmu Ruu was the only one that had been fuzzy, anyway.

I made a mental note of the fact that Darmu Ruu was 19, one year younger than Vina Ruu.

"By the way, how old is Jiza Ruu?"

"Jiza is 23."

"Ooh, that's surprisingly young! And Rimee Ruu was eight, right? So... a 15 year difference! That's quite an age gap!"

"Really? Well, some people have children at the age of 15, so I suppose it's as much as the gap between parent and child, in a way..."

Vina Ruu cast me a listless sidelong glance.

“Hey... Do you really find all this interesting...?”

Well, at least to me it was pretty interesting.

Maybe since they spent most of their days running around working, dealing with such excess tedium was pretty rough for the people of the forest’s edge.

“I want to hear something about you, Asuta...”

“Huh? But I mean, I shouldn’t have much of interest to bring up, either.”

“I want to hear about the country where you were born...”

I held my tongue for a moment, then stared at the red tarapa sauce and said, “Sorry. I don’t exactly want to talk about where I came from... It’s a bit of a rough topic for me.”

“Oh, but why...?”

“...I suddenly disappeared, so I can’t help but worry about if my old man is doing alright or not.”

After a moment of silence, Vina Ruu quietly whispered, “I’m sorry...”

This was making for a pretty gloomy mood...

But then...

“Asuta!” a voice energetically called out, and a little savior came running our way down the road, splashing in puddles as she went. It was Tara.

“You really opened a shop! That’s amazing!” she said, placing her hands on the stall’s counter and looking up at me.

The young girl also shot a slightly timid smile at Vina Ruu, who was standing next to me. Naturally, the older girl couldn’t help but give a wide grin back.

“There’s a really nice tarapa smell! Is that from your giba cooking?”

“That’s right. I wonder if you’ll like it.”

“I want to try it! I’ll take one, please!”

“Ah, but these are big enough for adults, so one costs two red coins.”

“Really? Then I’ll go ask my dad for some money!”

“Ah, hold on! It’d be bad if you ended up not liking it, so try a taste first. Vina Ruu, there’s another wooden plate in that bag, so could you get it for me?”

As I called that out, I looked into the pot. There were mini burgers in there, meant for sampling.

They were already a size smaller than the ones I was selling, and then I chopped one in half inside the pot and scooped it out onto the plate. Next, I cut off about 30% of that, then finally pulled out my secret weapons, toothpicks made by shaving down small grigee branches, and stuck one in it.

“Here you go.”

When I held out the plate to her, Tara looked dumbfounded.

“...What about the money?”

“Back in my country, some people would offer samples like this to customers before they bought. I already got permission from the old-timer from the inn who runs this area, so go ahead and give it a try.”

“Ooh... Thank you! I really ‘preciate it!”

Then, without so much as a hint of hesitation, Tara picked up the toothpick and tossed the little chunk of hamburger into her mouth.

“...What do you think?”

I was seriously nervous right now.

For the most part, my cooking had earned rave reviews from the people of the forest’s edge. But aside from the ever mysterious Kamyua Yoshu, this would be the first time seeing whether or not my flavorings and techniques would work when it came to folks from the city of stone, who were more familiar with the concept of cooking.

Tara... had frozen in place, the toothpick still hanging out of her mouth. And she was staring straight at me, her eyes opened wide in shock.

“What is this...?” she managed to squeeze out, sounding utterly dumbfounded.

And then... her little yellowish-brown face exploded with joy.

“It’s tasty! Super amazingly tasty, Asuta!”

I honestly felt like my knees were about to give out on me. This was seriously bad for my heart.

But well... Now, I’d finally cleared the first challenge before me.

“This is so amazing! I want to eat more! I’ll go get some money from my dad!”

“Ah, hold on! If it’s alright, I’d like to have Dora try some too. He’d feel more comfortable handing over the money then, right? Um, I don’t have too many of those little wooden needles, so do you mind if I reuse that one?”

“That’s fine!” Tara said with a big nod, then stuck another piece of meat with the toothpick and took off running back to her father, holding it aloft like it was the Olympic torch.

Dora’s stall was close enough that I could just barely make out its leather roof from here.

“That certainly went well, didn’t it, Asuta...?”

“Yeah! I’m so glad! Aah, now the light of hope is finally shining down on us! If I can put up a fight with this flavor, then it’s just down to how many people we can get to taste it!”

“That sounds like the hardest part, though...”

“It’s fine! That’s what we have the samples for! Once more people start coming by, we’ll start handing these out, mainly to folks from the south and the east!”

Though with all that said, I had only cooked two mini burgers to serve as samples. The smallest number of parts I could reasonably split them into was six, so I would have 12 to hand out in total.

Still, if sales weren’t going all that well, then I intended to use some of the patties meant for sales as samples, too. At any rate, the key point right now was to try to get even one person more to taste giba meat. In fact, even if all I managed to do today was hand out samples, I wouldn’t be upset about it.

“Asuta... I’m not all that comfortable with townsfolk talking to me...”

“Hmm? Ah, I’ll handle that part! I just need you to handle watching the fire.”

“No, that’s part of the job, so I want to do it, but... You won’t get angry if I don’t do it well at first, will you...?”

Apparently, the people of the forest’s edge were even more serious when it came to work than I was.

There were still few people around, but I started to feel things get livelier bit by bit.

It was then that Tara came splish-splashing up to us again.

“Dad said it was tasty, too! He was all surprised, like, ‘What is this?!’”

Then she held out some coins. They were dulled red coins... and there were four of them?

“Two please! One for me, and one for my dad!”

Full disclosure, I felt a bit like I was about to cry.

I certainly had been paid a good bit for that banquet, but when I had a customer saying my food was delicious and paying me for it... Well, there’s no way that wouldn’t hit my tear ducts hard, right?

It would probably hurt my reputation if I cried here and now, though, so I just replied, “Thanks for your business!” and got to chopping up tino and aria. I then placed them atop a poitan, added a patty soaked in plenty of tarapa sauce, then topped it off with another poitan.

“Here, thanks for waiting! It can spill out easily, so hold it sideways like this while eating it, alright?”

“Yeah! Thanks! It looks super tasty!”

I’m the one who should be saying thanks, here.

At any rate, I handed the completed burgers to Tara and accepted her money.

Four red coins... My shop’s very first sale.

“...You said you need to sell one more just to cover what you’re paying me, right? Will this business really work out...?”

“It will! Well, you could say she only bought it because we know each other, but still, it gives me a lot of hope that our first customer was a Genos resident!”

“Really? Oh, Asuta, there...” Vina Ruu grabbed the fabric by my waist again.

Looking up, there was a man walking our way from the north clad in traveling attire, and he was looking dubiously between our stall and Tara’s back as she ran away.

The hood on his cloak covered a lot of his face, but from what I could see his skin was quite dark. He must have been from the Eastern Kingdom of Sym.

Thinking this may be a chance for a sale, I reached for the wooden plate. However, the man went and briskly approached the stall even quicker.

As he came closer, he pushed back his leather hood, which had a few raindrops still clinging to it.

His eyes and hair were black, and his skin was several shades darker than the westerners. Yes, he was indeed from Sym.

I found his features to be pretty unfamiliar. He had raised, narrow eyes, and a thin nose and lips. He was real tall, but also rather slender. His long, black hair was tied up behind his neck, and there were accessories with beautifully colored stones around his neck and wrists. It was hard to tell exactly how old he may be, but well, I figured it was fair to call him a youth.

Anyway, that youth from the Eastern Kingdom was standing in front of our stall and looking at the symbols on the sign, still appearing dubious.

Then, he pointed towards the pot and questioned, “Giba?”

“Yes. It’s a meat dish made with giba. If you’d like, please go ahead and give the taste a try.”

As I said that I stuck a new toothpick into the last chunk on the wooden plate, and the youth tilted his head while looking puzzled.

It was then that Vina Ruu whispered, “Asuta... This person is from Sym, so he may not be too familiar with the language of the west, right...?”

“Huh?! The languages differ by country between the four great kingdoms?”

“The east and the north have different languages. You didn’t even know that much, Asuta...?”

I had no idea whatsoever.

Then, if I had awoken in the north or the east, we wouldn’t have been able to communicate at all? Or was it just that some unseen act of god was helping to take care of that inconvenience?

Well, this was no time to be worrying over such things, especially since doing so wasn’t going to help me arrive at a solution. Right now, I had to figure out how to get this curious gentleman to give the sample a try.

“Asuta, could you get some fresh meat on that plate? And another of those wooden needles, too...?”

“Huh? Ah, right!”

I scooped out the other half of the mini burger from the pot, then divided it into three atop the wooden plate.

Vina Ruu gave a nod, then came out the back of the stall and circled around till she was standing beside the youth. She smiled at him to lower his guard at least a bit, then elegantly popped one of the samples into her mouth.

Next, she held out the plate a bit towards the youth, and he held his hand over it. He stared at Vina Ruu, as if trying to figure her out.

Vina Ruu gave another smile and a little nod, and the youth finally picked up the toothpick. Then he suddenly tossed all three remaining hamburger pieces in his mouth.

After he finished chewing, he gave a big, satisfied nod, entwined his fingers in a strange manner, and bowed to me and Vina Ruu. He pulled his hood back up and left with a light and easy stride.

After a few seconds of silence, Vina Ruu whispered, “Sorry...” extremely quietly.

“Not at all! That was splendid work, getting him to eat it! And I’d guess the concept of samples doesn’t exist here in the post town, so something like that happening makes sense,” I loudly declared, as if I was trying to encourage

myself, too, but Vina Ruu just staggered and grabbed hold of the stall's pillar.

"...I wish I were dead..."

It turned out Vina was surprisingly weak-willed. But still, this was no time to be paying attention to stuff like that.

"It's fine! We still have one patty left for samples! And the real fight starts after the sun hits its peak! Let's give it our all, alright?!"

"What's the matter, Asuta?" Tara asked, suddenly standing back in front of the stall.

"Oh, it's nothing. How were the giba burgers?"

"They're called giba burgers? They were super tasty! Hey, are you going to be running this shop every day now?"

"Yeah, at least for the next ten days. After that, it'll depend on how much we can sell in that time."

"Hooray! Then I'll be coming every day, too! Plus Dad also said he wanted to eat it every day! It really, really surprised him!"

"Thanks. Hearing that you two were that happy with them makes me glad, too."

If Tara and her dad really did order one each every day, that would add up to 20 in total. Since my minimum requirement for success over these ten days was 60, that was some seriously appreciated support.

"Asuta..." Vina Ruu suddenly called out again, this time with a somehow slightly different tone in her voice.

"What is it?" I asked, turning around, only to immediately notice the oddity myself.

"Wah..." Tara weakly yelped, then hid in the shadow of the stall.

There was a whole group hurriedly approaching our way from the bustling south.

"W-What is it?"

The cloaked group had gone and surrounded our stall.

Tara was quivering a bit as she clung to my legs. Meanwhile, Vina Ruu had moved in close to my side and gently grabbed onto the sheath for the knife dangling from her waist.

There were seven men standing there, all tall and with their faces hidden by the hoods on their cloaks. However, the visible lower halves of their faces all showed very dark skin.



The guy in the middle said, “Giba,” and pushed through his comrades to come to the front. When he pulled back his hood, I saw that it was the same slender faced Sym youth who had eaten all the hamburger samples before.

“W-What is it? Do you have some sort of problem with our shop?” I asked, even though I knew it was pointless doing so.

Then, the youth pointed to the pot like he’d done before and muttered, “Giba,” again.

“That’s right, giba. What about it?”

“Giba. Red. One. Two. Three?”

“...What?” I questioned, tilting my head. The youth then reached into his cloak, looking just a bit troubled.

Vina Ruu was pulling firmly on my arm, but what he pulled out was just a dull red coin.

“Giba. Red. One. Two. Three?”

When I still didn’t respond, the youth looked sad and asked, “...White?”

“No! It’s red! Red! Two!”

The youth gave a nod, then pulled out a second red coin and placed them on the counter. Then, he stared at my face.

“...Vina Ruu, could you handle the stirring?”

I had carelessly stopped stirring, so I handed the spatula over to Vina Ruu, then hurriedly set about dicing aria.

Before long I had finished a new giba burger, which I handed to the youth and said, “Here you go.”

The youth gave a big nod and accepted the burger.

Seeing that, I hesitantly reached out for the coins... and fortunately, nobody seemed to find any fault with that.

Looks like he really was just a customer. I was seriously glad for that.

What was with the other guys just standing around and surrounding the stall,

though?

“Asuta...”

“I-It’s alright, Tara. They’re just customers... I think.”

Meanwhile, the youth just kept on stuffing his cheeks with the giba burger.

At first he was eating it with just one hand, but when he noticed that the tarapa sauce was about to leak out the other side, he readjusted his grip so he was holding it with both hands. Then, he started chewing away again.

How should I put it...? It wasn’t like he felt especially cold or anything, just that his expression was utterly unchanging. It... wasn’t quite enough that I’d call it creepy, but it did have me ill at ease.

Anyway, before long he finished the giba burger, then brought his fingers together in that strange way again and quietly bowed his head. Then, he nodded to his comrades as well.

The surrounding men (all of whom were also quite slender) each nodded back, then their hands started searching around inside their cloaks. With a *clunk, clunk, clunk* a row of red coins was laid out atop my counter. There were 12 coins in total, enough for each of the six men.

I just silently diced up aria and prepared one giba burger after another. Whenever I held out a completed dish dark fingers reached out and gently accepted it.

And not a word was said.

I was totally silent, and so were they. Even Vina Ruu and Tara weren’t saying anything.

Minutes later, the giba burgers had all disappeared into their stomachs, while I had 14 coins in my hands, including the two from the first youth.

With their hoods still raised, the six men brought their fingers together just like the youth had, bowed their heads to me, and then departed.

“Wow, your cooking sure is popular, Asuta!”

“Gah, you surprised me there!”

Before I had even realized it, a certain scrawny blond fellow had casually popped up beside the stall and called out to me.

It went without saying that I meant Kamyua Yoshu.

“W-W-Where did you pop up from? Please stop doing stuff that’s so bad for my heart!”

“I didn’t want to interfere with your business, so I was just quietly watching over you from the shadow of the trees the whole time. You didn’t notice me?”

I really did want to slug the old-timer when he played dumb like that.

Vina Ruu was also shooting a sidelong glare in the direction of Kamyua Yoshu’s smile, without any of her usual seductiveness.

The only one who actually looked happy here was Tara.

“Mister Kamyua! Hey, Asuta’s giba burgers are really, really tasty!”

“Yes, this certainly does look good. You even used tarapa? It was already delicious with just aria and tino, but with this, I can’t stop myself from drooling.”

As always, his tone was super friendly yet also somehow flaky.

“What was with those people just now...?”

“Hmm? They were travelers from the Eastern Kingdom of Sym, right? They were a rather large group, so I wonder if they were part of some large merchant group or something?”

“...You didn’t have anything to do with them, did you?”

“What do you mean? Are you suggesting I hired them in order to improve your shop’s reputation?”

Kamyua Yoshu smiled and shrugged his shoulders under his long cloak.

“If I was trying a plan like that, I would have gone for a more effective performance! And besides, it wouldn’t work at all in the first place when there’s nobody around like right now, yeah? I mean, just take a look about. Nobody even noticed that you sold seven meals at once.”

That was certainly true. Even if anyone was watching from the bustling south,

at that distance they just would've seen a group in leather cloaks surround the stall and then leave shortly after.

The old-timer selling accessories next to us was staring and looking utterly flabbergasted, though.

"There are a lot of folks like that amongst people of the east. It's less that they're unsociable, and more that they plunge on forwards not caring what the people around them think, I suppose... But they also tend to think it rude to act emotionally towards others. If you talk to them you'll generally find them pretty pleasant, but regrettably, they often can't speak much of the western language."

"I see..."

"Well, with that said, people from the east vary a good bit, too. There are also plenty who are a bit more versed in western customs than that. But you'll naturally come to understand all that if you run a shop here in this post town."

After saying that, Kamyua Yoshu started rustling around in his cloak.

"Now then, will you sell me some of your cooking, too, Asuta? I'll take two, to cover Leito."

"Ah, you see... I'll actually be out of supplies once I make one more."

"Huh? Tara bought two, and those folks from the east bought seven, so you've only sold just nine, right? So why are you out already?"

Just how long had this old-timer been spying on us?

This guy really was a first for me, with the way that he just seemed more and more sketchy the more that I interacted with him.

"I wasn't expecting much in the way of sales for the first day, so I only prepared enough for ten meals. After all, the cost of ingredients is nothing to sneeze at."

"That's a shame! There's no way ten of your meals would be enough, right?! And you had this big of a pot, but you only brought enough for ten?! Leito and I were looking forward to your cooking, so this sure is a let down!"

"My deepest apologies. I have leftover samples, so shall I throw that in? And I

did bake extra poitan just to be safe, too.”

“Yeah! At any rate, sell it to me! I don’t want some other customer beating me to the punch!”

That slightly panicked look on his face actually made him appear a bit less sketchy than usual.

The way that he weaved in expressions like that just made the guy even harder to pin down, though.

At any rate, I made up the last patty and the mini burger meant for samples into giba burgers, then handed them over to Kamyua in exchange for two coins. The mini burger was on the house, naturally.

“Thanks! Now I can try this out along with Leito! He’s in The Kimyuus’s Tail, so I’ll let you know what we thought later!”

With that, Kamyua promptly took off.

Feeling strangely at a loss, I turned and looked at Vina Ruu.

“Um... It looks like we’re done with work for today.”

“Right. Should I go ahead and put out the flame...?”

“Yeah, please do.”

This was what was meant when people said they felt dumbstruck, huh?

At any rate, the first day of our fight in the post town ended not just before the sun hit its peak, but before even an hour had passed.

3

“I’m home,” I called out as I opened the door, only to find Ai Fa seated leaning against the wall and looking back at me in confusion.

“Why? What happened? Was there some sort of incident in the post town?”

“No. I just came back because we safely sold everything we brought.”

“That... was rather fast. The sun hasn’t even hit its peak yet, has it?”

“It hasn’t. And we even took a number of detours along the way, too.”

We stocked up on supplies for tomorrow, stood and talked with Dora for a while, and visited The Kimyuus's Tail to hear Kamyua and Leito's impressions, then washed out the pot upon returning to the forest's edge before finally coming back home.

As for the leftover tarapa sauce that hadn't even gotten a chance to boil, Vina Ruu poured it into a leather bag that she had bought on the spot, then brought it home with a smile on her face.

We left the excess firewood with the cart when we returned it, so for tomorrow we'd just have to bring the ingredients and tools we needed, which would make everything lighter and easier to handle.

At any rate, I returned the pot to its place atop the stove and the tarapa and gigo and the like to the pantry, than sat down facing Ai Fa.

"We sold all ten of the meals I had prepared. Taking out the expenses, that means I roughly made five red coins in profit. Well, at least for the first day, I'd call this a huge success, but..."

But somehow, I didn't feel satisfied.

And figuring I should share that sense of dissatisfaction with Ai Fa, I went ahead and told her about everything that had happened today.

"Hmm... It seems clear that your dishes sold out of acknowledgment of your skill, though. Why not simply be happy in that success?"

"That may be so, but I have no idea how long that group from the east will be staying in the post town, so it's tricky trying to figure out what to do from tomorrow on."

To be blunt, it felt like a big failure in terms of making a splash and building a reputation.

Just what had the townsfolk thought, seeing us open up a shop and then pull the stall on back less than an hour later? Had they assumed we caused some sort of problem and had to withdraw?

Maybe I was being overly paranoid, but still, it had hurt seeing those stares coming our way.

On top of that, that group could hardly speak the western language at all, so it was hard to imagine them spreading much in the way of word of mouth.

“...Running a business sounds truly puzzling,” Ai Fa said while ruffling her blonde hair and moving her face in closer. “But even so, you carried out your job. So be at least a little happy.”

“Yeah...”

“I said be happy,” Ai Fa repeated, then she suddenly reached out and gave my left cheek a firm twist.

“Ow, ow, ow! You’re going to rip my cheek off! What do you think you’re doing, out of nowhere?!”

“I told you to be happy, but you weren’t listening to me at all,” Ai Fa said, then an awkward smile crossed her face. “Even though I’m happy for you...”

“Ai Fa, you...”

“Hmm?”

“You’ve been smiling more lately, haven’t you? Ow, ow, ow!”

Then, with a “Hmph!” that precious smile vanished from Ai Fa’s face, and she stood up and took her cloak from the wall.

“Owww... Ah, is it already time for you to head out into the forest?”

“Indeed. What will you do now, Asuta?”

“Ah, right. It’s still too early to start preparing dinner. I guess I’ll think about what to do next while chopping some firewood.”

“I already chopped some firewood, but I suppose there’s no harm to you chopping even more,” she said, moving her face in closer to mine again as I remained seated cross-legged on the floor. “Well then, I’m off. Make sure you don’t let your guard down today either, alright?”

“Yeah. If any suspicious drunks approach, I’ll be sure to run away in a full on sprint.”

“Right,” Ai Fa replied with a nod, and an incredibly strong light shining in her eyes.

Ever since the day of the Rutim banquet, Ai Fa had that sort of look in her eyes whenever she left me to head out into the forest.

At any rate, Ai Fa left for the forest like that, leaving me behind in the house.

The sun just hit its peak, huh...?

If that was the case, then now was around when I was supposed to be handing out samples in the more crowded streets of the post town, but instead I was sitting here all alone in the house.

It seemed my disappointment really had won out over my sense of satisfaction.

“Well, guess there’s no point in fretting over it. The real fight starts tomorrow! Yeah, tomorrow!”

It was a little risky, but I’d go ahead and prepare 20 patties for tomorrow. And if that ended up being a big mistake, then I could just go back down to ten. But if those happened to sell out quickly too, then I could start adding a bit more day by day. If I didn’t want to go wasting ingredients, then I just had to keep on playing it by ear like that.

I shouldn’t get ahead of myself. Just as long as I don’t go seriously in the red, I can keep the shop going for 10 or 20 days. If I just build up my results bit by bit, I’ll be fine.

Ai Fa was earnestly happy for me, so that helped me to be at least a bit positive myself.

Things may have developed in a bit of an unexpected direction, but since I hadn’t really expected to sell anything at all on the first day, yet I had gone and sold out my stock, I could feel at least a little happy about that, I figured.

And they may have been acquaintances, but still, Tara, Dora, Kamyua Yoshu, and Leito all gave rave reviews of the giba burgers.

As such, I should be set to face tomorrow’s work with hope rather than unease.

“Alright! Guess I’ll chop some firewood.”

I pulled a hatchet and a bundle of firewood out of the storage, then went to

leave the house.

Just when I was reaching to open the door, though, there was a sudden knocking from outside.

A visitor...?

I'd been living here for over a month now, and the only visitors we'd had in that time were Rimee Ruu and Gazraan and Ama Min Rutim.

Plus, it was just past when the sun hit its peak right now. It should be clear to everyone that Ai Fa would be out of the house at the moment, since she was a hunter.

While those thoughts were running through my head, there were another two knocks on the door.

I placed the hatchet and bundle of wood by my feet, brought my hands to my chest, and got my breathing under control.

"...Who is it?"

Silence.

I was starting to reach for the bolt on the door.

Should I try to hole up, or should I run? It was good to keep my options open, right?

But the second my fingers touched the door, a voice called out from the other side of the door.

"I'm... Saris Ran Fou, of the Fou clan."

I had never heard that name before. However, that voice had come from a woman, and there didn't seem to be much strength behind it.

After a few seconds of hesitation, I slowly opened the door.

Standing on the other side was a young woman, a bit on the skinny side. She had on a one piece outfit stretching from her chest to her knees, and she was holding an infant that looked even smaller than Kota Ruu.

Seeing all that, my guard finally dropped.

“I’m Asuta of the Fa clan. Do you have some sort of business with my clan head, Ai Fa?”

“Yes... Ah, no... A-Ai Fa already left for the forest, didn’t she?”

“Yeah, she just left. If you have some sort of message, I can pass it along to her for you.”

“Ah... Um, I wanted to give this to the Fa clan...”

With that, the woman picked up a bag like the ones we used for vegetables from by her feet.

The bag was rather big but it was also flat, so it looked pretty light.

“What is it, exactly?”

“Ah, yes, um... It’s pico leaves...”

This woman somehow seemed even more on guard than I was.

Well, I guess that should come as no surprise though, as I’m sure the folks around here all thought I was pretty sketchy.

“Pico leaves, huh? But why are you giving them to us?”

“Ah, well you see... Ai Fa has already given us numerous pelts...”

“Pelts?”

I didn’t understand what she was saying.

“By pelts, you mean from giba?”

“Yes... Since around a month ago, she’s left so many... M-My clan, the Fou, has few men, and they aren’t able to hunt many giba. But thanks to those pelts from Ai Fa, we’ve somehow managed to get by without this child starving...”

“I see... This is the first time I’m hearing of any of this. So my clan head has acquaintances like you nearby, huh?”

When I said that, Saris Ran Fou made a face like she was thinking about something hard, then held her child tight.

“No... We’re not acquaintances. By decree from my clan head, I’m forbidden from getting involved with the Fa clan...”

“Huh?”

“The Fa clan has bad blood with the clan that leads our people. And so if we involved ourselves with the Fa, that bad blood could extend to the Fou as well, he said... And so for two years now, I’ve been forbidden from having anything to do with Ai Fa or her house...”

“I see. I think I can understand his point, but still...”

After all, Ai Fa had intentionally cut off her ties with other clans on purpose. But what was this about pelts?

“Ai Fa has always left the pelts in front of our house without saying anything...” Saris Ran Fou said, her eyes staring straight at me. Those light blue eyes were starting to tear up just a bit. “At first, I had no idea who was doing such a thing, so I found it a bit eerie, but well... Sometimes you just have to grasp the opportunities that present themselves, or you’ll never get ahead. And so, we tanned those pelts and exchanged them for coins, which we then traded for aria and poitan... And in turn, that made it so I could somehow manage to provide milk for this child...”

“Right...”

“But a few days ago, some of the men returning from the forest saw Ai Fa leaving peeled pelts in front of the Fou house. That was when we finally learned who was saving us. The clan head said we shouldn’t do anything that would tie us to the Fa clan, but... all of us women, we begged him. At the very least, we wanted to repay her for the pelts in some way...”

As Saris Ran Fou said that, she averted her eyes.

“But with that said, the Fou clan can’t earn any real coins in the first place, so we could never offer much in exchange. Still, we figured that you can never have too many pico leaves, so we gathered these up.”

“I see...”

“I know that this won’t even come close to making up the debt we owe her, but I at least wanted to offer Ai Fa my thanks. We all feel ashamed, having her do all this for us even after the Fou clan cut ties out of fear of the Suun clan...”

“Ah, no. We don’t have the people around to tan hides at our house anyway, so please don’t worry about it. And knowing my clan head, I’m sure she’d be more upset that you found out she was the one doing it than anything.”

“But...”

“Alright, I’ll gratefully accept your feelings here. And also, if you have the chance, please try talking to Ai Fa directly. I don’t know anything of the circumstances, so I don’t think I can speak for her about what she’s feeling.”

“...Right. Thank you.”

With that, Saris Ran Fou handed the flattened bag to me and left.

I peered inside, and found about as much pico leaves as Ai Fa and I would gather in a day layered in the bottom. Considering they had to gather enough for their house on top of that, it must have taken a fair bit of effort.

...Well, I guess by offering pelts rather than meat, that won’t lead to any more people falling prey to corruption.

Actually, if anyone were to find fault with that, I’d give everything I had to defend that action.

A month ago... That was just around when I got picked up by Ai Fa.

The pelt from that first giba I prepared must have ended up getting delivered to the Fou clan. After all, it had been Ai Fa’s work the whole time from then up until now to deal with cleaning up the pelt and the innards once I was done.

More abundant living, huh...?

An ordinary guy like me could never fully understand Gazraan Rutim’s strong will, I figured. And I didn’t even know what was behind Kamyua Yoshu’s actions in the first place.

But at the very least, I didn’t think it was right for people to be living such poor lives that they were starving and couldn’t even provide milk for their baby.

And that was even more true when a single clan was monopolizing the reward money that was meant to be distributed amongst all the people of the forest’s edge, all so they could live comfy lives.

Even so, there's a limit to what I can do.

With that, I stored the pico leaves in the pantry, then set about chopping the firewood that would fuel the stove for tomorrow.

4

It was the second day of business for the giba cooking stall under the direct management of the Fa clan in the Genos post town.

While I sold out of everything on my first day, I had still been left with more disappointment than a sense of satisfaction, but I turned that around and used it as fuel to push me forwards from this morning on.

"Today I've prepared enough for 20! If we sell all that on our second day, it'll be amazing! Let's get fired up, Vina Ruu!"

"Right... But Asuta, you made all of this on your own, right? Are you okay in regards to your other jobs...?"

"Yeah. I learned first hand between yesterday and today that preparing 20 was no problem at all. It'd be plenty simple for me to keep on making this much each and every day," I replied, and I wasn't just acting tough or anything.

Making the tarapa sauce and the hamburger patties was something I could knock out in advance the day before. And I could prepare it all alongside dinner, and whatever I didn't finish then I just needed to wrap up after we ate. That just meant my usual nighttime chats with Ai Fa now happened while I was cooking.

That just left cooking the poitan and patties for the morning.

I'd already practiced making large quantities of food for both the dinner at the Ruu house and the Rutim banquets, so this much was nothing. I figured with things like this, even if we were talking the initial upper limit of 40 that I had predicted, I could make them just fine without needing to cut into my sleep or other work.

"So it's totally fine! And so, let's do this thing in high spirits!"

"There really aren't a lot of people around at this time though, are there...?"

We didn’t get hit with a sudden downpour like yesterday, but there still just plain weren’t many people passing through.

Since we were at the very northern tip of the post town, all that was past this point was the Genos castle and that stone highway and forest that stretched on as far as the eye could see, so the only ones coming by were genuine travelers.

From what I heard there were plantations to the south of the post town, which also meant there would naturally be a farm village, with lots of folks opening stalls down that way. On top of that, the inns were also to the south, so it just made sense that the travelers would do their shopping at the stalls on that end after waking up.

At any rate, until the sun hit its peak and the crowds picked up, the best we could hope for was pinpointing the few travelers passing by to sell to.

“Now that I think of it, I know that the castle town is to the northwest of here, but if you ignore that and keep going further north, where does this connect to?”

“Who knows...? Wouldn’t it be the Northern Kingdom of Mahyudra...?”

“Isn’t Mahyudra way up north? And well, I heard Genos is pretty far south as far as the Western Kingdom goes, so I get the feeling there must be all sorts of towns in between.”

“I don’t know anything about all that... If I think too much about stuff like that, I feel like I’ll just start wandering that way, so I try to keep it out of mind the best I can...”

“Is that so?”

“Yes... I see, so there are all sorts of towns even here in the Western Kingdom... I wonder if we people of the forest’s edge would still be mocked as ‘giba eaters’ even in places other than Genos...?”

With that, Vina Ruu stared off towards the distant north, ennui in her eyes.

“So you want to go somewhere far away because you hate hearing that?”

“No... That’s not it, but... Well no, maybe it is. But at any rate, I want to live a naked life...”

“N-Naked?”

“Yes... At the forest’s edge, I’m the eldest daughter of the main Ruu house. In the post town, I’m just a giba eater woman... The only ones to acknowledge me for who I am are my family. But I want all sorts of people to see the real, naked me. Or at least, I think that’s what I want...” She shot me a coquettish glance. “Maybe that’s why I’m so drawn to you... The common sense of both the forest’s edge and the post town don’t weigh you down. So I figured, maybe you could see me as just me...”

“Y-You hadn’t thought things through that deeply back when you made your move at me, did you? I mean, back then the two of us had hardly even talked...”

“Right... At first I was just attracted to your background, how you had come from so far away that you didn’t even know the name of the continent. But I still don’t think I could even have done something like that if I wasn’t also drawn to you personally, too...”

Vina Ruu definitely seemed passionate when working, but it seemed that her emotions started to get all stirred up when she had too much time on her hands.

I started to wonder secretly to myself if Tara would pop up around now and glanced around the highway. And then, I spotted a nice looking target.

“Ah! Is that a foreigner, from somewhere other than Genos?”

It was a man with skin that was neither yellowish-brown nor ivory, but rather white with a touch of ruddiness to it. He was very short and stout, and his hair was a dark brown. And he was still a bit far away so it was hard to make him out in detail, but he looked like he had some facial hair.

He had on a sleeveless vest and cylindrical legged pants, making for an outfit that reminded me a bit of the one young Leito wore, and he was walking along from the south while browsing the shops to his left and right.

“What country was a pale-skinned guy like that born in?”

“Huh...? He’s from the Southern Kingdom of Jagar, isn’t he?”

So that was it, huh?

Well, ruling out the enemy nation to the north, that had to be where he was from, using process of elimination. The people of the forest's edge had originally come from the south and had light brown skin, so it made sense that the other folks from there shared a similar lineage.

"So the folks with yellowish-brown skin are the Genos natives, right? But there are just about the same amount of ivory skinned folks around, so where are they from?"

"They're all citizens of the west... When I was little, Granny Jiba once told me that Genos was far and away the most peaceful and abundant land in the country, so people from all over came here to live and work."

Ah, I see.

So there were folks who settled here in Genos decades ago, as well as folks who were born and raised here. I felt like now I could understand why even though they were detached from the situation, so many people from the south and east seemed to fear and despise the people of the forest's edge more than pureblooded Genos citizens did.

They weren't all travelers, so some of them must have had that mindset to begin with. But if it was possible to break that mindset, that could surely spread to the indigenous people of Genos, too.

Well, putting all that aside, I had business to take care of.

The southern man was still steadily walking along and browsing, so things were looking good.

He didn't have much in the way of luggage about him and was pretty lightly outfitted, so he probably wasn't going to cut on through and keep heading north. While praying to myself that he would come close enough that I wouldn't have to shout, I started stealthily chopping up a mini burger to use for samples.

"Asuta... Since he's from the south, I think it would be better for you to handle him."

"Huh? Why's that?"

"There are still quite a few older folks from the south who view the people of

the forest's edge with hatred. They call us nothing but betrayers who tossed aside the southern god, Jagar..."

So not contempt and fear, but downright hatred, huh?

But even though I saw roughly the same proportion of white-skinned southerners as dark-skinned easterners, I didn't recall sensing that many threatening glares.

"Yes, well that's because there are more people from their enemy nation of Sym wandering around, so normally they have their hands full glaring at them, I guess..."

"Huh? The Eastern and Southern Kingdoms are enemies?"

"You really don't know anything, do you Asuta...?" Vina Ruu asked, half looking astounded but also half pleased, and she wore a smile. "There's just as old of a feud between the east and south as there is between the north and west. But since the west is friendly with both of them, they're forbidden from causing any trouble here... And if they break that rule, they won't be allowed to step foot on western land ever again, so they apparently won't go causing a commotion so lightly."

It seemed the people of the Ruu clan may possess a whole lot more information than Ai Fa, who lacked any relatives.

But at any rate, I had to focus on business.

It seemed like the man from the south was just killing time, as he was carefully looking over each stall, but he didn't appear to be buying anything.

When I saw he had finally stopped at the accessory shop next to us, I went, *Yes!* in my head and gave a little fist pump.

It was then that my gaze met with the man's.

He was older than I had been thinking. In fact, he may have even been in his fifties.

He had a big head and a square face, and his back was short but well built. In fact, he looked more well built in general than the citizens of Genos. And he had an impressive moustache and beard combo going on, too.

The green eyes that sparkled under his bushy eyebrows didn't quite look calm and gentle, though.

Once the man finished with the accessory shop, he stomped on over towards our stall.

"Giba? You're selling giba meat of all things?"

I was trying to respond with a smile, but the man kept on pressing and cut that off.

"What are you, an idiot? Who'd eat something as smelly and hard as that? You're the only ones who will dare eat that crap. And then you impertinently went and used tarapa, too. You fools don't even know what good food tastes like, so you should just stick to eating aria and poitan. You really should close up shop and get lost, before you lose all your precious horns and tusks."

His cutting words came like a machine gun, not giving me a chance to get in a single word edgewise.

And then, once he seemed to have said his piece, the man turned to leave.

"Um! You say all that, but giba meat is delicious. If you'd like, please taste one of these bits of meat here."

"Huh?" he questioned as he turned around, shooting me a disgruntled glare.

"Are you a complete and utter idiot, boy? Why should I have to eat damn giba meat? They sell kimyuus and karon here in town. There are much better meats all around to be had. It's downright nonsense trying to sell giba in the middle of all that, you fool. Besides, if I eat that crap my skin'll turn brown like you people, and everyone'll turn a cold shoulder to me too."

"T-That's nothing but pure prejudice! I mean, I've eaten a ton of giba meat, and you can see how I look."

I'd expected to run into a customer like this eventually. In fact, it might even be reasonable to say he was relatively light on fear and contempt compared to most, making him not too bad to handle.

"What's a kid like you doing dressed up like a person of the forest's edge and selling giba meat...? Aha. So you were seduced by that temptress there, weren't

you? You're a real fool. But well, no matter how stupid you may be, your life is yours to live. If you like that woman that badly, then just go live in the forest with her. Then nobody would give you any grief."

"No, but giba meat really is tasty. I thought it would be a shame if this delicious meat could only be had at the forest's edge, so I decided to open this shop. These samples are free, so if you don't mind, why don't you give it a try and see for sure whether or not I'm just being tricked?"

My sales smile was perfect, I figured.

And yet, the man just snorted, "Hmph," and stood directly facing me. Then, he glared at the plate of samples and said, "Looks real unappetizing."

He'd been heaping a storm of abuse my way this whole time, but perhaps because he wasn't raising his voice, I wasn't sensing much animosity or ill will from him.

The main impression I was getting was that he was surprisingly talkative despite his boorish appearance.

"So this is free, right? You won't make me pay you anything, no matter what?"

"Yes, of course," I replied with a smile and a nod.

As frustrated wrinkles formed on his brow, the man reached out and grabbed a toothpick with his thick fingers.

Then, he tossed the chunk of mini burger, which I had cut into six parts, into his mouth, chewed thoroughly, then swallowed.

Finally, he glared at me once again.

"...It was crap. You really are being led along."

"Huh?"

"It didn't stink as bad as I expected, and it wasn't hard at all. But it was all gushy and had an unpleasant texture, and the taste was too heavy, like I could feel it clogging up my nose. It doesn't even compare to kimyuus or karon. You seem to have cooked up the tarapa real nice, but it just got completely ruined by everything else. You really think anyone would pay you coins for this? The

fact that you're happy with crap like this is why people mock you and call you 'giba eaters,' you know."

Could it be...? Was he really, truly someone whose tastes it just didn't suit? That seemed to be the case for both the texture of the hamburger and the taste of the giba meat.

It wasn't as if I hadn't predicted this ever happening, but it was just such a sudden development.

"Asuta..." Vina Ruu whispered, gripping the fabric at my hip.

I was feeling a bit shaken, but regardless I followed Vina Ruu's gaze...

And saw a group in familiar leather cloaks rapidly approaching.

5

"W-What do you guys want?! This is western territory! You planning on starting something here?!" the man yelled, finally raising his voice for the first time.

The cloaked group, meanwhile, just wrapped around the man and the stall to half encircle the place.

And there were quite clearly more of them today than there had been yesterday.

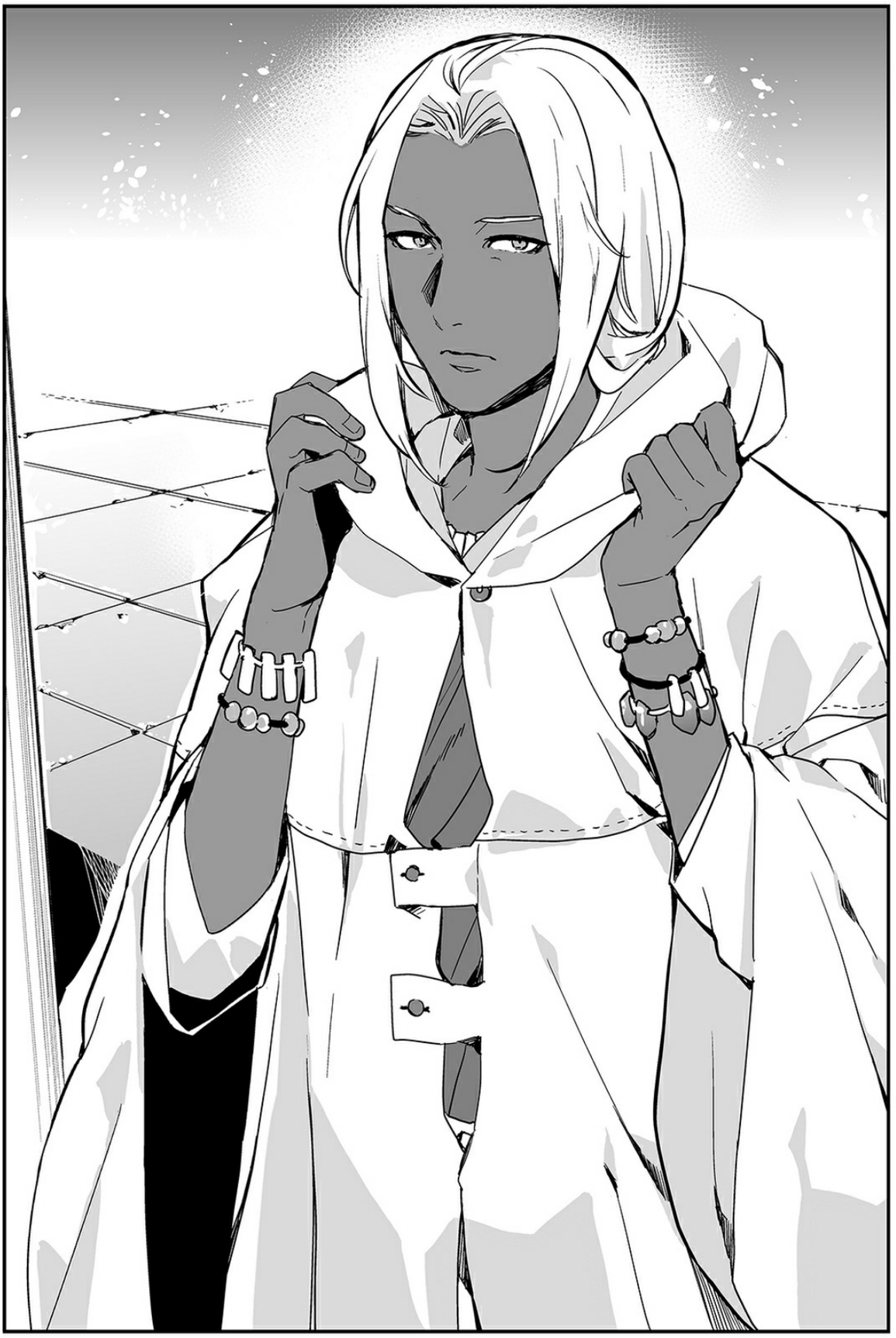
"...We have no plan, to cause trouble," one of the group said, shocking me by using the language of the west, albeit a touch awkwardly.

"We came, to buy, giba meat. We'll wait, our turn."

As he said that, the hood of the man's cloak flipped back.

His skin was quite dark, and he had raised, narrow eyes, as well as a thin nose and lips.

Yes, his facial features were a lot like those of the youth from yesterday... but his hair was silver like Granny Jiba's. And yet, he looked young. His hair wasn't the result of old age, but rather he was just born that way.



“We will wait, our turn. We will have, ten, please.”

“W-What, are you all soft in the head? I can’t exactly imagine you’re sane if you want to pay for that disgusting meat. It’s like just throwing your money straight into the stove. Just let the people of the forest’s edge eat that crap. I can’t imagine it would make you all get any darker skinned, but still, it’ll just ruin your mood to eat awful meat like that, right?”

The silver-haired youth tilted his head, looking confused.

“I, still haven’t, eaten it. But, my allies, seven of them, ate it yesterday. They all, said, it was delicious. That is why, we ten, came here... Ten, please.”

“...Right. Thanks for your business!”

With that, I set about dicing up tino and aria, still feeling a little shaken up at hearing giba meat face such slander.

And in the meantime, my ten customers started silently clanking their coins down on my counter.

“I can’t believe this. So you folks from Sym don’t know what good meat tastes like, either? Because that crap’s not fit for normal humans to eat. If you want meat, then you should eat kimyuus or karon or something.”

It was some rather extreme interference with my business, but he still wasn’t raising his voice as he said it, and my customers from Sym didn’t seem to be paying him any heed, so it was nothing for me to worry about.

At any rate, I kept on working away at the ten giba burgers.

I handed the first of them over to the silver-haired youth, who sure enough silently ate it with a blank expression, gave a big nod, then turned to face the man from the south.

“Giba, tastes good. For two red, I am satisfied.”

“That’s just crazy talk. What the hell’s wrong with your tongue? Hey, everyone, get over here!” the man loudly yelled out.

With that, a new group came on over, all of them pale-skinned.

The cloaked group all smoothly clustered together, seemingly to make room

for the newcomers. However, they kept munching away at their giba burgers all the while.

“What is it, Pops? Feels a little tense over here,” a young Jagar fellow from the new group asked in a bit of a coarse tone. Sure enough, the youth had dark brown hair, green eyes, and a short yet well built physique.

It seemed that in general, folks from Jagar weren’t built all that big. There were now eight people from Jagar gathered here including the first man, but only one or two of them looked like they may be taller than me. But all of them had sturdy physiques and rather fierce looking faces. Their hair colors and ages varied, but the majority of them had scraggly hair on their heads.

“Just look at them. They say that giba meat of all things is delicious and are eating it up. I had a bit too, but it wasn’t anything worth paying coins for. Did folks from Sym always have no taste?” There was a restlessness to his voice. It seemed he really was well and truly mad at this point.

“Pops, you ate giba meat? There’s no way that tasted good, right?” the youth from Jagar questioned, glancing over us and grabbing the man by his thick arm. “...Plus, it’s best not to get involved with the people of the forest’s edge. They’re even more trouble than guys from Sym. If you cause too much of a fuss, who knows what’ll happen to you later, right?”

“Nothing I’m saying is wrong. They’re the ones in the wrong. And if you think I’m lying, then you all try it, too.”

“I’ve got no interest in eating damn giba meat.”

“Enough already, just try it. Hey you, feed them your giba meat.”

It was an extremely heavy-handed demand... but it was also a precious opportunity. There were a lot of folks from Jagar around town, but if they didn’t like giba meat by nature, that would be a real serious issue.

These giba burgers were ultimately just a curveball. I had figured that even if their unique texture turned out to be a problem, I could always recover by offering some simple grilled meat dishes instead.

But this guy they’d been calling “Pops” had a problem with the taste of the giba meat itself. And that was in spite of the fact that I had used the rather

strong tarapa sauce alongside it, too.

Was that down to the general tastes of folks from Jagar, or just Pops's personal opinion? No matter what abusive language may come my way as a result, I couldn't let this chance to give out samples and find the answer slip by me.

And so, I scooped out a mini burger from the pot onto the plate, then split it up into six parts. Five parts from the first sample were still sitting there too. I placed the plate atop the counter, held out enough toothpicks for everyone, and said, "Please, go ahead."

Three of the group who looked to be on the older side went first and reached out without any hesitation.

Then, Pops chimed in and said, "Hey, you all try it too," pushing the younger folks forward. And so, they started grabbing toothpicks, too.

By the way, the cloaked group had all finished their giba burgers in the meantime, but for some reason they didn't leave, even though they didn't look overly interested and were just standing there silently.

"Well? It's gross, right?" Pops questioned, crossing his arms while looking over his allies.

As for the other men... Their expressions all seriously varied.

"If it's gross, then come out and say it."

Only two out of the group responded to him.

One of the old-timers said, "It's bad," and one of the younger crowd followed up with, "It isn't especially good."

"Just the two of you?" Pops replied, his eyes opening wide in shock.

It sort of reminded me of a look I had seen from Donda Ruu in days past.

"What about the rest of you? You're not going to say it's good, are you?"

"...It's not bad," one of the older men replied, while one of the youths agreed, "It's decently tasty."

That left the biggest of the old-timers, the youth who looked even younger

than me, and the young guy with the coarse tongue who spoke earlier, all of whom were standing there looking dumbfounded.

“...It’s delicious,” that last youth muttered.

“W-What the...? Is this really giba meat?”

“Yes. It’s genuine giba meat, not karon or kimyuus.”

I was still feeling pretty darn on edge inside, but even so, I replied with a smile.

“The cost for one is two red coins. You can place an order, if you’d like.”

“Two red coins, huh...?” the large old-timer pondered, then pushed his way past the younger men.

His body was nice and filled out, and he looked to have a good number of years under his belt. Certainly, he didn’t look any less fierce than Pops.

That man said, “I’ll have one,” and offered me his coins.

“Thank you! Please hold on just a moment.”

“Aldas! You’re seriously paying for this awful crap?”

The man called Aldas turned and faced Pops with a look of annoyance on his face.

“Pops, if it wasn’t to your taste, then it wasn’t, but don’t go shouting about it in front of the shop like that. You know if the guards come they’ll haul you away, right?”

“B-But...”

“You may not like it, but to me it’s delicious enough to die for. Stuff like that varies from person to person. It’s nothing to cause such a fuss about.”

It varies from person to person...

Right, giba meat had a quirkiness to it. It was just down to my personal tastes, thinking it was more delicious than beef, pork, or kimyuus meat. So with this many people around, it wasn’t strange at all for some of them to not like it.

I had already assumed that much. And yet, I had felt something boiling and

simmering up inside me even so. That was proof that I still had a ways to go as a chef.

“Hey, one for me, too,” the youngest looking of the Jagar group, who had been standing there kind of flabbergasted, chimed in and held out his coins.

“Thank you!” I replied while handing a completed burger to my first customer, then another of the men stepped forward, saying, “That looks pretty good.” It had been the youth who had called it “decently tasty.”

“I’ll have one too, kid.”

“Right! Thank you!”

“M-M-Me too!” the youth who had been talking down on my cooking at the start called out, making up his mind and holding out his coins.

Among the seven of them... No wait, eight including Pops, now four of them had made a purchase.

Half of these people had acknowledged my cooking.

While feeling a tinge of disappointment, I solemnly accepted that result.

So it had altogether good reception from the people of the east, but was about 50-50 amongst the folks from the south, huh? I suppose maybe the types of flavors you like really does vary based on the country you’re born in...

As that thought ran through my head, I diced up some more tino and aria.

In the meantime, that large Aldas fellow who made the first purchase exclaimed, “Man, that was good!” in admiration. His stern, stone-like face was overflowing with earnest surprise and joy. “So giba meat was this delicious? Just who was it that said giba was hard and stinky? Because I definitely like this stuff, even over karon.”

When I glanced over, I saw that guy called Pops who seemed like the group’s leader scratching his head and wearing a real sour expression on his face.

“This tarapa is fantastic, too. That sourness hits just right. And what’s this vegetable mixed with the tino?”

“That’s raw aria, thinly diced.”

“Raw aria?! Oh, yes, that slight bite to it goes so well with this meat. Man, it’s making me feel like I wanna chug down some fruit wine or something.”

“That’s for sure. Hey, we didn’t see you in the afternoon yesterday, so do you not stay open till that time of day?”

“Yes. It takes some time to get back home to the forest’s edge, so we close up in the early afternoon.”

“That’s a shame. I’d love to buy two of these instead of paying the inn four coins for dinner.”

These folks from the south all had fierce looking faces when they were staying silent, but unlike the group from the east, they also showed extremely varied expressions.

And when I saw them loudly proclaiming how delicious my food was, it tugged my heart in all sorts of different directions, too.

“Man, that was good! Hey, are you going to be out here at this time again tomorrow?”

“Yes. At least for now, I intend to stay open for another nine days.”

“That so? We’re here in town till the end of next month, so we’ll come here every day for a meal.”

“Thank you! I’ll be awaiting your next visit.”

With that, the men from the south started to disperse.

Pops was still standing there with a sour look on his face, but Aldas gave him a light jab on the shoulder.

“Come on, let’s get going, Pops. It’s about time for work, right?”

And yet, Pops shot me a scary look and said, “Hey. That tarapa was good, so use kimyuus or karon instead of giba. If you did, I’d pay you some coins, too.”

“...I’m sorry. Right now, I don’t have any plans to use any meat but giba. But eventually, I do plan to start selling other dishes using it...”

“No matter what you make, the giba meat will ruin it,” the old-timer muttered, then he left.

Then, I glanced over and saw that the group in the cloaks still hadn't budged so much as an inch.

However, the silver-haired youth at the head of the group then slowly approached.

"Saying giba meat, is bad, is strange. To me, it's very tasty."

"Thank you very much. If you'd like, then I'd love to have you stop by again sometime."

"We'll come, tomorrow. Once nine days, are over, will you stop, doing this shop?"

"No. If it looks like I can continue, then I'd like to keep on doing so."

"It would make me happy, if you kept doing it. We'll come, each day. We are here, for all of the blue month."

The blue month... That must have meant next month, right?

I believe Kamyua said his job started on the 15th of next month, so I figured the month must have been just about to turn over.

"I am, the head of the, merchant group 'Silver Vase,' Shumiral Zi Sadumtino."

"Huh?"

"I am, Shumiral Zi Sadumtino. What, is your name?"

"Ah... I'm Asuta of the Fa clan."

"Asuta. Thank you. We'll come back, tomorrow."

With that, the group from Sym also departed.

"That was... amazing. We just sold 14 at once...?" Vina Ruu, who had been silently stirring the contents of the pot the whole time, suddenly chimed in for the first time in a while. "That just leaves six, right...? At this rate, we'll probably sell them all, won't we?"

"That's right. I'm super happy about it."

"And yet you look like you're feeling many other things besides happiness... Why?"

“Ah, well... I mean, I guess I’m just frustrated about being told giba meat was gross after all. That’s the first time I’ve had something like that happen since Donda Ruu called my hamburgers poison.”

“I think the person saying that is the strange one in this case, though... My father just didn’t like the softness of the hamburgers, but those men were saying the giba meat itself didn’t taste good. There must be something wrong with their tongues...”

“That’s not true. Tastes just vary from person to person.”

Through my showdown with Donda Ruu, I had been reminded of that completely obvious fact.

And I’m sure the fact that my cooking earned a generally positive reception from the people of the forest’s edge and the folks from Sym was of course influenced by what they had eaten up till then, too.

I knew all that. I really did, but... Even so, that sense of defeat whirling around in my chest still wouldn’t subside.

Maybe that wasn’t even my pride as a chef, but just my childish frustration at having someone badmouth something I liked.

In that case, I should just shut those feelings away deep inside. But still... The people of the south were supposed to have less prejudice than those from the west, but they were the ones to say the giba meat wasn’t good. I’ve got to keep that fact firmly in mind as I plan how to move forward.

“Ah... Asuta, it’s that man who sells the vegetables.”

“Huh?” I questioned, looking up to find Dora and Tara coming our way from the south.

I shot them a slightly relieved smile, but then went “Huh?” and tilted my head.

There were two unfamiliar men following behind the father and daughter. They both had yellowish-brown skin and looked to be around Dora’s age. And they had the same sort of majorly strained smiles on their faces as the old-timer did when I first met him.

“Hey there, Asuta. How are things going?”

“Thanks for asking. Today’s going well. I mean, we’ve already sold 14.”

“Huh?! Then you’ll be out soon?”

“We have six left. There’s still plenty of time left till the sun hits its peak, so I’m certainly happy about it.”

“I see. I’m glad to hear it. Um... I’d like to have these two try those sample things, if that’s alright.”

The faces of those two men were now twitching in front of me and Vina Ruu.

“Of course. I’d appreciate that, myself, but... Who are these men?”

“They’re old acquaintances of mine. One sells cloth, and the other pots.”

“Ah! Are you the guy I bought this pot from?”

“Th-That’s right. I-I’m surprised you remember.”

Most men in their prime here in Genos were well built, so a scrawny guy like this really left an impression.

“These guys wouldn’t believe me even when I told them giba meat is delicious, so I dragged them here. So can you let them have a taste?”

“Naturally! Hold on just a moment. I’ll heat them back up for you.”

There were exactly two samples left on the plate, so I soaked them in the piping hot sauce, then placed them back on the plate.

The men from the pot and cloth shops exchanged a look, forcing smiles but looking like they were about to cry.

Tara watched the meat out of the corner of her eye as she tugged on her father’s arm.

“Dad, I’m hungry...”

“Ah, right. Asuta, could we order one from you in the meantime?”

“Thank you. It really does make me glad, hearing that the two of you are so fond of them.”

“I’m glad too, to have met folks like you from the forest’s edge.”

As he said that, he glanced over at Vina Ruu.

Vina Ruu smiled back, looking a bit troubled.

“We’re all citizens of the west, but for some reason I just couldn’t bring myself to think of the people of the forest’s edge as my brethren. Even now, when I see any of those terrifying men, I just freeze in place, but... But even so, I really am glad to know that there are folks like you among them, too.”

As Dora accepted the giba burger, he gave a bright smile.

“Come by my shop again sometime. I’d like to have you eat some of the aria I’ve grown.”

“Yes, well, I’ll be sure to tell my family that, too...”

With a happy smile on his face, Dora bit into the giba burger.

“Ah... This giba burger thing really is delicious. I’m seriously happy knowing the vegetables I grew are being used in such wonderful cooking.”

“No, it’s because the ingredients themselves are delicious in the first place that I was able to make such a tasty dish. I’ll keep on counting on you for delicious aria and tarapa, Dora.”

“I can proudly take on that task, at least.”

With that, Dora turned to face his two friends.

“So, how long do you two plan on staying huddled up like that? You already left your shops and came all the way here, so at least give it a try.”

“W-We were forcefully dragged here, though,” the pot seller grumbled, but even so he still reached out for a sample. Though he trembled a bit, he picked up the toothpick, worked up his nerves, and tossed the little chunk of meat into his mouth.

“H-How is it?” the cloth seller asked, tugging on his friend’s arm.

“...It’s good. Seriously, it’s such a mysterious taste...”

“Ah, it’s made by finely chopping up meat and then balling it back up. So it might make for a bit of an unusual texture.”

The pot seller’s eyes seriously started to drift about. Then, he made up his

mind and dug around in his clothing around his chest using those slender fingers of his.

“I-I’ll have one too! I won’t quite understand it if I don’t eat a bit more.”

“Right, thank you!”

“H-Hey, are you serious...?”

With that, the cloth seller grabbed a toothpick, too.

“Whoa, this is just plain tasty, isn’t it?!” he exclaimed, his eyes opening wide in shock as he peered into the pot. “This is really giba meat...? And man, this tarapa is really good, too!”

“Of course. I grew that tarapa, after all,” Dora chimed in, puffing his chest up with pride.

“W-What are you getting a big head over?” the cloth seller replied with a weak chuckle. Then he turned to me and said, “A-Alright, I’ll have one too! U-Um, it won’t make me grow horns or turn my skin all dark, will it...?”

“You believe in those superstitions? I’ve never seen a person of the forest’s edge with horns, and according to my grandmother they look the same as they did when they first came here from the southern forest.”

“I-I know that! Alright, give me one!”

“Thank you,” I said earnestly from the depths of my heart.

Yes, I really did have a ways to go, seeing as I was shaken by every little thing, whether I was getting all depressed from someone saying my cooking tasted bad or feeling happy when someone said it was good.

But at any rate, my fight was still only just getting started.

From tomorrow on, I would prepare 40 giba burgers.

And if it looks like those will sell out too, then I may have to start thinking of unveiling a new dish even sooner than I had planned.

Yes, I had a whole ton of things to consider.

Anyway, Kamyua Yoshu showed up out of nowhere like a ghost again and ordered one each for him and Leito, so once again we ended up completely

selling out in less than an hour.

6

It was now the evening of the following day, our third day of business.

I was currently sprawled out on the floor in the Fa house's main hall, when suddenly there were two knocks on the door.

"Asuta, it's me," I heard Ai Fa's voice say.

I peeled my indescribably exhausted body from of the fur carpet, then headed towards the entrance to remove the bolt.

When I did so and opened the door, I saw my beloved benefactor for the first time in half a day, only to suddenly hear, "What's with that drained look on your face? Did you not even sell one today? Even if that's the case, don't make such a pathetic expression in front of me. It's unpleasant."

"Ugh... What about you? The number of giba around has steadily been decreasing lately, right?"

"I took one down. However, it got overly damaged in the process, so I wasn't able to bloodlet it well."

"I see. Good work. The most important thing is that you weren't hurt."

"Like I said, what's with that look? If you don't tell me the gist of things, I really will get angry."

"I'm just a bit tired, so don't worry about it. I'll get my energy back soon enough just from being with you, anyway..."

"Don't say such foolish nonsense. It's displeasing, so fix yourself right away."

My clan head sure didn't show mercy.

"What in the world happened? There must have been some sort of problem for you to look so incredibly drained, right?"

"It sure was something, yeah... Today, the guards ended up getting called."

"What? What do you mean?" she asked, suddenly grabbing me by the collar.

“What in the world did you do? You were supposed to just be working seriously, weren’t you?”

“I was doing that! And thanks to that, we sold out of all 40 burgers for today! But that was how the guards ended up getting summoned...”

“...I don’t understand. Explain it to me.”

She pushed me away, hung her cloak on the wall, and leaned her sword up against it too.

While watching her look every bit as gallant as always as she did so, I moved over towards the stove and sat down next to it.

“Folks from both the south and east gathered immediately when we opened the shop today, and we sold our first 20 burgers in no time at all.”

“Right.”

“And I brought more today, so I went ahead and prepared the other 20 in a big hurry. Once I finished them, people bought four more, including Tara and her dad.”

“Yes.”

“That left 16... But then, that Silver Vase group and the guys from Jagar showed up all at once. And both of those groups wanted ten each.”

“Hmm? But didn’t you say they showed up when the shop opened?”

“No, the folks who showed up first all heard tell of the shop from those groups, and they were all first time customers. Apparently, folks from the south and east each have their own preferred inns so they won’t run into each other much. And it seems that the giba burgers have become a big topic of discussion in those places.”

“...Right.”

“And so, since there were ten folks in both groups and only 16 burgers left, I told them I’d sell ten to the Silver Vase since they just barely got there first, and the remaining six to the folks from the south. But then, they yelled out, ‘At least make it fair and do eight each!’”

“I see.”

“The guys from the east had no intention of yielding either, though... And since the commotion showed no signs of dying down, some passersby called for the guards.”

“Oh? If that was the case, then only the ones causing the commotion would be punished, right?”

“Yeah, but that’s not how it turned out. They reached the conclusion that I was the initial cause of the problem, so I was entirely at fault, and I just barely avoided getting banned from the post town.”

“Is that the law in the city...?” Ai Fa questioned, anger flickering in her eyes.

“I-I don’t know anything about that. But at any rate, I managed to persuade them, so don’t worry about it. Plus, I really had screwed up by not preparing enough... That fact at least has been weighing heavily on me.”

“I see... That certainly sounds rough.”

Ai Fa lightly shook her head, clearing away the anger that had started to sprout in her.

“Good work today... And now, I’m hungry, Asuta.”

“...You really don’t know mercy, do you?”

“I said good work to you, didn’t I? Now I understand the reason behind your fatigue. I get it, so hurry up and do something about that depleted look on your face.”

I massaged the sides of my face, wondering if it really looked that bad.

Well, it was true that in the few hours since the guards released me, I had been running my mind and body full blast, so maybe I just didn’t have any energy left to spare.

It was times like this that taking in nutrition was important.

“Alright! I’ll get to work preparing dinner, then!”

“...I didn’t say you should force yourself to sound overly cheerful.”

Oh, I see.

I just meekly started adding fire to the stove in order to heat up the already prepared soup.

“Still, it’s rather remarkable that you managed to sell 40 meals on just your third day, isn’t it?” Ai Fa asked, sounding a bit perplexed as she sat beside the stove with one knee raised. “And yet, you still don’t look even the least bit happy.”

“Well, I mean, I’m glad to have sold better than expected, but I’m still not in a position where I can just be happy about it. To me, it feels like I’m still standing on the edge of a cliff.”

“The edge of a cliff...?”

“Our ultimate goal is to have the taste of giba meat spread throughout the post town, right? But so far, only four people born in Genos have even tasted the giba burgers. No matter how popular they may get among folks from the east and south, those people will all eventually leave town. So at this rate, I’m earning some change, but I’m not any closer to carrying out our goal, right?”

Thanks to today’s investigation by the guards, I learned all about the background of my customers.

Just as they had said, the group from Sym was part of the merchant group known as the Silver Vase. They were traveling around to towns in the west and north for a year with goods made of precious metals and the like from their home country, doing business as they went.

And apparently the folks from Jagar were part of a somewhat famous construction group that had built a great number of buildings around the post town.

That guy called “Pops” who utterly rejected giba meat was their leader, and supposedly they were in the area doing repairs on older buildings.

“And so, both the Silver Vase and that construction group will be leaving at the end of next month. And all those other folks are just here to work, not residents of Genos. Right now, 90% of the giba burgers are selling to them, so folks from around Genos have still hardly had a chance to taste it.”

“But... wasn’t your plan always to start by selling to folks from the south and

east?”

“Well, that may be so, but it still wouldn’t do if I get hauled away by the guards before my cooking can build up a reputation, right? The next time something happens, I really may end up getting banned... So, I’m standing on the edge of a cliff.”

The cold glares from the guards and Milano Mas were still burned into my mind.

Their eyes pretty much said, “So the people of the forest’s edge really are just heathens who disturb the peace here in town...”

It was utterly unreasonable. I couldn’t help but think that if we were anybody but the people of the forest’s edge, we wouldn’t have been handled so harshly.

But even so, we had made up our minds to keep on selling despite that animosity as people living at the forest’s edge.

We couldn’t afford to get sloppy from here on out.

This really did drive it home again, the fact that I was up against the entire town in this fight.

“...Your face is finally back to normal,” Ai Fa said from up close.

I turned in surprise and found that she was now standing right next to me.

“Also, you’re a surprisingly greedy man, Asuta.”

“G-Greedy?”

“How many coins did you earn over these three days?”

“Huh? Well, putting all three days together I sold 70, which makes for 140 red coins. Subtracting out the initial fee, Vina Ruu’s daily wages, and the cost of the ingredients, that should make for 77 red coins of pure profit.”

“That means you made as much as hunting six giba’s worth would earn you in just three days, doesn’t it?”

“Those things can’t be compared. After all, no matter how much I earn, it doesn’t put even the slightest dent in the number of giba around. The work of a hunter is totally different.”

Now that I thought about it, my quota for these ten days was 60 meals.

I certainly hadn't foreseen clearing that on just the third day.

As I kept on stirring the soup, Ai Fa stood by my side with a smile on her face.

"That's the thinking of the people of the forest's edge. But townsfolk work and sweat solely to earn coins, don't they?"

"I told you though, that's not our goal, right? Well, I would be really glad if this money could go towards buying new pots and blades, though."

"...That's why I said you're greedy," Ai Fa said with a smile, an incredibly peaceful light shining in her eyes.

I still didn't understand, though.

"What, are you saying I'm greedy because I'm not happy with selling and earning more than expected? In that case, you must think I'm pretty awful."

"That's not it. It's that you aren't blinded by coins and keep on pushing to achieve your original goal. You have a greedy desire for victory."

"...Then at least phrase it as me hating to lose. 'Greedy' makes it sound way too negative," I complained while stirring around the contents of the pot, which had heated up quite a bit by now.

"Very well," Ai Fa replied, drawing even closer. She ruffled my hair (I had already removed my towel) while bringing her face up near mine.

"You hate to lose, Asuta."

She smiled so wide that her white teeth were on clear display, calling to mind a mischievous child.

That type of smile was rare for Ai Fa, and was more the type of thing I expected from Ludo Ruu.

It was rare for her to openly smile in the first place, so I was seriously taken aback.

"...Anyway, I'm hungry, Asuta."

"Ah, right. I guess this is plenty hot enough. I'm going to grill up the meat, so could you help me move this?"

“This” referred to the giba soup I had completed earlier. The pot was still warm, and there was only just enough in there for two people, so it would heat back up in no time.

Once we moved that to a board set in the back, I placed a new pot on the stove, then got a wooden plate I had prepared in advance. Ai Fa looked at it with confusion on her face.

“What is tonight’s dinner? There’s some sort of smell to it that I’m not familiar with.”

“That’s right. I purchased a new ingredient to try out tonight. Well, I say ingredient, but it’s really more of a spice.”

Atop the wooden plate, a giba rib and shoulder roast were submerged in a red liquid. It was fruit wine with finely diced aria and my new ingredient, myamuu, making for a marinade.

“Myamuu?”

“Right, myamuu. It’s a vegetable that was used in that kimyuus manju I ate.”

It was a spice like a cross between garlic and coriander, making for a complex aroma that seriously stirred the appetite.

It came in green stalks about as thick as a straw, and if you bit into it raw, it was incredibly spicy. I had diced it thinly enough to turn it into a paste just like with the aria, and added it to the marinade.

“I’d been interested in it for a while, but I didn’t even know its name or anything. I asked Dora about it today, and I finally managed to pin it down. I’m sure this would probably go well with the tarapa sauce, too.”

As I explained, I started by sauteing some aria I had cut into thin slices. When those were nice and soft, I added in the marinated meat while making sure it spread properly around. Instantly, the smell of fruit wine and myamuu filled the room.

“What do you think? Doesn’t that smell seriously get to you?”

“...For some reason, I suddenly feel extremely hungry.”

Well, that made sense. I was a novice when it came to coriander, but I

thought it made for a wonderful aroma for stimulating an appetite when you paired together the smells of grilled meat and garlic.

Back in my old world there was no shortage of people who avoided it because it was too strong of a smell, but myamuu didn't leave as strong of a lingering scent as garlic. Plus, I'd seen plenty of women and children eating those kimyuus manju, which firmed up my resolve to use that powerful aroma in my cooking.

By the way, this wasn't sold by vegetable sellers, but rather shops that handled rock salt and dried goods, and was an ingredient I hadn't seen in the Ruu pantry.

"Alright, now that the surface of the meat is nice and grilled, I'll be adding this in too."

With that, I poured the rest of the marinade from the plate into the pot. The procedure I used was the same as with ginger pork. In my head, I thought myamuu giba would work as a name.

"Asuta."

"Hmm?"

"I'm hungry."

"Ah, right, that's the fourth time you've said that now, isn't it? It's pretty much finished, so just hold on a moment."

Once the meat had been heated to temperature all the way through, I moved it to the plate with the aria.

I had sprinkled salt and pico leaves over the giba meat to begin with, so there was no need to season it any further.

Then once the remaining sauce in the pot had heated up enough, I poured it over the meat and aria, completing the dish.

"Ah, the baked poitan are in the pantry. Sorry, but could you dish out the soup?"

"Right."

I hurried to the pantry and brought back the poitan I had baked in the morning, as well as some shredded tino I had prepared.

“This is the raw tino you added to your giba burgers, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. I figured it would probably go well with this dish, too.”

When you think of ginger pork, you think shredded cabbage. And so, shredded tino was sure to go well with myamuu giba, too.

Well, at least if my sensibilities from having grown up in another world matched up, that was.

“Alright! Well then, shall we dig in?”

“...Hey, there’s not much meat on your plate, is there, Asuta?”

“Ah, yeah. When I was figuring out the ratio of marinade to aria and myamuu and how long it should be heated and the like, I ended up eating quite a bit of meat in my taste tests. And so, this much is plenty.”

Ai Fa shot me a bit of a dubious look.

“You seem to have put quite a bit of effort into this... Could you perhaps be planning on selling this dish in the post town, too?”

“Man, you’re sharp! That’s exactly it. It would take too much time to prepare more than 40 giba burgers, so I was thinking I’d start selling this too from tomorrow on. This is how you eat it.”

First up I loaded a heaping helping of shredded tino atop the poitan, which I had stretched out thinner than with the giba burgers. Then I added the meat and aria on top, and finally rolled up the bottom like a crepe, finishing it off.

“It’s dinner, so you have two, Ai Fa. And the remaining aria went into the soup, so make sure to finish it all.”

“...No person of the forest’s edge would leave dinner on their plate.”

“Right, I just wanted to try saying that. Now go ahead and chow down.”

Ai Fa gave a nod, completed her pre-meal ritual, and then picked up her dinner.

Then she knitted her brows a bit, having noticed my gaze.

“Don’t stare at people’s faces.”

“A-Ah, sorry about that. I was just interested in how you’d react.”

Ai Fa looked away with a, “Hmph,” and then bit into the myamuu giba.

Sure enough, she held the dish with both hands, which made her look incredibly adorable.

More important, though, was the flavor.

I didn’t think it had turned out half bad.



I didn’t have any ginger, cooking sake, or soy sauce, so I wasn’t exactly plotting to get close to the flavor of ginger pork. The fruit wine with its heavy sweetness and the strong garlic-like spice and aroma of the myamuu had soaked into the grilled meat to create a rich salty-sweet flavor, which paired perfectly with the shredded tino and baked poitan.

The meat was all less than five millimeters thick. However, it still had a solid bit of chewiness to it. If I messed up with the strength of the flame it could end up too tough for the townsfolk, so I took special care with that.

As I went ahead and prepared my own portion, I turned to Ai Fa and asked, “What do you think?”

“It’s good,” Ai Fa replied, the same as always.

Well, whether it was just plain delicious or still lacking something, Ai Fa wasn’t the sort to put that into words, so it would be hard to drag any more out of her...

“The aroma is nice. It suits this meat well. It’s as good as the steak... Would this aroma go well with steak, too?” she said, giving surprisingly substantial impressions for today. “However... Maybe this sweet of a taste wouldn’t be good with steak? And I wouldn’t want this aroma to go with regular hamburgers. With giba burgers and the tarapa... How would that be? I’m not so sure.”

“Th-That was amazing. That’s the first time you’ve given such in-depth impressions, isn’t it?”

And I found everything she said to be reasonable information.

At any rate, Ai Fa cast her eyes downwards again and looked like she was searching for what to say.

“Also... It definitely tastes good, but it made my throat feel parched. Perhaps... It would taste better to me if the taste wasn’t quite so strong.”

“Ah, I see. The people of the forest’s edge are only used to the rock salt used for dried meat in terms of spices, so I might have flavored it a bit too strong. I’ll try tweaking the portion used for dinner by letting it soak in a bit longer.”

Ai Fa gave a bit of an exhausted sigh, and then stared right at me.

“That’s all I have to say. Don’t ask any more of me. If I have to think anymore, my head will start hurting.”

“Got it. Thanks. That was a big help!”

“...Still, didn’t you say you intended to sell steak and normal grilled meat after the giba burgers? That with those recipes the tastiness of giba meat would be easier to see?”

“Yeah. That really was my plan.”

I adjusted my seating a bit.

“But I told you yesterday how several of my customers said the samples were no good, right? And it seemed like those folks didn’t just dislike the softness of the hamburgers, but the taste of the giba meat itself. So I wanted to try out a stronger seasoning than I’d ever used before. I wondered if there was a method that would preserve the deliciousness of the giba meat, but also cut down on its fairly strong quirkiness.”

“Right.”

“Roughly the same number of people from the south and east are buying my food, but that’s probably because the big dispute over whether it’s good or not has driven up everyone’s curiosity. So even though nobody complained to my face today, I’m sure there were still folks who weren’t satisfied. If things went badly, half of them may have even felt that way.”

Plus, the folks from the east were all so untalkative and expressionless that I had no idea whatsoever how to estimate how many of them were happy with my food.

My number of customers may have been growing day by day, but I didn’t even know how many repeats I was getting. Especially the folks from the south, what with the way their faces were shadowed by those hoods most of the time. I had a hard time making out their features, so recognizing one from another was difficult.

“Well at any rate, there were still folks who said they didn’t like the taste of

the giba burgers even though I used the fairly flavorful tarapa sauce, so rather than pushing the meat's flavor to the forefront with steaks, I figured it would be better to try a dish that suppresses the quirkiness of the meat. And that salted meat or whatever from The Kimyuus's Tail was pretty darn salty, so I figured the townsfolk didn't have any real problem with strong spices."

"...You certainly seem to have given this a lot of thought."

Ai Fa had quickly gobbled down her second myamuu giba, and was now staring at me.

"What was with that depleted look on your face before?"

"Huh? I was just plain exhausted. There was that whole commotion during the day, and then afterwards I had to hurriedly complete this new dish. Plus, I had a whole ton of other things to think about."

I leaned forward a bit as I put together another myamuu giba for Ai Fa.

"Hey, Ai Fa. I never guessed I'd do this much business with just people from the south and east. I intend to make things work somehow tomorrow with the giba burgers and this new dish, but I don't think that will settle the heart of the matter."

"Hmm...?"

"With just one stall, all I can do is sell the myamuu giba after I sell out of the giba burgers. That means I'm not seeing the proper effectiveness of having two dishes on my menu... So it's way sooner than I had expected, but I think it's time to start seriously considering expanding to a second stall."

As she accepted the myamuu giba I was holding out, Ai Fa went "Hmm..." and gave a dignified nod. "If that's what you think, then you can go ahead and do it. I'll trust in your decision."

"No, but I mean, this is pretty important, right? Expanding the number of stalls and personnel will also increase the expenses..."

"But you feel that is a proper path to take to find success, right?"

Ai Fa gently stared back at me.

"I trust in your decision. Don't make me keep saying that over and over."

“...Got it. Thank you.”

I gave a big nod, and Ai Fa shot me back a gentle smile.

“...You really are a greedy man.”

“Hey, I told you, don’t say greedy...”

“You really do hate to lose.”

Well, I had no objection to that.

It was all down to my naive thinking that I hadn’t managed the kind of results I’d wanted in these three days.

If I made a mistake in my judgment, it could lead to this whole plan crashing down. I really felt that with the commotion today.

In the first place, it was strange that I found myself lamenting that folks from the east and south were buying everything up before it reached anybody from the west.

My initial goal was supposed to be having the shop prove successful over the first ten days so that I could roll out a new dish. But now, I couldn’t take things at such a leisurely pace. I had gone over capacity on the third day since opening, so I needed to deal with things quickly.

Vina Ruu had already brought the matter up.

As long as Donda Ruu gave his permission, we could have another person helping out as soon as the day after tomorrow.

If I could just make it through tomorrow somehow, then the day after that I could launch my counterattack.

“Alright! Now it’s time for round two!”

“What’s a ‘round’?”

When I turned and looked her way, I found Ai Fa staring at me with one knee up and her chin resting on her hand.

“H-Huh? You already finished eating, Ai Fa?”

“You’re just slow. You’ve got work to do after this, right? If you don’t hurry up

and eat, you'll end up cutting into the time you have for sleep."

"It's alright. I already made the giba burger patties in my spare time. I just have to cut the meat for the myamuu giba and prepare the tarapa sauce, which'll be easy. The most difficult part will honestly just be baking the poitan tomorrow morning."

Ai Fa was giving me a distant look.

"Hmm? What is it?"

"...No one but me benefits from you staying here at the Fa house. So I was just thinking that you really should be with the Rutim."

"W-What are you talking about? Are you trying to tell me to leave the Fa clan again?"

"Did you really think I would say that at this point?"

Ai Fa's gaze was very gentle.

As I sipped the soup (which had chilled a bit by now), I scratched my head.

"If that's the case, then why are you bringing that up? Please don't make me all uneasy like that."

"I'm happy. Because you chose to stay here, I mean. And because you found a way to do work where you thrive while staying part of the Fa clan."

As she said that, Ai Fa scooched over my way using her hands and knees. Then, she ruffled my hair again. When I stroked her hair I got a body blow for it, yet this was some awfully intimate physical contact.

"U-Um, I kind of feel like I'm a small child or something when you do that."

"Is that so? My father Gil used to do this often when praising me," she said, giving the first pout I'd seen from her in a while.

"Ah, but it doesn't feel bad or anything. I was just a bit embarrassed."

"...I see," Ai Fa said, looking downwards.

I felt a twinge of regret, figuring I'd said something I shouldn't have.

And then...

Ai Fa suddenly got on one knee and hugged her arms around my neck. In an instant, my body and mind were awash in her warmth, fragrance, and strength.

“I’m glad I didn’t lose you back on that night... I’m glad that you chose the Fa rather than the Rutim.”

“A... A-A-Ai Fa?” I questioned, my voice unintentionally cracking.

Her unrelenting strength held my body tight, and her soft hair brushed up against my cheek. I felt like my heart was about to stop. There was an iridescent light flickering in the depths of her eyes. As I vaguely thought that if this sensation continued on for a few more seconds, my nerves would all burn up, that warmth, strength, and fragrance grew distant. Ai Fa sat back on the floor and started childishly scratching her nose.

“...That just now was how I feel.”

“P-Please don’t go shocking me like that...”

I had to firmly plant my hands on the floor to support myself, as I felt like I was about to up and collapse.

“Y-Your dad was a pretty passionate person, huh?”

“Hmm? What’s this about my father Gil?”

“Huh?”

“He has nothing to do with this. I just did what I wanted to just now.”

I sat there, shocked into silence.

“If you found it unpleasant, then I’ll refrain in the future. But just now, I simply couldn’t hold back how I felt... My apologies for interrupting your dinner. Now, go ahead and get back to eating. I’ve gotten a bit sleepy,” Ai Fa said with a composed expression, pointing to my remaining food.

She’s... She’s a million times as bad as Vina Ruu!

Not noticing my mental scream, Ai Fa set about letting down her hair.

“I believe you’re proving plenty successful, but if you think otherwise, then strive even harder... And just as I said before, those coins are your own to use as you please. If you come up short, just tell me.”

“...Is it really alright to be putting such complete trust in me? What if I use the money I earn to buy hair accessories and stuff like that for you?”

“I’d beat you to a pulp.”

“Ah, I see... Got it! In that case, depending on how tomorrow’s sales go, I really will move to expand my business! You won’t go complaining later, right?”

“What are you getting so worked up about?” Ai Fa questioned as she moved her face in closer again, now with her hair down. “Did I make you feel uneasy after all?”

Her face looked a bit displeased and worried.

Still having gotten no further with my dinner, I gave a heavy sigh.

“Of course not. Sorry about that...”

“...You truly are a strange man.”

I didn’t think that was the case at all. And yet, when I saw Ai Fa’s relieved smile, I just couldn’t bring myself to argue.

At any rate, our fight was still only just getting started.

Intermezzo: The Girl from the Post Town

“Listen, you shouldn’t get any closer to people of the forest’s edge, alright, Tara?” Dora said with kind of a scary look after Asuta’s group left the shop.

Tara couldn’t just accept that, so she asked back, “Why? Asuta is a good person. That’s why you said you wanted to thank him, right? But I still can’t be friendly with him at all?”

“I’m sure that Asuta fellow isn’t all that bad. He’s dressed like a person of the forest’s edge, but he must have been born in some town or village somewhere. And that Ai Fa girl who was with him, I’m sure she’s a splendid hunter. But still, it’s just too dangerous to be around the people of the forest’s edge.”

Dora brought his face in closer.

“You’ve seen them going wild about town too, right? There are a lot of savage folks like that among the people of the forest’s edge. So you mustn’t go and approach them when you can avoid it.”

“But... everybody who drinks too much and goes crazy is scary, not just the people of the forest’s edge, right?” Tara questioned.

Dora just brushed her off, though, saying, “When I say no, I mean it. Even when the people of the forest’s edge do something wrong, the guards just let them go. That’s why they think nothing of causing trouble. Nothing good can come from us associating with a dangerous bunch like that... So now that we’ve thanked them properly for saving you, there’s no need to approach them any more than you already have.”

As he said that, Dora peeked out from under the roof of his stall to check the position of the sun.

“Looks like it’s almost the second hour. It’s a little early, but go around and take orders. And no detours, alright?”

“...Right,” Tara replied, still not sounding satisfied, and then left the shop.

The highway was currently overflowing with people. People who lived in the post town, those who came from their farms to work like Tara and her father, and travelers from the south and east. It wasn’t at all rare to see people of the forest’s edge among them, either. Lots of people lived at the forest’s edge, after all, so they came here to the post town to buy food.

Most of them were women, though, so it was pretty uncommon to see a hunter dressed in a giba cloak. And so, when Tara ran into that hunter from the forest’s edge ten days ago, she really was scared.

That man was drinking in the middle of the day, and he drew his blade in town and howled like a beast. And his blazing eyes looked like an animal’s.

But the ones to protect Tara from that ruffian were also people of the forest’s edge: Asuta, who was dressed like a person of the forest’s edge but didn’t look like one, and Ai Fa, a beautiful young woman who wore a giba cloak.

Ai Fa’s eyes shone like an animal’s, too. In fact, if Tara had to say, Ai Fa’s glare looked scarier and stronger than that man’s. But then Ai Fa called that ruffian out for the bad stuff he was doing and saved Tara.

Even so, the guards called Ai Fa and Asuta criminals and tried to take them away. If that traveler, Kamyua Yoshu, hadn’t popped up then, the bad guy may have gotten to go free while the good guys got arrested.

Why is that? That drunk said he was “part of the ruling clan,” so... Maybe only the people of the forest’s edge who are part of that clan are bad? Tara thought to herself as she walked.

Tara liked Asuta’s eyes, which were black like a person from Sym and really sparkly.

And Ai Fa was a little scary but she was so brave and Tara thought she was really cool.

Her daddy Dora didn’t seem to think those two were bad people, but he said not to go near people of the forest’s edge. Tara found that strange, and sad.

I want to try Asuta’s giba cooking, too...

She was sure Dora would say not to eat it, though.

As she walked through the hustle and bustle of the post town, Tara gave a little sigh.

◇

The following day, after finishing breakfast, Tara was playing with kids from around town like always.

Since she helped her dad out with his work in the post town, Tara actually had more chances to play with the kids there than the ones from back in the village.

Today, she was playing with a boy from an inn and a girl from a kimyuus shop.

“Yesterday, my big brother came back from working in the castle town for the first time in a while,” the boy said as they were taking a short rest after getting tired out playing tag. “And he brought karon back meat as a gift! That’s amazing, right? Not leg meat, but back meat!”

In the post town, nobody sold any karon meat except legs. The back and rib meat was really expensive, so you could only get it in the castle town.

“It was soft, and super tasty! Now that I’ve had it, I don’t think I’ll ever want to eat leg meat anymore!”

“Hmm? It’s softer than kimyuus meat?”

“Ah, I guess they’re about the same softness? But it’s not just soft! How should I put it...? Anyway, it’s really delicious!”

“Ooh. But kimyuus skin is really yummy too, right?” the girl said, sounding like she was challenging him. “Meat with skin is expensive, so not everyone can buy it, yeah? But when the meat and skin is cooked together, it’s really really tasty!”

“Kimyuus skin is for making cloaks and leather bags. Karon’s definitely way tastier!”

“That’s not true! In my house, meat with skin is a special treat once a month! If you think I’m lying, then try it sometime!”

Tara happily listened to the back and forth, then remembered what she’d heard yesterday and asked, “Hey, is giba meat tasty?”

The two turned and stared blankly at Tara.

“By giba, do you mean those things that make a mess of fields? There’s no way those are tasty.”

“Yeah. Plus, if you eat giba, don’t you grow horns and your skin gets all dark like the people of the forest’s edge?”

“Huh? Really?”

But Asuta’s skin was the color of people from the west, and he didn’t have any horns.

His eyes and hair were black, but people from Sym were dark all over. Plus she didn’t think there was anything wrong with having dark skin to begin with.

“Giba meat is stinky and hard, so only the people of the forest’s edge eat it. I feel bad for them, only getting to eat such yucky meat,” the boy said with a laugh.

Then, a woman who had been drawing water slapped him upside the head and said, “Hey, what do you think you’re saying so loudly? If a person of the forest’s edge hears that, they’ll drag you off into the forest, you know.”

For some reason, Tara started to feel all sad.

Then, she stood up in a hurry and said, “Ah! The sun’s almost at its peak! I’ve got to go back to the shop! See you two tomorrow, alright?”

“Yeah, see you then.”

Tara waved, then took off north in a hurry.

Along the way, she bought a kimyuus manju. Those were her favorites when it came to snacks here in the post town.

What does giba taste like...?

That thought just wouldn’t leave her head.

Karon leg meat was really hard, so unless it was cooked real carefully in a stew, she didn’t much care for it.

Was giba meat even tougher than that?

Kimyuus meat was soft and easy to eat. It didn't have much taste though, so it probably wouldn't be too tasty without the myamuu and stuff.

Was giba meat even blander than that?

Tara would probably never have a chance to eat karon back meat or kimyuus meat with the skin still on it. Even most people from the post town couldn't afford such luxuries.

But Tara was able to eat kimyuus and karon every day, so she was sure she was fortunate. Her dad often said back when he was poor, they couldn't afford any meat and ate nothing but kimyuus eggs.

I wanna try giba meat... Tara thought to herself as she ran down the highway.

When she finally made it back to her father's shop, she saw a young man with black hair standing there.

"Ah! It's Asuta!" she shouted out joyfully without thinking.

The sight of the person next to him caused Tara to trip, though.

It wasn't Ai Fa, but a hunter of the forest's edge who was about as tall.

He was even smaller than Asuta. But even so, he had on a giba pelt cloak and had a blade and a hatchet dangling from his hip. He was a hunter boy with yellowish-brown hair and light brown eyes.

That boy approached Tara with a smooth, animal-like walk.

"You sure are a runt! You're just about as tiny as little Rimee. How old are you?"

His voice was really loud.

There was a strong light in his eyes as he stared at Tara and looked her over. He didn't seem scary at all, though.

Even though Asuta had a worried look in his eyes from behind the boy, he was still smiling her way.

And so, Tara earnestly answered "Eight."

"The same as little Rimee, huh? But you're so skinny it makes you look smaller than you should."

The boy crouched down in front of her. And his eyes with that bright, strong light in them looked back and forth between Tara's face and the manju with a look of confusion.

She had been thinking, so Tara was still holding a completely uneaten manju.

"Something smells good. Is this thing tasty?"

"...Yes," Tara replied with a nod.

"Hmm..." the boy muttered, fixing his gaze on the manju.

He seemed sort of like he was hungry, so Tara asked, "Do you want a taste?"

The boy looked even more confused, but ultimately, he bit into the manju.

But then he started complaining.

"Hey, it's not tasty at all. Asuta can make way tastier cooking, you know?"

"I-Is that true?"

He wasn't scary, but he was just so bold and confident that she couldn't help but feel overpowered, somehow.

He looked littler and younger than Asuta, but this hunter boy seemed a whole lot stronger than the adults from around town or the village.

Is that why everybody's scared of the people of the forest's edge?

Of course, Tara wasn't able to keep herself perfectly calm, either.

The thought that he seemed cool was stronger than any fear she felt.

Both Ai Fa and this boy whose name she didn't even know were just plain cool.

She didn't exactly know why she thought that. But he looked really dashing, with the way he stared straight ahead and paid no attention to the gazes aimed at him.

After that, Kamyua Yoshu showed up, they chatted for a bit, and then Asuta's group left.

Tara didn't really get what they were discussing, but it seemed like it was decided that Asuta really was going to open a shop in the post town.

“Wow, so Asuta’s really opening a shop?” Tara happily asked.

“Yeah...” Dora muttered in response.

He had looked worried for a while now, and now his face looked pained.

“What’s the matter? Does something hurt?”

“Huh...? Ah, it’s nothing. I was just thinking how there really are all sorts of different folks among the people of the forest’s edge.”

“Yeah. The people Asuta knows are all so cool, right?”

“Cool, huh?”

Dora listlessly shook his head. Her dad looked really worried, but Tara still had something she wanted to tell him, even so.

“Hey, I want to try eating Asuta’s cooking.”

Dora shook his head again, a gloomy look on his face.

“There’s no way we would find giba meat tasty if we ate it. And if Asuta keeps on saying how delicious it is, he’ll probably end up branded a liar,” Dora said, sounding like he was worried about Asuta.

Tara clung to her father’s thick arm, looking up at his depressed looking face.

“You don’t know if something’s tasty or not till you eat it. Am I not allowed to buy Asuta’s cooking with the coins you gave me?”

Dora was silent for a bit, but soon enough he patted Tara on the head with his big old hand.

“I gave you those coins as a reward for helping out with work, so use them as you like. But no taking time off work if it wrecks your stomach, okay?”

“Yeah! Thanks!” Tara responded, looking up at her dad with a big smile on her face.

◇

Asuta’s shop opened up four days later.

After waiting for the brief but heavy downpour of rain to let up, Tara took off running to his stall.

“You really opened a shop! That’s amazing!”

Asuta looked more down than usual, but he soon pointed a smile Tara’s way.

The woman of the forest’s edge working with him gave a gentle smile, too. Tara had thought the woman gave off a bit of a cold feeling the last time she saw her, but that smile made her look really nice.

“There’s a really nice tarapa smell! Is that from your giba cooking?”

“That’s right. I wonder if you’ll like it.”

There was tarapa simmering away inside the pot. And it seemed like he used all sorts of other ingredients, too.

Either way, the smell sure was making her hungry.

Tara tried to buy one, but Asuta held out a plate for her, saying she should give it a try first.

It was a bit of meat in a strange shape, soaked in deep red tarapa broth.

It must have been all round and flat at first. But then he chopped it up into smaller bits and put them on top of that plate. And when she looked at the cut side, it was all weird and bumpy.

Now that I think of it, what type of animal is a giba, anyway?

Tara had never seen one before.

Occasionally one would get caught in a trap out in the fields, but Tara and her mom never got to see them. An old lady living the neighborhood even said that you would be cursed just by looking at one.

But this giba meat looked really tasty. At the very least, she just couldn’t get enough of the smell.

And so, Tara bit into it without any hesitation.

When she did, she found herself overwhelmed.

“What is this...?”

The sour tarapa taste was really strong. But it was also a whole lot sweeter than the tarapa she ate at home. There was a real mellow sweetness to it, like

the little tarapa they sold in the castle town.

And this must have been aria that was all diced up and heated together with it. Maybe that was where the sweetness was coming from.

That stinging on her tongue was probably from pico leaves. Now that she thought of it, she heard somewhere that lots of them grew in the Morga forest.

At any rate, it was like nothing Tara had ever eaten before, and made for a really tasty broth.

The taste of the giba meat was so striking that it didn't lose out, though.

It wasn't hard or stinky at all. The meat crumbled just from biting lightly into it. And when it combined with the tarapa broth, an indescribable yumminess filled her mouth.

Tara had never even imagined such tasty meat could exist. She chewed and chewed, but the flavor kept on coming. It was just a tiny fragment of meat, but Tara felt overwhelming joy from tasting it.

It was way tastier than kimyuus or karon. And could kimyuus meat with the skin or karon back meat really be any more delicious than this?

"It's tasty! Super amazingly tasty, Asuta!"

Asuta had looked a bit worried, but now he looked relieved and broke out in a smile.

"This is so amazing! I want to eat more! I'll go get some money from my dad!"

"Ah, hold on! If it's alright, I'd like to have Dora try some too. He'd feel more comfortable handing over the money then, right?"

"That's fine!" Tara said with a big nod and took off running down the highway.

There was still a feeling of happiness filling her mouth. And Tara could feel that happiness spreading throughout her entire body.

This was sure to make Dora happy, too.

These past few days, Dora had been acting strangely. Tara could sense it was because he was trying to figure out what sort of relationship they should have

with the people of the forest's edge. He seemed to be drawn to Asuta and the people around him, but it was just how he was to hesitate to form bonds like that.

His worries were probably something that only he could truly understand.

Tara's mom and big brothers back in the village had all said they shouldn't get involved with the people of the forest's edge. When Tara argued against them, Dora just sat there silently, looking pained.

Dora was being tormented by complex feelings that Tara just didn't understand.

But I'm sure it'll be fine now.

Asuta wasn't a liar.

The only liars and bad guys must have been the ones from that "ruling clan."

Her dad had looked so troubled for a while, but now he could finally feel relieved. And as Tara thought that, the joy she was feeling only grew stronger.

She ran along with a *splish, splash* as she dashed through the puddles left from the rain, and before long she was standing back in front of her dad.

Dora was seated under the roof of his stall, and he turned absentmindedly to look at his daughter.

"Here, it's Asuta's cooking! He was able to make something this delicious with the vegetables you grew!"

Dora gave a listless smile, then accepted the little wooden needle that was pierced through a chunk of giba meat.

Tara watched with great excitement, anticipating the explosion of surprise that would soon show on her father's face.

Afterword

You have my deepest thanks for picking up this book, the fourth volume of “Cooking with Wild Game.”

The first volume of this series was published in February of this year, so half a year has passed since then.

It’s been quite a bit of time, but it feels like the blink of an eye... It certainly is a strange feeling.

At any rate, it’s thanks to the kind support from all of you that the volumes have managed to pile up this far. And so, let me express my sincerest gratitude.

Oddly enough, this time around things ended on a “Our fight’s only just getting started!” sort of note, but Asuta and company’s true struggle really is still to come.

Fortunately, the continuing publication schedule is already all planned out, and I will feel truly blessed if you’re looking forward to seeing the series onwards.

At last, the story’s stage has transitioned to the post town. The next volume is planned to have various events there as its main focus, too.

There are still a number of troublesome issues left regarding the settlement at the forest’s edge, though, so it’ll also be essential to simultaneously make sure things keep advancing there as well.

And next time around, those troublemakers who didn’t make an appearance this time are sure to stand in Asuta’s way.

Still, this series sure has become one with a lot of characters. We must be at around 30 named ones by now.

Things were pretty wild to start with, though, what with volume one introducing the 13 members of the main Ruu house, including the baby.

When the novelization for this series was put into motion, the first big concern my editor from Hobby Japan raised was, “Will it really be alright to have this many characters around?”

But as the author, I can’t help but look forward to seeing which new characters Kochimo-sama will bring to life with each volume.

This time around, Kamyua Yoshu got to have a color image up front. He’s an aloof character and you don’t know if he’s an enemy or an ally, so everybody’s image of him tended to differ. And so I thought it would be very difficult to draw him, but as the author, I’m extremely satisfied with how things turned out.

I’m also very grateful that the merchants from the east who I’m personally fond of got illustrated, too.

It’s a strange feeling, seeing these characters that sprung forth from my mind taking visual shape by someone else’s hand, but it also makes me feel incredibly blessed.

I hope to keep that feeling firmly in my heart as I keep on writing from here on out.

Now then...

Let’s go ahead and cut off my rambling here.

As always, 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!

Our fight is only just getting started!

August 2015,

EDA



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Cooking with Wild Game: Volume 4

by EDA

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