COOKING WITH WILD GAME

VOLUME 8



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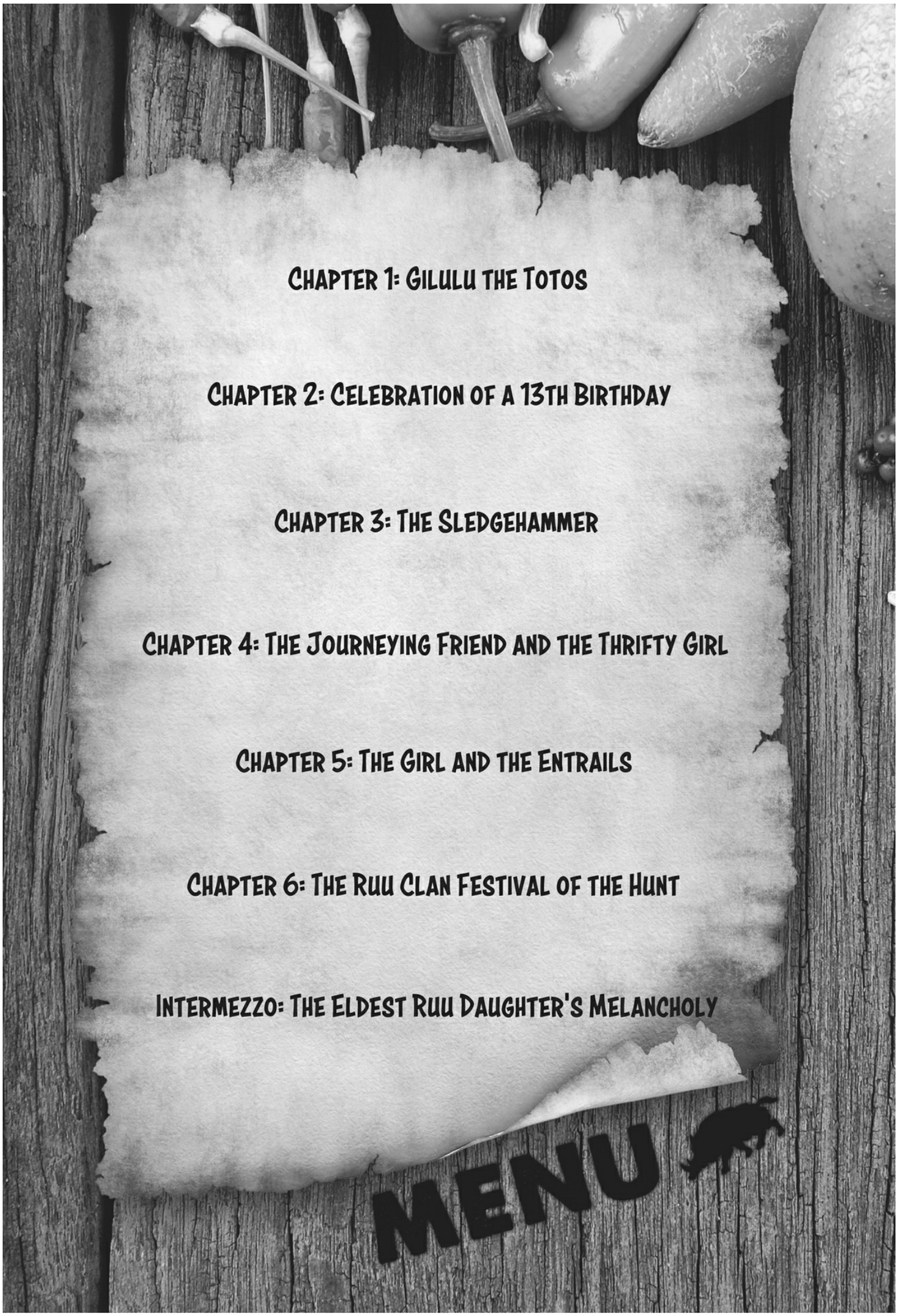


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Between the two of them stood a massive figure: A giant totos bird, of the sort I was used to seeing around the post town.
I'd imagine anyone would be thrown for a loop to suddenly find something like that waiting outside their doorway.
"Ahaha! So lame!" Rimee Ruu laughed away.
"Are you okay, Asuta?" Ama Min Rutim asked, sounding concerned.
And so I nonchalantly opened the door... and shouted, "Gyah!" before falling back on my butt.


AI FA'S ARMS WERE WRAPPED AROUND ME SO TIGHT THAT IT FELT LIKE THEY COULD CRUSH ME.
"STAY BY MY SIDE FOREVER. AND I SWEAR THAT I'LL DO THE SAME FOR YOU, TOO."
AND THOUGH I COULDN'T EVER POSSIBLY MATCH HER STRENGTH, I RESPONDED BY HUGGING HER BACK.


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Chapter 1: Gilulu the Totos

1

Those two women visited the Fa house on the 20th day of the blue month, four days after Tei Suun's death brought that whole chain of incidents to a close.

"Are Asuta or Ai Fa in? It's us, Ama Min Rutim and Rimee Ruu."

I had just returned from work in the post town, and had been going to get my vegetable knife to prepare for tomorrow. Today Li Sudra headed straight home and the women from around the neighborhood hadn't showed up for cooking lessons, so I was all alone in the house.

"Ah, yes, hold on just a moment."

I placed my knife and the aria back atop the cutting board, then stood to my feet in a hurry.

Ama Min Rutim and Rimee Ruu made for a bit of an unusual pairing, but I couldn't see any reason to feel concerned in the least. And so I nonchalantly opened the door... and shouted, "Gyah!" before falling back on my butt.

"Are you okay, Asuta?" Ama Min Rutim asked, sounding concerned.

"Ahaha! So lame!" Rimee Ruu laughed away.

Between the two of them stood a massive figure: A giant totos bird, of the sort I was used to seeing around the post town.

"W-W-W-What's going on? What is a totos doing here at the forest's edge?"

"Yes, well, it would take a while to explain everything, but the Sauti men captured it out in the forest," Ama Min Rutim replied with an apologetic bow down at me. "We should have mentioned it right away. I didn't expect you to be so surprised, though... My deepest apologies."

"N-No, I'm sorry for being such a wimp there."

That's what I said, but I'd imagine anyone would be thrown for a loop to

suddenly find something like that waiting outside their doorway.

Totos were massive birds that stood at around three meters tall, making them a few sizes bigger than even an ostrich. They were shaped just like ostriches, too, but their whole bodies were covered in dark brown plumage. And they had elliptical bodies, long necks like Nessie, two beefy legs, and talons that dug firmly into the earth.

This beast was significantly larger than an ostrich, making it a seriously imposing presence. It had to have weighed over 200 kilos, at least.

I was used to seeing totos around the post town on a daily basis, but it was still stunning to see one up close like this. If it kicked a person with one of those burly legs, it could easily take them down with a single blow.

And yet, Ama Min Rutim was just standing there perfectly calm next to the huge bird. There was a leather bridle around the totos's beak and neck, and the woman's graceful fingers held onto the end of it.

"Isn't this amazing?! It's a totos! A totos! This is my first time getting to touch one!" Rimee Ruu excitedly stated as she hugged the bird tightly around its right thigh. Then, she rubbed her cheek up against its dark brown plumage, only for me to yell in a panic, "Ah, that's dangerous, Rimee Ruu!"

"It's alright. Apparently totos are rather docile animals, so they won't run wild as long as you don't try to do them harm," Ama Min Rutim chimed in with her usual relaxed smile.

It had been around ten days now since I had last seen her, but she remained just as gentle, trim, and pretty as always. She wore her dark brown hair in a bold short style that was rare to see at the forest's edge, and her slender body was clad in a single-piece outfit, proof that she was wed. She was the young wife of my precious friend Gazraan Rutim, after all.

Then there was Rimee Ruu, who was every bit as full of energy as always. She wore an utterly carefree smile on her face, and her reddish hair looked even fluffier than the totos's feathers. And she wore a single shoulder dress made for children, which covered her tiny little body that looked like it had less total mass than a single one of the large bird's legs.

“So, what’s going on here, anyway...? I mean, you two came here to the Fa house along with a totos discovered by the Sauti clan. I don’t have much of an imagination, so I really can’t even begin to guess at what brought things to this point.”

“Yes, well, we’re assuming that this totos is a survivor of the ones those townsfolk let loose in the forest’s edge five days ago. The Sauti men captured it while hunting, but they had no idea what to do with it, so they brought it to the Rutim settlement.”

I see. That fake merchant caravan of Kamyua Yoshu’s had brought along around ten totos, but they only brought two back out with them. That would explain why this totos found wandering about the forest had come with a bridle already attached.

However, there was still more that I didn’t understand. To start with, just why did the Sauti go to the Rutim for help?

“The Rutim already had an agreement to teach the Sauti how to bloodlet and dissect giba. That had been put off due to all the commotion after the clan head meeting, but Dari Sauti had already personally come to visit our settlement today.”

“Ah, so he’s already recovered, then?”

“Yes. He needed to talk to Donda Ruu about the upcoming discussion with the nobles of Genos, and so he asked if he could stay at the Rutim settlement for the time being to fulfill that promise as well.”

The Sauti clan had been carefully maintaining a neutral stance when it came to the matter of doing business in the post town, but they seemed quite interested in the idea of delicious food. And so, they must have requested to start by learning bloodletting and dissection as soon as possible. I wasn’t quite sure if they had chosen the Rutim instead of the Ruu because they didn’t want to impose on another of the leading clans, or because Dari Sauti and Gazraan Rutim had hit it off, though.

At any rate, both of those clans lived far away from the Sauti settlement. Since they were at the southernmost extreme of the forest’s edge, it would take them around two hours walking. That was why Gazraan Rutim had made the

suggestion for clans that were so far apart to trade their men temporarily. Then there wouldn't be any change in the number of hunters on hand for each clan, and they could efficiently learn bloodletting and dissection techniques.

"And it was decided it would be best to hear Donda Ruu's opinion on what to do with this totos, too, so I headed to the Ruu settlement in place of the men, who still had hunting work to take care of, but—"

"Papa Donda got all mad and said 'What do I care?' Isn't that just awful? It's not like Ama Min Rutim did anything wrong."

Donda Ruu must have been on edge around now, too. After all, he would be meeting with influential folks from the Genos castle in just a few days.

Originally, the discussion was set to be held on the 23rd day of the blue month. However, yesterday that was revised to the 30th. And it wouldn't be just the three leading clan heads and Cyclaeus any more, as the ducal guard captain Melfried and the bodyguard Kamyua Yoshu would also be joining in. I had made that proposal to that aloof acquaintance of mine, and sure enough he ended up seeing it through.

Cyclaeus had overlooked the misdeeds of the Suun clan, and was suspected to have lent a hand to their wrongdoings. Kamyua Yoshu had told us that in order to prove that, Melfried had deceived the people of the forest's edge and set a trap for Zattsu Suun.

However, if that was true, then there was no reason for hostility between the people of the forest's edge and Melfried. It would make far more sense for them to join together from here on out in order to deal with the treacherous Cyclaeus. Or at least, that was what I had proposed to Melfried's accomplice, Kamyua Yoshu.

In turn, that led to Kamyua Yoshu talking to the three leading clan heads. Of course, I had already conveyed what he had told me the other day to them. And so, they were aware that it wasn't the lord of Genos who was their enemy, but his proxy, Cyclaeus.

With that, the leading clan heads' anger towards Melfried and Kamyua Yoshu for deceiving them subsided, at least for the time being. However, the situation wasn't going to improve until Cyclaeus was taken down. After all, he still hadn't

retracted his statement that all members of the Suun clan should be handed over to the castle.

The criminals Zattsu and Tei Suun had already passed away. So why was Cyclaeus so insistent about getting ahold of the members of the Suun in spite of that? I honestly didn't know, but there was no way we could ever go along with it. The former clan head Zuuro Suun was awaiting judgment at the forest's edge, and Diga and Doddo were being treated more or less like prisoners after their escape, but the rest of the former members of the clan were all striving their hardest to live proper lives, day after day.

First off is seeing if Melfried's side's excuses are valid, and if they are, we'll have to give our all to expose Cyclaeus's old crimes. As long as that doesn't happen, though, Genos and the forest's edge will never truly see eye to eye.

In other words, Donda Ruu and the others were facing the upcoming meeting with Cyclaeus, with the weight of the forest's edge's future on their shoulders. And so, it was no surprise that any of them might be feeling on edge. After all, they didn't exactly have the time to figure out what to do with a lost totos right now, anyway.

Thanks to all that, I was able to understand how things had played out, at least 80% of the way. There was just one question I had left.

"So... Why did you bring this totos here to the Fa house?" I tried asking Rimee Ruu.

However, the girl just replied, "Dunno," with a shake of her head.

"'Dunno'...? Then what are you doing here, Rimee Ruu?"

"I didn't have any work, so I just followed along with Ama Min Rutim. It's been a while since I've seen Ai Fa, after all! Hey, why *did* Papa Donda say to bring the totos here?" Rimee Ruu asked, her bright blue eyes now staring at Ama Min Rutim.

"Um..." the young woman hesitated, which was rare for her. "You see... He said that the Fa clan chef would probably be overjoyed to pluck its feathers and prepare its meat... That was what I was told."

"Huh? He said to eat this totos?" I questioned, staring up at the massive bird

in question.

From far up above, the totos was tilting its head and shooting me back a blank look.

Its face was pretty small compared to its huge body, but it was still about the same size as a human's. Its curved beak was slanted down a bit and looked massive and intimidating, but the bird had a surprisingly goofy face overall. Its big black eyes had long eyelashes that gave it a sort of sleepy look like a camel or a giraffe.

"I mean, I've prepared small birds before, but it'd probably be difficult to handle one this big... It's even larger than a giba, isn't it?" I mumbled, then looked down to find Rimee Ruu clinging to the totos's leg again.

Those big blue eyes that had just been staring at Ama Min Rutim were now looking my way and full of tears.

"You're going to eat this totos...?"

"Huh?"

"Asuta, you're going to eat it?"

She was clearly right on the verge of breaking down sobbing.

At a loss for words, I turned around to face Ama Min Rutim, but she also looked troubled as she asked, "What should we do...?"

I mean, this was precisely the time for some dietary education. And yet, I just wasn't strong enough to say something like, "It makes no sense to eat giba but feel bad for a totos!"

"Umm, if this totos originally belonged to people from the castle, it'd probably be bad to just go and eat it. I can get in contact with Kamyua Yoshu once I'm in town, so how about handing it over to him?"

"I see. That certainly sounds like the proper course of action," Ama Min Rutim said with a sigh of relief.

However, Rimee Ruu still looked like she was about to break down in tears.

"You're giving the totos back to town...?"

“Huh? I mean, we can’t exactly keep it here at the forest’s edge, right? Considering how big it is, the cost of food alone would end up being enormous.”

“Yes, and we can’t exactly go letting it live here without permission from the leading clan heads.”

With those words from me and Ama Min Rutim, the dam finally burst and Rimee Ruu’s tears came gushing forth.

All that was left to do at that point was for me and the young wife to share a glance and each give a deep sigh.

◇

It was now the following day, the 21st of the blue month.

“Oh? A totos at the forest’s edge? That’s certainly an interesting story!” Kamyua Yoshu had come to visit the stalls before the sun hit its peak, and so I had launched right into discussing the matter from yesterday with him. “Well, it’s not like they would starve out in the forest, and they can run faster than a giba on level ground, so I guess it’s not so strange for a totos or two from back then to have survived... So, what sort of dishes are you planning on making with it?”

“Ah, no, that thing’s way too big for me to handle. Besides, the people of the forest’s edge don’t seem to have any interest in totos meat, anyway. But the plan is to have someone bring it to town tomorrow morning, so could you take it?”

“Hmm... I’d love to help you all out if you’re finding yourselves in a bind. But there are no totos at the forest’s edge, huh...? Doesn’t it seem too boring to just give it back to town?” Kamyua Yoshu said with a big grin. This man was always smiling, but when it intensified like this, it seriously put me on edge.

“It’s not like we particularly need to make things interesting. And it’d be a huge problem if the totos started chowing down on the fruits of the forest, so I figured it was best to return it as soon as possible.”

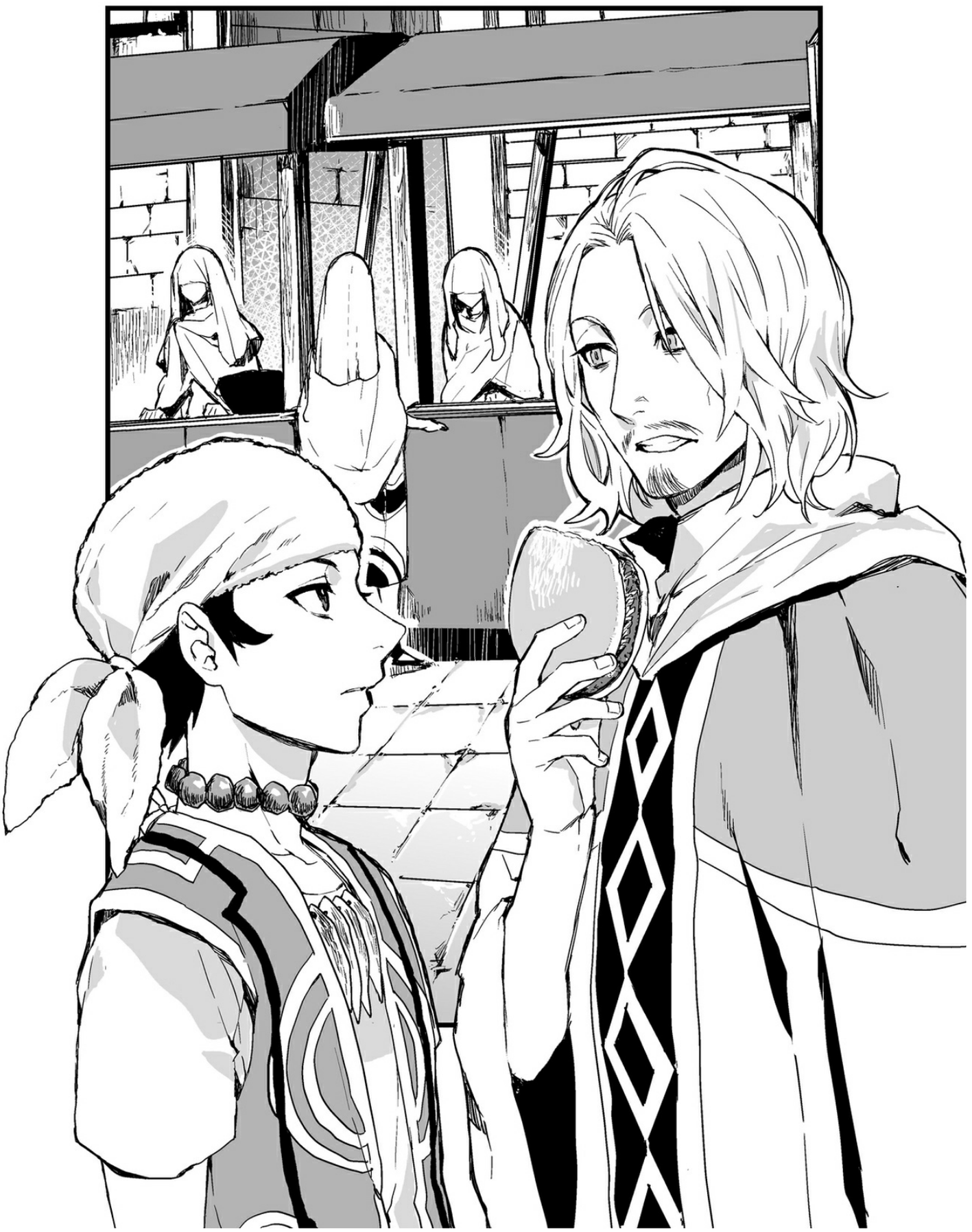
“Totos only eat the leaves from high up on trees. Apparently they’ll eat pretty much any leaves as long as they’re soft enough, and they never eat fruit or bugs or the like. So they should be able to coexist alongside the giba just fine, right?”

“But there’s no point to them coexisting, is there?”

“Let me put that another way... Totos and the people of the forest’s edge should be able to live alongside one another just fine.”

I had no idea what he was getting at. And so I looked back at his skinny face with some serious distrust, but he just grinned even deeper.

“I mean, totos are seriously convenient, you know. Their meat and eggs are pretty tasty too, but it’s no exaggeration to say that mankind’s prosperity came from the fact that we have totos around. They’re strong and fast, and they’re so obedient by nature that they rarely ever go wild. They can pull along luggage, and you can ride on them, too. And if you just tie them to a tree they’ll take care of feeding themselves, plus they even live about as long as humans. They’ve been our trusty partners since ancient times.”



“I mean, all that may well be true, but...”

“Then let me ask you a question. How long does it take you to head from the Sauti settlement at the south of the forest’s edge to the Zaza settlement in the north by foot, Asuta?”

The topic took yet another abrupt swerve.

While feeling quite cautious, I replied, “If you head out at the break of dawn, you’ll arrive there around when the sun hits its peak from what I hear.”

In other words, it took around six hours to come from the southern limit of the forest’s edge to the north.

“I see. But if you could ride a totos, then you could cut that down to a third or even a fourth of the time needed. And it’d be possible to go even faster with practice, too.”

“Huh...”

“I believe that having three leading clan heads was an excellent idea. The idea of choosing powerful clans to the north and south to keep an eye on the whole of the forest’s edge was also wonderful. However... it has to be a big hassle for the Sauti and Zaza clan heads having to spend half a day traveling just one way, right? And there’d be a lot of waiting around for everyone to arrive in a time of emergency, too.”

That was certainly true. That was exactly why Dari Sauti ended up staying with the nearby Rutim clan when he wanted to contact Donda Ruu.

It took about two hours to travel from the Ruu settlement to the Sauti one. And it was around four hours to head from the Ruu settlement to the Zaza. Even treating the Ruu as the center of the forest’s edge, it still took that long to get there from the north and south.

“This is just my own personal theory, but I believe that how fast information can be conveyed is what determines how advanced a society becomes. And so it was by befriending totos that we were able to build things up this far. Without them, it would be hard to even travel from one of the four great kingdoms to another. So if the people of the forest’s edge are seeking greater

strength and prosperity, it just doesn't make sense to avoid using this totos's abilities."

"But it's not so easy to ride on one of those big birds, is it? And honestly, I find it pretty hard to imagine totos running about the forest's edge..."

"It's true that it takes some time and a good bit of physical ability to ride a totos. But I figure the people of the forest's edge shouldn't have any trouble at all. With just a few days of instruction, they'll probably be able to move those birds about like their own limbs," Kamyua Yoshu stated, the grin still fixed to his face. "And let me just add, there's no proof that totos is one of the ones we brought along with us, Asuta."

"Huh?"

"We were operating under the assumption that all the totos from back then would get wiped out by giba, so we didn't bother to brand them. And you can't claim ownership over a totos without a brand. Even if they have a bridle on them, they're treated the same as wild totos. You've got no obligation to return it to us, so won't you seriously reconsider keeping it?"

"Ah, no, but..."

"You just have to leave it outside during the day, and then only bring it in at night. You don't generally need to look after it at all, so it shouldn't be a hindrance, right? And if it does become one, then you can go ahead and cook it up. Well, townsfolk generally won't eat them unless they can't work anymore due to injury or age, though. That's just how important of a source of labor they are. But if you think I'm tricking you, then why not try living with it for a bit?"

"I mean, you *were* the guy who kept on deceiving us for weeks..."

"And I've apologized for that again and again, haven't I?!" Kamyua Yoshu replied, holding both arms out in a pose of lamentation, gripping his half-eaten giba burger all the while. It was like he was an actor, and one who was seriously chewing up the scenery at that.

"Alright, I'll try to take a positive attitude in thinking it over. But if Ai Fa or the leading clan heads oppose it, I've got no intention of going against them. So please don't go setting your expectations too high."

“Oh, I see. But surely nobody will turn the idea down after learning how convenient totos are, right? After all, it’ll lend even further strength to the forest’s edge!”

I shot another glare right back at that aloof grin.

“Um, I would find it pretty hard to believe, but you didn’t leave the totos out in the forest with this in mind, right?”

“Huh? You’re seriously overestimating me, there! There’s no way I could have imagined the totos surviving in a harsh environment filled with giba like the forest of Morga!”

As he said that, Kamyua Yoshu’s seriously untrustworthy face broke out in a grin like a Cheshire cat.

2

“Welcome home, clan head.”

After safely finishing up work at the post town and returning to the Fa house, I quickly set about my preparations, at which point Ai Fa showed up carrying a 60 kilo-class giba.

Just yesterday, she had finally resumed her hunting work. It had been around 20 days now since she had dislocated her left elbow. Ai Fa of course had the same sour look on her face as always, but a light had clearly returned to her eyes that I hadn’t seen in some time.

My clan head just answered my greeting with a, “Right,” and a nod of her head, then her eyes narrowed and looked full of doubt.

I was standing in front of the stove behind the house, frying up aria to use in the stalls, and women from nearby houses were observing as I worked. That shouldn’t have been so unusual of a sight, but Ai Fa’s sharp eyes immediately noticed the two unusual intruders in the mix. In other words, Rimee Ruu and young Leito.

“Whoa, that’s amazing! You took that down all on your own, Ai Fa? That’s crazy! I mean, you only just healed from your injury!” Rimee Ruu said with a

bright smile, and Ai Fa didn't seem too concerned by her presence. After all, if it weren't for her work around the house, the young girl would come here to play each and every day.

However, the real issue was the boy standing beside her and wearing a calm, gentle grin. It wasn't exactly forbidden for westerners to step foot in the settlement at the forest's edge, but it was still seen as quite an unusual occurrence.

"You're that child who calls himself Kamyua Yoshu's apprentice, aren't you? What are you doing in a place like this?"

"Yes, that's correct. I came here to offer instruction on how to ride a totos."

Ai Fa held her tongue, hung the massive giba from a tree branch a bit removed from the stove, then shot me a dangerous glare.

"Explain just what's going on here, Asuta."

"Yes, I'll do so now." After moving the mass of sautéed aria to a wooden plate, I reported on the whole of the exchange I had with Kamyua Yoshu. "So, could I hear your opinion on the matter, clan head?"

"Why exactly did you go and invite a westerner to the forest's edge before consulting with me?"

"Ah, I wanted to get your permission to start with, but..."

"My apologies. Kamyua pushed me onto Asuta. He's rather busy at the moment, so he sent me to teach you how to ride totos in his place."

The man who killed his father, Zattsu Suun, was now dead, but I couldn't spy any changes in Leito. Or at least, nothing that showed on the surface.

He had flaxen hair and light brown eyes, and looked to be around ten years old. After staring at his cheerful face for a moment, Ai Fa's glare pointed back my way.

"That aloof man seems to have even reconciled with the leading clan heads, at least for the time being. However, this is another matter entirely. Did Donda Ruu not say to use that totos for its meat?"

The bird in question was positioned even further away than the giba, and was

nonchalantly pecking leaves off of tree branches.

“I figured if there was a more efficient way to use it than just treating it as meat, then we should propose that to the leading clan heads. And if Donda Ruu won’t bend even then, then I’ll simply follow what he says. But... Donda Ruu went and shoved this hassle onto our Fa clan without even asking, so there shouldn’t be any need to follow what he half-heartedly mumbled down to the letter.”

With that, Ai Fa went silent. Just last night, she herself had been frustrated with how crudely Donda Ruu had treated the matter. She even said, “Are we seriously supposed to eat such an unappetizing animal?”

It was then that Rimee Ruu stopped just silently watching our exchange, and instead walked over and tugged at Ai Fa’s clothing.

“Ai Fa, you’re gonna eat that totos...?”

And so, Ai Fa also fell.

I didn’t know if there was a saying like “A single tear is worth a hundred words,” but at any rate, my beloved clan head couldn’t possibly offer up any further objections once she was faced with that teary-eyed child.

“So what exactly is it that you intend to do...?” Ai Fa asked, shooting me a hellish glare once Rimee Ruu’s tears subsided.

“For the time being, I figured we could at least see how much trouble it takes to learn to ride a totos. After all, no matter how convenient they may be, the people of the forest’s edge aren’t fond of wasting time.”

“So who is going to ride it, exactly?”

“I’ll be going first,” I replied.

“No.”

“Me, then!” Rimee Ruu chimed in.

“No.”

Ai Fa’s razor sharp replies cut down even Rimee Ruu.

With a deep sigh, my beloved clan head started ruffling her blonde hair.

“Alright, I’ll ride it,” Ai Fa stated, looking even more displeased than before. However, young Leito just smiled on back at her.

“That totos seems to have an especially calm nature even for its species, so I don’t believe it’s very likely at all to try to shake you off. As long as you don’t act violently towards it, you shouldn’t be in any danger.”

And so, we halted our work for the time being to instead tackle test driving the totos.

With Leito holding the massive bird’s reins, we moved around to the front of the house. The six women hanging about also accompanied us, sharing cheerful looks as they gathered around. They included Li Sudra, Jas Din, Toor Din, and three other women whose names I hadn’t remembered yet from the Fou and Ran clans.

“Totos don’t squat down much aside from when they’re sleeping or laying an egg. You can upset them by trying to force them to do so, so normally you climb on while they’re standing,” Leito explained while walking all the way out to the path in front of the house. “You should ride them somewhere between the middle and rear of their back. Please take care so that if you need to suddenly stop and lose your balance, you won’t slide down past its neck. That could shock the totos and cause it to run wild. Um... is there anything around that can be used as a stool?”

“That won’t be necessary,” Ai Fa muttered, then placed her hands on the totos’s back and nimbly hopped atop.

The bird was around three meters tall in total, but half of that came from its neck, so its torso reached up to around 150 centimeters. That was about as high as she was tall, so I couldn’t help but marvel once again at her physical capabilities as a hunter of the forest’s edge.

“Whoa!” Rimee Ruu shouted in amazement, and the other women started murmuring a bit among themselves. And honestly, Ai Fa looked so cool sitting up straight atop the totos that I couldn’t help but feel jealous.

“Now could you squeeze the totos’s torso with both knees, but not enough to hurt it?”

Ai Fa’s slender legs moved ever so slightly, but the huge bird didn’t budge in the least.

“Alright, it’s stayed in place because I’ve been holding the reins up till now, but now it’s holding still because you’re squeezing its torso. I’m going to loosen up my hold now, so please maintain that same strength in your legs.”

With that, Leito did as he said and loosened his grip.

Sure enough, the totos and Ai Fa didn’t move even slightly.

“Okay, now can you take these reins and pull them tight, making sure you’re holding evenly on both sides?”

As Ai Fa sat horseback... er, birdback, Leito handed her the reins.

My clan head silently followed the boy’s directions, then Leito checked her grip from both sides.

“That looks good. Don’t overly tense your arms, and let your elbows relax just a bit... Well, those would be the normal notes I’d give, but even that seems unnecessary. Um, I realize it’s a little late to ask this, but is this your first time riding a totos?”

“Of course. The people of the forest’s edge don’t ride such beasts.”

“Your posture is absolutely perfect. Keep on sitting up straight, even when the totos starts moving. Ah... and that current position is the sign for it to stop. We’ll have it walk shortly, but if you want it to stop, then pull the reins back towards you and squeeze its torso. It’s dangerous to stop suddenly though, so please do it gently so as not to startle the totos.”

“Right.”

“Well then, let’s try walking. Start by loosening up on the reins and your legs. Then pull the reins downwards, and it should walk.”

“Whoa!” Rimee Ruu exclaimed again.

Sure enough, the totos started trotting along at a relaxed pace. However, thanks to its long legs, that was certainly quicker than when a human being walked. We all quickly jogged after, but after going about five meters, the totos suddenly halted.

“Hmm, it really did stop.”

“Yes. How about next, we try directing it? If you leave it be, the totos will simply follow the path, but if you want it to move to either side instead, then pull the reins that way to move its head in the direction you wish. You don’t need to use too much strength, so to start off take care to be gentle so as not to frighten the totos.”

Once again, the massive bird started moving.

I didn’t have much of a view of Ai Fa’s arm movements from down on the ground, but after going around three meters, the totos started zigzagging at roughly 50 degree angles down the path.

“Ooh, totos sure do listen to directions obediently, don’t they?” I admired.

Leito chimed in, “That’s true. Things are almost going *too* smoothly,” with a rather strained smile. “If you manipulate the reins skillfully enough, you can also make it face the opposite direction. Do you want to give it a try?”

Almost as soon as Leito said that, the totos made a big U-turn. After that it zigzagged on back to the starting line in front of the house, at which point it came to a precise stop. The movements were so precise and lacking in hesitation that it looked almost machine-like.

“That’s so amazing! I wanna ride it too!”

“Still... This isn’t all that different from just walking on your own. What’s fun enough about this to make it worth all of this training? In fact, I can’t recall ever seeing any townsfolk riding totos, now that I think about it.”

“It’s dangerous when a totos suddenly breaks out running, so it’s forbidden to ride them in town. However, everyone uses them when traveling between towns. And so... how about letting it run just a bit?”

Apparently, you just gave it a little kick with your heel to get the huge bird running.

“Rather than suddenly breaking out in a sprint, please get it walking first and then give it a slight kick. Then you can steadily increase the speed by putting more strength behind it, bit by bit.”

“Hmph,” Ai Fa uninterestedly snorted, then started the totos walking again.

Rather than following after again, this time we first moved over to the side of the road. After all, the trail in the forest’s edge was only about half the width of the stone highway, or about five meters wide.

As the backs of Ai Fa and the totos steadily moved away, their speed also increased bit by bit. Eventually they were going so fast that I couldn’t help but feel a little worried, and then they turned around a curve in the path and disappeared from view.

However, less than ten seconds later they reappeared from behind the trees, coming back our way seriously fast. They had to be going around 50 kilometers per hour, at least. That put them at around the same speed as a scooter flooring it down the street.

As the totos’s powerful legs kicked up dirt, Ai Fa was riding atop it in a pose that made me think of a jockey riding a racehorse, her cloak fluttering in the wind as she flew right past us. Then she slowed down bit by bit, smoothly turned around, and trotted back on over our way.

“Th-That was totally amazing! Ai Fa, you’re so cool!” Rimee Ruu shouted once more.

And that wasn’t all, as some other shrill shrieks of admiration also sounded out. Turning around in surprise, I found the four youngest of the six women cheering, their eyes sparkling just as brightly as Rimee Ruu’s.

By the way, the Sudra clan head’s wife Li Sudra was also a part of that younger group. She was normally so restrained and graceful, so her clinging together with the other women and looking like a lovestruck maiden made for something of a sight.

The remaining two women, Jas Din and a middle-aged lady from the Fou clan, also let out an impressed, “Ooh...”

“That was splendid. Everything was so perfect that I don’t even have any further advice to offer,” Leito chimed in with a clearly awkward chuckle. “There’s a saying that ‘You fall ten times before you learn to ride a totos,’ but you managed it without falling even once. Honestly, it’s rare to see someone so

skilled at handling a totos even in town. To think that the hunters of the forest's edge would prove so skilled..."

"Being able to do a trick like this is nothing worth bragging about," Ai Fa stated while wearing the same sour expression as always, then she nimbly descended from the totos.

Leito yelled out, "Ah!" but since she retained a firm grip on the reins, the totos didn't move. The boy gave another strained smile, then shrugged his shoulders, looking a good bit more mature than his age would imply. "So, what did you think? Can't you see now how you could use this totos to shorten the time it takes to travel from one end of the forest's edge to the other? And it seems clear that the hunters of the forest's edge can learn to ride them without much trouble at all. I hope you can now understand Kamyua's words, that there's a more effective way to use it rather than just eating it."

"Hmm..." Ai Fa muttered, still wearing a bit of a gloomy expression.

As I watched her out of the corner of my eye, I chimed in, "Can I try riding it too?"

Instantly, I got three responses of, "Don't," "You shouldn't," and, "It would be best if you didn't."

"It would be a problem if you got injured like that, wouldn't it?"

"Yeah, it'd be dangerous if you fell, right?"

"If you're still interested even so, then I believe it would be wise to practice bit by bit each day."

Their words slammed down upon me in a torrent.

"I see. I get full well what everyone thinks of my physical capabilities. Still, you really can't see things going any way but me falling off the totos?" Now, I got nothing but silence back. And boy did that ever sting, considering the circumstances. "Alright, I get it... Then please let me practice bit by bit every day, like you said."

"Why are you so fixated? There's not any point to you being able to ride a totos, is there?"

“Ah, no, but I mean, you looked like you were enjoying yourself so much while riding it, so I couldn’t help but be interested.”

Ai Fa didn’t respond.

“It was fun, wasn’t it?”

Again, silence.

“Huh? Did it not feel good, then?”

“So annoying!” she yelled out, kicking me in the leg again for the first time in a while. “To start with, we still haven’t even gotten permission from the leading clan heads! We can’t go acting on our own without that!”

“Oww... What are you so angry about...? Anyway, if the leading clan heads still aren’t interested in totos, I think we should take this guy in at the Fa house. If they just told us to eat it to start with, they shouldn’t have any issue with us using it how we please, right?”

“What? What do you intend to do by adopting such a creature?”

“I mean, it’s obvious how convenient this guy is, even without needing Kamyua to tell me. Like if we buy a wagon to hitch to it, it’d be a lot easier to transport food and cooking tools, right? Even I should be able to get it to walk along and pull stuff, wouldn’t you say?”

With that, Ai Fa finally seemed to start thinking it over.

“I see... So you could use it like that, too.”

“Yeah. However, there’s that rope bridge on our usual path, so we’d have to take the long way around. Still, they should have wagons that can carry not just goods but also people in town, right, Leito?”

“Yes. It’s more common to have large wagons that are pulled by two totos, but you should be able to find smaller ones if you look, too. And you wouldn’t have to worry about being thrown off then, either.”

Ai Fa started seriously considering the matter.

It was then that I suddenly heard a loud, “Huh?!” from Rimee Ruu. She sounded oddly excited, so I turned around while feeling just a bit concerned,

only to spy an utterly dumbfounding sight. There were two women of the forest's edge walking our way from the south, and they were leading three totos along with them.

The ones holding the reins were Ama Min and Morun Rutim. Ama Min Rutim was in charge of two of the massive birds, and as she slowly approached with the pair of them behind her, she bowed her head and looked truly apologetic from the bottom of her heart.

"I'm so sorry. The Sauti men found even more totos out in the forest..."

Rimee Ruu of course yelled out, "Yay!" while I gave a deep sigh, and Ai Fa angrily furrowed her brows.

The totos, meanwhile, paid no attention to how we humans were feeling, and just nonchalantly started chewing away at nearby leaves.

3

Ultimately, the forest's edge ended up taking in all four totos.

It really wasn't such a big deal. Ai Fa just got furious at having four totos pushed onto her and headed to the Ruu settlement, personally demonstrated how useful the big birds were, and then earned Dari Sauti's enthusiastic approval.

"This would certainly make it easier to come and go all the way to the north! And it would make it simple to go shopping in the post town no matter where you live!"

From what I heard, apparently folks living to the north and south of the forest's edge didn't go into the post town unless they were holding a big banquet. When I asked why that was, I got the simple answer back that it was too far.

The settlement at the forest's edge was long, stretching from the south to the north. For clans near the center like the Ruu and Fa, it took about an hour to reach the post town. But for the Zaza at the far north and the Sauti way in the south, the trip apparently took around four hours.

And so normally, they tended to buy their aria and poitan directly from closer farm villages, and when they needed rock salt or fruit wine, they would pay those folks to go make the purchase for them.

The ability to head from one end of the forest's edge to the other in just 90 minutes had to hold some serious appeal, too. Up till now, clan heads who lived far apart only got to see each other once a year, at the clan head meeting. And even without needing Kamyua to tell me, I could easily tell just how important it was for the leading clan heads to be able to meet frequently in order to decide the future of the forest's edge.

"I'm embarrassed at our lack of insight, to not have noticed the usefulness of the totos even though we found them. They are something we absolutely need. And I'm sure the Zaza clan head must agree with that statement, too."

I only heard it secondhand through Ai Fa, but apparently Dari Sauti had been seriously impressed with the totos. My clan head even added that though he acted calm and composed, his eyes had been sparkling just as much as Rimee Ruu's.

"However, it definitely frustrates me to owe that Kamyua Yoshu man a debt... Please tell him that I would like to offer appropriate payment for the totos," I was told, entrusting me with that message. Of course, Kamyua Yoshu politely refused when I conveyed it to him, though.

"The forest's edge and Genos will be having a discussion soon, right? If that ends peacefully, I'd like for you to discard any notions of debt and the like and just accept the totos. However, if things go poorly, then you can either thrust payment at us or return the totos then."

It was a rather crude proposal, but it apparently had earned the approval of the people of the forest's edge.

And so, Dari Sauti ended up personally riding a totos to the north to deliver the news and get Gulaf Zaza's approval, after which it was officially decided that the people of the forest's edge would take in the four birds.

All of that only ended up taking a mere four days in total. It was decided with an unbelievable amount of speed for the insular people of the forest's edge. Even Donda Ruu ended up saying he had no objections if the other two leading

clan heads were in agreement. I didn't know if Rimee Ruu's tears had a secret role in that or not, though.

As for where the totos ended up, they were being taken in by the three leading clans and the Fa. We would have been capable of purchasing our own totos, so we said that all of them should go to the leading clans instead. But since we were the ones to show them how convenient totos were, it was decided that we should keep the very first of the birds that was found.

"Tomorrow, I'll look into where we can get a hold of a cart," I reported to Ai Fa.

It was now nighttime on the 23rd day of the blue month, the day where Kamyua made that proposal and the totos were officially recognized as belonging to the forest's edge.

This was after we had finished dinner without incident. I was busy preparing for tomorrow, while Ai Fa was seated a bit away, right next to the front door.

And beside Ai Fa was the totos, its huge legs folded and its long neck loosely stretched out. Carnivorous beasts like mundt and giiz prowled around at night, so it was important to bring it inside the house.

As Ai Fa looked down upon the sleeping bird's face, she whispered, "I see..."

"I mean, we didn't have anything to spend coins on anyway, so it works out pretty much perfectly. And it'll be a small price to pay to be freed of all that daily labor."

It was now the 26th day since I had started working in the post town. By this point, the Fa clan's fortune exceeded 3000 red coins. That'd be just three silver coins, though. Still, at any rate, it was an utterly unthinkable amount for the people of the forest's edge.

"Do as you please... Just make sure not to push yourself until you've had enough training, alright?"

"Yeah. The path to the post town is pretty narrow and has a lot of slopes. So I'll stick to practicing on flat trails for the time being."

"Right," Ai Fa bluntly responded.

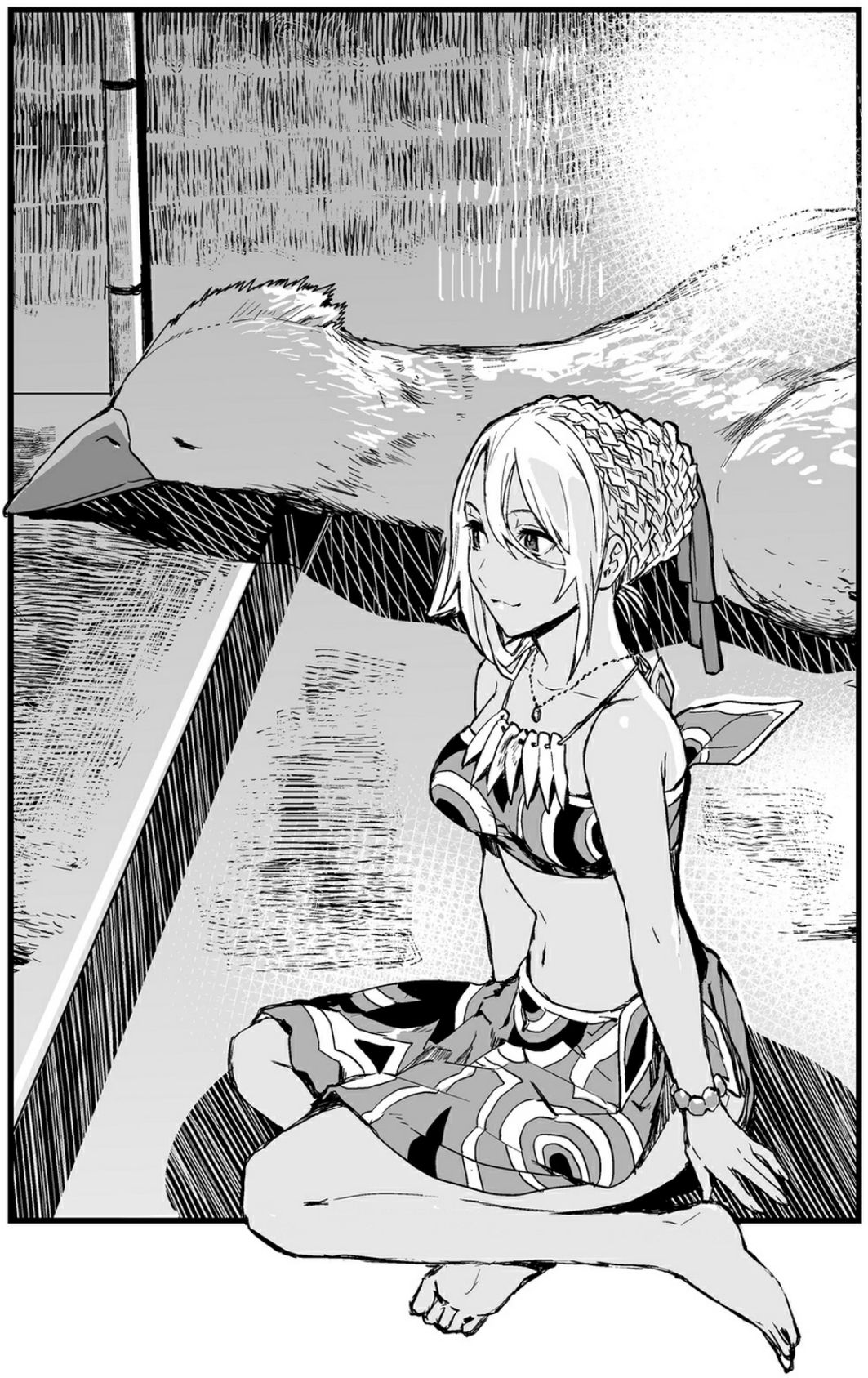
“Umm... You’re not mad or anything, are you?” I asked, feeling a bit concerned.

“Why should I be mad?” Ai Fa questioned with a tilt of her head. “As long as the leading clan heads have no objections, then everything is fine. Since the beginning, I’ve just been concerned about our relationship with Genos taking a turn for the worse.”

So Ai Fa really had enjoyed riding on the totos, huh? Well, she had looked so satisfied when she made it run, and now she was gently watching over it as it slept.

Plus, I sort of got the feeling that totos and the people of the forest’s edge had a strong affinity to begin with. Otherwise I couldn’t imagine them accepting something from another culture so quickly. And besides, it had just looked natural to see Ai Fa riding atop a totos, like something out of a portrait.

Even the people of the forest’s edge themselves didn’t seem all that clear on the matter, but perhaps before their ancestors came to live in the forest, they had ridden totos about the plains. Ai Fa and the totos just seemed to fit together so well that I couldn’t help but imagine such things. And so, I felt really satisfied too when I saw Ai Fa gently watch over the sleeping bird.



“So, what should we do about naming it?”

“Naming? A totos is just a totos.”

“But there are four totos at the forest’s edge now. If we don’t give it a name, calling out to it could get complicated.”

“So you’re saying we should give a beast a name like a human?” Ai Fa questioned, shooting me a shocked look.

As I taste-tested the tarapa sauce, I asked, “Is it really that surprising?” with a tilt of my head. “We’ll be living with it, so it’s pretty much a member of our house. Giving it a name helps you feel more attached, and understand one another deep down in your hearts, right?”

“Hearts...?” Ai Fa pondered, looking back down at the totos. “Do beasts really have such things? It’s true that it responds more earnestly than any human, though, just by me pulling on the reins or giving it a kick on the side.”

“Yeah. I guess they wouldn’t be called man’s best friend otherwise.”

“This totos may be easier for me to deal with than any human.”

“That’s a bit of a worrying statement.”

“In fact, it may make me want to try putting a bridle on you, too.”

“I’m a human being, so please just tell me what you want instead!”

“Totos certainly are mysterious creatures...”

After that string of concerning comments, Ai Fa sank unusually deep into thought.

I placed a lid atop the pot of completed sauce, put out the flame in the stove, washed my hands, and then walked over next to her.

“So, what should we do about the name? I don’t know what sort of names would be alright, so I’d really prefer it if you decided.”

After a bit of silent thinking, Ai Fa quietly whispered, “Gilua.”

“Gilua, huh? That’s a great name,” I replied, feeling just a bit taken aback. After all, the name of Ai Fa’s father who passed away two years ago was Gil Fa.

“Are you naming it after your father, then...?”

“Yes. I thought in the past that if I had a child and it was a boy, that was the name that I would use,” she said, as I silently sat down right next to her. “However, I decided to live my life as a hunter. There’s no longer any chance of me being a mother and having a child. And so I thought why not give him the name in that case? What do you think?”

I closed my eyes, and started seriously pondering on a proper response. And though I felt rather flustered, one came to me surprisingly easily.

“In that case, why not go with a different name? Nothing’s ever really absolute, so there’s always a chance that someday you’ll want to have a child after all, right?”

I braced myself for a blow to come raining down on me.

However, Ai Fa just muttered, “I see...” with a calm expression on her face. “Then let’s go with Gilulu. Gilulu Fa doesn’t sound too elegant to me, but we wouldn’t be granting him a family name anyway, so it should be fine.”

I was at a loss for words.

“Do you not like that either?” Ai Fa questioned, slowly turning my way.

As I stared back into her incredibly clear blue eyes, I replied, “No... That sounds like a great name to me, too. It’s charming and seems to fit him just right.”

“Right...” Ai Fa muttered, then shot me a bright, gleaming smile.

And so, the Fa house gained a new member by the name of Gilulu.

Chapter 2: Celebration of a 13th Birthday

1

It was now the day after we welcomed the totos Gilulu as a new member of our house.

We were striving hard the same as always in the post town, but Reina Ruu also came along. Unsurprisingly, it was because she had some shopping to do.

That wasn't a problem in and of itself, but the whole time she seemed to be thinking about something, until she finally whispered to me, "Asuta, could I have a bit of your time?"

I had an uneasy feeling about that, somehow. Sheera Ruu, who was helping me man the myamuu giba stall, also tilted her head.

"Ah, no, but... In just a bit, I have to go leave for my work at the inns..."

It was currently just before the sun would hit its peak. Since four days back, I had also taken on preparing food for The Sledgehammer, which unavoidably left me with a rather tight schedule.

"It won't take long. Couldn't you, please?" Reina Ruu insisted with a bit of a childish look on her face and an earnest shine in her blue eyes.

"Alright... Can I leave the stall to you for just a bit, Sheera Ruu?"

"Of course. Li Sudra should be here soon as well, so we'll be fine here."

We walked into the thicket behind the stalls, and I looked back on Sheera Ruu with a bit of concern as we went.

"I'm so sorry for interrupting your precious work time..."

"Ah, don't worry about that. So, what is it?"

It had been a bit since I had last seen Reina Ruu. The last time had probably been the night after Zattsu Suun was captured, which would make it around nine days. Lately Vina and Lala Ruu had been buying the ingredients for the main Ruu house since they were coming to the post town every day anyway, so

it had become noticeably rarer for anyone else from their family to come here for shopping.

Her long hair was pure black, a rare color among the people of the forest's edge, and she wore it in two braided pigtails. The 17-year-old girl had a cute face, and though she was on the small side, her proportions were absolutely a match for her older sister's.

She was a good, kind-natured girl, and was exceptionally skilled at cooking for a person of the forest's edge. Yes, she was a splendid young woman with absolutely nothing to be ashamed of... and as always, I found it hard to judge just how friendly I should act towards her.

"I'm so sorry for asking such a thing of you now, but I just can't help myself... Will you please accept my request...?"

"D-Depending on what it is, of course."

Reina Ruu was short enough that she only came up to around my chin, but she was looking up at me with a seriously desperate expression. We weren't touching at all, but she was close enough that I could feel her breathing.

"The thing is..."

"Y-Yeah?"

"Tomorrow we'll be celebrating Lala's birthday..."

"Huh?"

"Lala will be turning 13 years old. And so... I was hoping you could prepare a single dish for the celebration... What do you say?" Reina Ruu asked, her eyes full of worry.

Still not getting what was going on, I let out a foolish, "Uhh... How many people will it be?"

"The 12 members of the main house. We'll prepare the poitan and soup and everything. I'd like to leave the meat dish up to you... Is that too much to ask after all?"

"No, if that's all, then I don't especially mind," I replied, only for Reina Ruu's eyes to open wide in shock.

“I-It’s really alright? I mean, you not only have your stalls, but also your business with the two inns, and you’ve been taking care of the totos as of late too, right?”

“I take care of the work with the inns during the day, and it shouldn’t be that much more than what I normally do after heading home. I don’t need to do all that much for the totos, either. So if I can do my prep work in the Ruu kitchen like last time, then it should be no trouble at all.”

“Really? Thank you so much...!” Reina Ruu said, bringing her hands together in front of her chest and breathing a deep sigh of relief.

“T-That’s a bit much, isn’t it? Why are you so surprised, Reina Ruu?”

“Huh? It’s just, I’d heard you were so busy lately that I never thought you would actually accept. But I’m sure this will make Lala very happy, too,” Reina Ruu answered, breaking out in a broad smile.

I found that affection for her family very charming, but just a bit of doubt remained in the corner of my mind. Which is to say, a concern that Reina Ruu was plotting something.

No, I’m probably just overthinking things...

At the very least, I didn’t think the joyful smile she was showing at the moment was fake. Plus, this girl wasn’t the sort to use her little sister’s birthday as part of some plot anyway, so I just brushed aside those thoughts.

Then, even though there was no way Lala Ruu would hear us when we were this far away from the stalls, Reina Ruu stretched up on her toes to whisper in my ear, “So, is there any sort of special ingredients you need? If so, I’ll try to buy everything today.”

“N-No, you only just told me about this, and I haven’t decided on a dish or anything yet... And is there any point at all to whispering right now?”

“Ah, right. Sorry, I got carried away,” Reina Ruu apologetically replied, pulling back and looking all embarrassed and bashful.

I really wanted to believe this wasn’t all calculated.

“Um, it may sound a bit childish, but could you keep this all a secret from

Lala? I’m sure it’ll make her even happier that way.”

“I don’t mind that, but won’t it be totally obvious when I show up at the Ruu settlement?”

“If we just tell her our mother wanted to consult with you about business or something, I’m sure it’ll be fine. And I already talked things over with my father, too.”

“I see... By the way, you don’t mind if I talk to Vina Ruu and everyone else about it, right?”

“Of course. But please tell them to keep it a secret, too.”

“Ah, and is Mida included in those 12 you mentioned before? If he’s there, I’ll have to prepare a lot more food, right?”

“No. As of yesterday, he’s been eating with Shin Ruu’s house. And thanks to my mother’s instructions, Mida is limited to five people’s worth.”

I see, so he was put on a diet, huh? That was a great decision on Mia Lea Ruu’s part... Still, it was only limiting him to eating as much as five people.

At any rate, I seriously thought over if there was anything else I needed to confirm, only to realize I still hadn’t asked the most important question of all.

“By the way, I can’t exactly go leaving my clan head all alone, so could Ai Fa also attend dinner?”

With that, a different sort of pained look filled Reina Ruu’s eyes.

“Of course. Have you and Ai Fa ever spent the night apart from each other up till now?”

We hadn’t.

In the 60 days we had spent living together, we had often separated during the day, but we hadn’t eaten dinner and slept apart even once.

“Well then, please give my regards to Ai Fa as well. And I’m sorry again for interrupting your work,” Reina Ruu said with one last cheerful smile, and then she departed.

◇

“Hmm... A birthday celebration for the third Ruu daughter, is it? I don’t especially mind,” Ai Fa bluntly stated while waiting for me to get dinner ready. “Just allow me to confirm: Even the Ruu clan doesn’t hold a large banquet just to celebrate a birthday, correct?”

“Yeah. I suppose it’d be about the size of that preliminary banquet before the wedding. They’ll go all out with the cooking, but will only be celebrating with the same family members as always, apparently.” That said, going “all out” at the forest’s edge just meant throwing more vegetables into the giba stew than usual, until recently. “Reina Ruu and them will supposedly be giving their all to prepare the soup and everything. All I was asked to make was a meat dish, so it shouldn’t be too much of a burden.”

“I see. So what sort of dish do you plan to make, then?”

“Ah, it won’t be anything new for you unfortunately, but I was thinking I’d use what I got from the owner of The Sledgehammer.”

I was referring to a special ingredient, even more rare and expensive than the tau oil from The Great Southern Tree.

“You’re using *that*...?” Ai Fa questioned, frowning just a bit as that ingredient was one of her favorites.

“I mean, it’s a special occasion, after all. And we should be able to buy plenty the next time merchants from Sym arrive, so don’t go sulking like that.”

“Who’s sulking?! So... how old will the third daughter of the Ruu be tomorrow?”

“Ah, she’ll be 13, apparently.”

“13, is it? If she were a boy, that’s around when she would be taught to hunt.”

“Hmm? So what about girls, then?”

“Girls are taught how to be a bride and wife before the age of 15... But my mother Mei passed away soon after I turned 13, so I don’t know too much about that.”

“I see...” I muttered, my eyebrows drooping a bit only for Ai Fa to shoot me a harsh glare.

“What? You said you lost your mother ten years ago, so there’s no logic to you pitying me. Stop that pointless worrying and get back to manning the stove, already.”

“You certainly are restless, going right from sulking to angry...”

“I’m not sulking or angry at all!”

Despite remaining seated, Ai Fa still managed to stamp her feet.

I certainly wouldn’t dare say it out loud, but it was super adorable. And fortunately, that helped end things without feeling overly gloomy.

“Oh, right. I was told that each person gives a flower as a birthday blessing...”

“Did you think I wasn’t even aware of that much...?”

“I just wanted to confirm to be safe. For all I knew, that tradition could have even varied by clan. Ah, and we’ll be heading back to the Fa house after eating, right?”

“Yes. I wouldn’t feel right borrowing a bedroom in the main house.”

“Well then, I’ll head to the Ruu settlement right after work, so could you take care of Gilulu?”

“‘Take care of Gilulu’?”

“Yeah. Since we’re going out, you’ll need to put him in the house before leaving, right?”

As for Gilulu, he was once again seated by the entrance, his long neck stretching out across the floor. After looking over his peaceful sleeping face, Ai Fa turned and shot me a questioning look.

“Asuta, if you don’t intend to use Gilulu for an occasion such as this, then just when *will* you use him?”

“Huh? But it’ll be night when we’re heading back, and there are two of us... Ah, but I guess we could lead him by the reins then.”

“What do you mean? I can’t see any reason we can’t ride him both going and coming back.”

“B-But wouldn’t it be dangerous to ride a totos down such a dark path? Plus

that’d blow out the flame from a candle, too.”

“We don’t need candles. If we just run Gilulu lightly, giiz and mundt won’t be able to catch us.”

“But it’s possible he can’t see well at night, isn’t it? Back in my old world, that was true for a lot of birds.”

“Oh? Totos can’t see well in the dark? Even so, as long as there’s moonlight, I’ll be fine. If the moon is hidden, though, we’d have no choice but to get down and lead Gilulu like you said, so I suppose we should still prepare a candle to be safe.”

So for Ai Fa, candles were only necessary to ward off beasts? I was once again left in awe of the people of the forest’s edge.

“Well then, there’s just one more thing concerning me... I still haven’t ridden on Gilulu’s back, you know.”

“I’ll handle the reins, so it won’t be a problem. You just need to cling to me so as not to fall off.”

Sure enough, I recalled Leito mentioning it was possible for two people to ride on a totos. I questioned a bit the thought of clinging to a beautiful young woman like Ai Fa, though.

“Shall we try practicing riding with the two of us after dinner? It seems like it will prove rather amusing, doesn’t it?” Ai Fa said with a smile, at which point I didn’t feel I could really try to object any further. “So, will it be much longer till dinner...? I’m feeling quite hungry.”

“Yeah, I just need to grill the meat, so hold on a little bit longer. Today, I’m making teriyaki with loin meat and tau oil.”

“Right.”

Ai Fa always gave back a flat response when we weren’t having hamburgers. She didn’t look disgruntled as she ate, but she also didn’t seem especially happy, either. I had yet to find a dish she liked better, and even the ingredient from The Sledgehammer ultimately just acted as an additional garnish to the hamburgers.

“Now that I think about it, it’s been around two months since I first met you. I guess it makes sense for someone from the Ruu to have had a birthday by now, then.”

“Hmm? I don’t understand what you mean.”

“I mean, there are thirteen people in the main Ruu house if you include Kota Ruu, right? So it wouldn’t be strange for them to be having a birthday every month, wouldn’t you say? This world also has 12 months to a year, after all.”

However, once every three years they had a 13th month, which I still had trouble wrapping my head around.

“You always have such unusual thoughts. We aren’t under the Ruu clan, so such celebrations would normally have nothing to do with us.”

“Well, yeah, I guess that’s true, but still...”

“And don’t go throwing out statements like ‘around two months.’”

“Huh? But that’s about how long it’s been, right? I haven’t exactly been counting, but it should be nearly 60 days soon,” I replied, only for Ai Fa to prop up her cheek by placing her elbow atop her raised knee.

“It’s not ‘about.’ As of tonight, it’s been exactly two months.”

“Eh?”

“I met you out in the forest on the 24th day of the yellow month. Since today is the 24th day of the blue month, it’s been precisely two months.”

I was at a loss for words.

Ai Fa, meanwhile, gazed off a bit into the distance.

“I suppose this was around the time of day that I was boiling that stew, wasn’t it? You were sitting there in that foreign white outfit, your eyes sparkling as you stared excitedly at giba meat that hadn’t even been bloodlet.”

It had been two months exactly since that night... Since I met Ai Fa in the forest, had a sword pointed right up against my nose, and was invited to the Fa house.

Back then, and even a month back, I had been living with no idea whatsoever

what day or month it was. I didn't start paying attention to such matters until I started working in the post town. And so, it somehow felt like I had been hit with a real surprise attack.

"Alright, I'm canceling the tau oil teriyaki! Tonight, we're having hamburgers!"

"Hmm? Why the sudden change?"

"I mean, if it's our two month anniversary, then why not have a bit of a celebration? Ah, right, I'll go all out and use *that*, too!"

"It's only been two months, so is it really anything worth celebrating? And besides, if you go mincing up meat now, it'll just make dinner even later."

"I've got the patties meant for selling in the post town! Of course, I'll have to make more to replace what we eat! They're smaller since they're meant for snacks, so we'll have two each."

As I stood up to head into the pantry, Ai Fa just shot me a confused look.

"I don't understand at all. Why are you so worked up, Asuta?"

"Huh? I'm not especially worked up or anything... I just want to at least feed you your favorite food on a day like today. But if you want to eat something other than hamburgers, I'll certainly take any requests."

"...Of course that's not what I'm saying."

Ai Fa had a very complex look on her face, as if she was at a loss as to whether or not she should pout.

And so, the Fa house had a small celebration of its own before the one for Lala Ruu's birthday.

2

It was now the following day, the 25th of the blue month.

Just as planned, I went directly from the post town to the Ruu settlement, only to find a bizarre sight awaiting me there.

"Whoa, what's that?"

The plaza of the Ruu settlement sat surrounded by seven houses. And in one of its corners lay an unusual blob of flesh, wrapped in cloth with swirling patterns. A number of small children had excitedly gathered around the pile of meat.

As I stood there dumbfounded, Lala Ruu answered, “Who else could that possibly be but Mida?”

It was completely obvious even at a glance that that was Mida, but I had absolutely no idea what he was doing lying down in a place like that. Lala Ruu and I approached closer, but it didn’t become any clearer in the least what was going on.

Mida was sprawled out on the ground, his huge body coated in sweat as he panted. And as he breathed, his almost perfectly round stomach moved heavily up and down. The young children climbed atop and tried to keep their balance, clung tight and giggled excitedly, and tried their hardest to scramble back up when they fell. It was as if he was some sort of playground equipment.

There were five kids in total, three boys and two girls. They were all in the sort of outfits meant for children, so they must have been under the age of ten. And the youngest looking girl of the group couldn’t have been more than three at the most.

“Umm... This isn’t some sort of abuse, is it?”

“Does it look like that?”

“No, but I don’t know what it is.”

At the very least, I couldn’t see any malice in the children’s smiles.

As for Mida, he looked like a beached sperm whale, and I honestly couldn’t even tell if he was still conscious.

It was then that a man approached from the shadow of one of the houses.

“Mida, you’ve rested enough now, haven’t you? Let’s get back to work.”

I didn’t really recognize the man, but he looked to be a bit younger than 40. He was slender and tall, had a mustache, and his long blackish-brown hair was tied together behind his head. Behind his narrowed eyes I could spy dark blue

pupils, and his long face was taut, giving him a rather somber appearance overall.

“Water... I want to drink water...”

“Then go ahead and draw it yourself. You already drank the water jug dry, after all,” the man replied, no mercy or restraint in his voice.

Mida started slowly sitting up, and the children gave excited shrieks as they leapt off of his belly.

I also let slip a “Wah!” although mine wasn’t quite as joyful. That was because a soft, smooth presence suddenly clung to me from behind.

“I’m sorry. It really wasn’t on purpose... I’m just feeling unwell for some reason...”

I had been prepared to launch an immediate objection to that dangerous sensation I was feeling on my back, but when I saw Vina Ruu’s face over my shoulder, it really had gone pale. She was seriously bad at dealing with Mida.

“Ah, Sheera, you’re back? Good work today, and to you women of the main house, too,” the older man said, turning away from Mida to face our way.

That was when I finally remembered. The man was Sheera and Shin Ruu’s father, the former branch family head Ryada Ruu.

Now that I looked closely, he was dragging his right leg along as he walked. Despite being an age where he would normally head out into the forest, he didn’t have a hunter’s cloak or sword. The tendons in his legs had been severed and he was no longer able to hunt, and so this youngest brother of Donda Ruu’s had yielded his role as head of his household to his young eldest son, Shin Ruu.

I bowed my head as best as I could manage, as Vina Ruu was still clinging to me from behind like she was trying to force me to give her a piggyback ride.

“Ryada Ruu, nice to meet you... I don’t think we’ve spoken before? I’m Asuta of the Fa clan.”

I was the only one this pale living at the forest’s edge, so that introduction was probably unnecessary. However, Shin Ruu and his family had helped me out a lot up till now. And so, I wanted to show the former head the greatest

amount of respect that I could.

“I believe this is indeed our first time meeting face to face. I’m the former head of Shin Ruu’s house, Ryada Ruu. Thank you for always looking after my daughter Sheera.”

He must have felt the same as I did, as he then calmly bowed back. He really did have a similar feel to Shin and Sheera Ruu about him, somehow.

“Um, what work is Mida doing, exactly?”

“Hmm? Right now, he’s been tasked with gathering lumber from the outskirts of the forest.”

I followed Ryada Ruu’s gaze, and saw a mountain of logs heaped in the shadow of Shin Ruu’s house. They were notably thicker than what was gathered as firewood, and had been cleanly cut, too.

“He’s doing that instead of working as a hunter?”

“That’s right. He may be strong, but as you can see it takes him no time at all to run out of energy. He’d just be a burden to the other hunters like this, so we’ve got him doing other work for the time being.”

As we were having that conversation, Mida apparently finally noticed us. After all, as he lay on the ground surrounded by grinning kids, he muttered in his unusually shrill voice, “Huh...? It’s Asuta... You came here, Asuta...?”

“That’s right. I’m gratified to see you again, Mida.”

As soon as I said that, Lala Ruu butted in with a, “Hey, what’s with the way you’re talking to him? He’s younger than Ludo, you know. And as of today, me and him are only one year apart.”

“No, but...” I started to argue, but then I thought it over. He was three years younger than me, so it was probably a bit much to be using such polite language around him. “Mida’s so large that I mistook his age when we first met. Do you mind if I just talk to you casually from now on, Mida?”

“Hmm...?” Mida mumbled as his fatty cheeks shook a bit, seeming not to understand in the least. Then, he let out a hefty sigh. “Ah, I get all hungry when I see you... Am I going to get to eat something yummy...?”

He really was just the same as always.

Nine days back when he was faced with Tei Suun's remains, he was so sad that it was like the world had come to an end, and no matter how much Ai Fa and Yamiru Lea chided him, he wouldn't stop sobbing. But fortunately, none of that grief seemed to be hanging about him now.

"There's still some time left till dinner. So keep working hard so that you can enjoy that yummy food later, alright?" Sheera Ruu stated in a calm, kind tone.

I was caught off guard and turned her way, only for Sheera Ruu's eyes to also go wide with surprise.

"What is it? Did I say something strange?"

"Ah, no... Sorry. I just hadn't really heard you talk like that before... It really made you feel like a big sister or something."

"I don't quite understand what you mean, but that sounds embarrassing, somehow..." Sheera Ruu replied, looking down a bit awkwardly.

I scratched my head at Lala Ruu's chilly glare, and then when I noticed Ryada Ruu's gaze, I broke out in a cold sweat.

"Er, um... I'm sorry."

"I don't know what you're apologizing for, but it's about time for me to be getting back to work," Ryada Ruu answered with a calm, serious expression, then looked over at the children surrounding Mida. "And you all, if you don't have anything to do, then go play over that way. You can't bother Mida while he's working, alright?"

"Yup!"

"Bye bye, Mida!"

"Let's play again sometime!"

"Yeah..." Mida replied, his fatty cheeks trembling again.

As always I couldn't read his facial expressions, but I could see a sort of disappointed light shining in his tiny piglet-esque eyes.

Seeing that, I figured he'd be just fine. And so, feeling a bit relieved, I went to

say farewell to him.

“See you around, Mida. Let’s both give our work our all.”

“Huh...? You’re leaving already, Asuta...?”

“No, I’m going to be preparing a dish for dinner at the main house tonight. So if you have the time, we can always talk later.”

“Yeah... Got it...”

As I watched Mida slowly rise out of the corner of my eye, our group started moving again. Though with that said, the pots Sheera and Lala Ruu were carrying came from Shin Ruu’s house, so the two of them headed that way while I and the still staggering Vina Ruu headed for the main Ruu home.

“It’s been over ten days now since Mida came to the Ruu settlement, hasn’t it? But you still haven’t been able to overcome your trouble dealing with him yet?”

“I don’t know how everyone’s able to treat him normally like that... Ugh, he’s so gross...”

“But if he keeps working hard, then maybe Mida’s physique’ll end up normal... Er, that might be a bit far, but at least like Dan Rutim’s.”

“Will I be able to last till then...?”

By that point in the conversation, we had arrived at the main Ruu house.

After greeting Sati Lea Ruu, we headed out back to the kitchen. And right as we rounded the corner, we ran into Rimee Ruu. Or to be more accurate, Rimee Ruu riding atop a totos.

“Ah, Asuta! Hey there! Welcome to the Ruu house!”

I had built up a decent bit of immunity through living with Gilulu, so I managed to not get all flustered by the sudden appearance of the bird.

“Hey, Rimee Ruu. So you can already ride a totos all on your own?”

“Yup! It’s still tricky to make it run, though...”

She looked to be having a great deal of fun manipulating the reins and making the totos turn its head our way.

They were about the same size, but this totos had a bit darker plumage than our Gilulu, and had even darker feathers than that mixed in along its body and neck in a sort of tiger stripe pattern. Apparently when you paid attention, totos had quite a bit of individual differences.

“Hey, what did you name the Fa house’s totos? This guy’s named Ruuruu!”

“Ruuruu, huh? That’s cute.”

“Yup! That’s because it’s the Ruu clan’s totos!”

As I pondered whether or not the Zaza and Sauti clans named their totos, I answered, “Ours is Gilulu.”

“Gilulu and Ruuruu, huh? They’re kind of similar, aren’t they?” Rimee Ruu said, looking delighted.

“Ah, Vina, good work today. And Asuta, welcome to the Ruu house. Thank you for coming all this way today,” Mia Lea Ruu called from inside the kitchen, where Reina Ruu was also waiting. “Now Rimee, Asuta’s here, so our break time is over. Tie up the totos.”

“Alright!” Rimee Ruu answered, passing by the door to the kitchen to do as she was told.

Vina Ruu also lowered down her luggage, then left while still looking a bit exhausted.

“Thank you, Asuta. Um... Lala didn’t notice, did she?” Reina Ruu quietly asked from over next to her mother.

“She didn’t,” I answered with a nod. “Actually, even if she thought I may make dinner, she probably wouldn’t be surprised by that fact alone. But at any rate, she didn’t ever bring it up.”

“Still, since we’re talking about you, I’m sure you’ll prepare a dish that will really shock her, right?” Mia Lea Ruu asked.

“Ah, I thought about it a lot, but I was worried going with something unfamiliar could end with her disliking it, so I’ll just be adding something a little extra. It’s essentially just a grilled meat dish with tarapa sauce though, so please don’t go getting your hopes up too high.”

Yet despite what I said, Mia Lea and Reina Ruu shared a look full of expectations.

I really was just adding a topping, so I didn't want them getting too hyped up. But at any rate, I went ahead and set about cooking. After all, I had to do my preparations for tomorrow here too, so I honestly didn't have a lot of time to spare.

"Sorry for the wait! Well then, I'll help Asuta to... Huh, can I not help out?" Rimee Ruu questioned.

"Yeah, this is my personal work. Still, it might be a little tricky today..."

Thinking about it normally, it would be pretty rough to try to finish all my prep work before dinner. Usually, when we put in a full day of work in the post town, that task would stretch until after we ate.

However, we weren't planning on staying at the Ruu settlement tonight, so I wanted to get everything finished now if at all possible.

"Um, Mia Lea Ruu... I'm sorry about this, but could I borrow some help for today? I'll pay the same amount as I do for the work in the post town."

"Hmm? In that case, should I call Vina back? You haven't been wanting for firewood lately, have you?"

Ah, right. Whenever Vina Ruu didn't stop by the Fa house on the way back, she spent an hour gathering firewood.

"No, but I'd like to have someone to help me all the way until the start of dinner. Is anyone from the branch houses available?"

"In that case, let one of us help you out. We've already baked the poitan, so we should be able to handle our work with just two of us."

"Ah, could we please do that, then?" I asked with a sigh of relief.

"Alright, then let's work real hard! What should I do first?" Rimee Ruu said with a smile as she clung to my legs.

Seeing that, Reina Ruu mumbled in a panic, "Ah, um, you see... I-I want to help Asuta out! Is that not okay...?"

Rimee Ruu turned her way with a baffled stare, while Mia Lea Ruu gave a hearty shrug of her shoulders.

“I don’t care which of you does it. But if you’re being paid for the work, then I suppose we should go with Reina, since I’m more confident in her skills.”

“Huh?! But I can do work just fine!” Rimee Ruu argued, puffing her cheeks. “I wanted to help out with the stalls in the post town, too! And I even got left behind for the clan head meeting! Why do I always get left out?!”

“That’s because you’re still a little kid. Once you can carry a pot, I wouldn’t mind having you go to town instead of Lala.”

Upon hearing that, I was suddenly hit by a thought.

“In that case, it may be possible for Rimee Ruu to help once the Fa house gets ahold of a totos-pulled wagon. The plan was to stop by the Ruu settlement and have everyone ride in it, after all.”

“Huh? But wouldn’t stopping here take you far out of your way?”

“No. Since there’s a rope bridge along the usual route from the Fa house, it wouldn’t be possible to take a totos that way. And so, it’d be more reasonable to have everyone meet up at the Ruu settlement, then take the southern route into the post town together.”

With that, Rimee Ruu shouted, “Hooray!” and leapt into the air. And as she saw that, Reina Ruu started fidgeting.

“Uh, mother... The reason you left the work in the post town up to Vina was out of concern that the members of the Suun clan may make a move, right? And so, um...”

“Yes, but now things have gotten all complicated with the folks from the castle. We only just removed Ludo and the others as guards, so I think we should have Vina keep helping out until that discussion is held.”

“Yes, that’s true...” Reina Ruu agreed with a slump of her shoulders.

“Rimee, that goes for you too. Until we can trust that the castle isn’t our enemy, a small child like you can’t go wandering around the post town.”

“It’ll be fine! I’m sure Papa Donda will beat up those people in the castle, no

problem!”

Er, it’d be a real issue if he went and did that. But at any rate, for now we just had to tackle the work in front of us.

“Well then, let’s get started. Rimee, you come help out over here,” Mia Lea Ruu stated, signaling the start of our work.

“We’ll try to take care of as much of the prep work for the stalls as we can over here. I guess we should start with the hamburger patties.”

“Right. That means dicing the aria and mincing the meat, yeah?” Reina Ruu asked, the expression on her face shifting in an instant. Now, she was wearing an unusually serious look. The people of the forest’s edge took their work seriously by nature to begin with, but what exactly had her feeling so eager? “Which should I be in charge of? Or should both of us do the same task at once?”

“Y-Yeah... We’ll start by both dicing aria, and once that’s done we’ll split off to sauté the aria and mince the meat.”

“I see... the sautéed aria needs to cool off for a bit, so it’s most efficient to do things in that order.”

Seriously, just what was going on here?

I couldn’t help but feel a bit taken aback by this sudden shift in Reina Ruu as I set about dicing up aria with my Sym-made vegetable knife.

“That knife cost 18 white coins, didn’t it...?”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

“That’s an unbelievable price, but it certainly does seem to cut well. I can really sense that from how you handle it.”

Despite the fact that she was stealing glances over at my hands, Reina Ruu was still managing to skillfully dice up aria.

“What is it...? You’re already totally accustomed to this sort of work, right?”

“Ah, I wouldn’t go that far... And I already realized this back at the clan head meeting, but Vina and Lala have both gotten really good at manning the stove,

haven’t they?”

“H-Huh? But Sheera Ruu and I are the only ones using knives when cooking in the post town...”

“Yes. But I meant things like how to progress with work and what to use spare time on and the like. And Sheera Ruu improved at handling knives and managing flames on top of that.” Even as she was talking, Reina Ruu’s hands kept on precisely chopping away at the aria. “By now, I’m sure I can’t measure up to her at all. I suppose that’s only natural after she’s received instructions from you for nearly a month now, though.”

“I-I don’t think that’s true at all.”

“Oh, it certainly is. And I’m still just a child deep down, so I can’t help but find that a little vexing.”

Then, Reina Ruu broke out in a smile of a sort I had never before seen from her.

Just as she had said, there was still a bit of childishness about her. She was a very serious and kind girl by nature, yet while she was often frank and open, she also frequently bottled things up inside. And she was a very girly girl who I found a lot harder to handle than Rimee Ruu, who was pure and innocent, or Lala Ruu, who very openly showed her emotions. That was the overall impression I had of Reina Ruu.

But just how could I even go about describing the expression on her face at the moment...? Her smile was full of something similar to yet different from hostility or envy, and clearly displayed a strong will. It was like the grin of a warrior heading off to a decisive battle, yet there was too much joy behind it for that to fit. At any rate, it was a truly undaunted smile.

Did she see Sheera Ruu as her rival? Not in terms of love of course, but rather as women who specialize in manning the stove.

“Ah, I’m sorry...! Um, I don’t especially harbor any negative feelings towards Sheera Ruu, you know...” With that, Reina Ruu broke out in a childish expression again, and I glanced at her family behind her. However, Mia Lea and Rimee Ruu were acting like they hadn’t heard a thing, and just kept chatting

away while peeling chatchi. “I just feel like I want to work even harder at manning the stove than I have up till now. Sheera Ruu is a precious member of our clan, though, so even if I do feel a bit frustrated, I would never want to disrespect her!”

“Ah, I wasn’t thinking anything like that. And that desire to improve yourself is a good thing, I’d say,” I told her. Reina Ruu stared back at my face for a bit, and then finally broke out in a relaxed smile.

It seemed like she may have been feeling more than a little emotionally unstable at the moment. However, I couldn’t help but want to cheer on this change in her.

The reason Sheera Ruu so diligently strove to practice her cooking was likely because that was where she derived her sense of worth from. By using her skills, she was able to earn money and help out her family. Plus, she looked happy at the thought of her family eating her cooking. And so, she wanted to strive even harder... That’s how I imagined she thought.

However, I didn’t sense those sort of straightforward emotions—fitting to a person of the forest’s edge—coming from Reina Ruu. No, there seemed to be more of a hazy feeling hanging about her... Perhaps a vague desire to improve, some sort of uncertain goal, or an undefined irritation drove her?

Maybe she even needed the approval of those around her for her own sense of self-esteem. However, I certainly wasn’t enough of a saint to be able to look down on her for that. In fact, that sort of thing wasn’t rare at all in the world I came from. Pretty much everybody had a bit of that in them, I’d say. That included me too, of course.

In other words, to cut to the chase, I sensed something very familiar in Reina Ruu. The scent of a rookie chef, taking pride in her own cooking skills and finding both joy and sorrow from them...

“What’s the matter...? You stopped working, Asuta,” Reina Ruu pointed out, now wearing a bit of a mischievous smile.

I can’t say I recalled seeing such an expression on her before.

Perhaps Reina Ruu was in the midst of a serious change. I guessed that was

why she seemed so unstable right now.

At any rate, I found her actions that served as an omen of that change both very exciting and charming.

Of course, I didn't mean that in terms of physical attraction, and perhaps this was a bit of a grandiose statement, but I could feel my heart tremble at the premonition that this was the birth of my future rival.

3

At last, night rolled around.

Before dinner, first the clan members were to present Lala Ruu with flowers.

Normally she was seated down from everyone else along with Rimee Ruu, but now she was sitting sullenly between the clan head and the elder.

"To think, you're now 13... You're pretty average in terms of height, but you're still just a little brat inside, aren't you?" Donda Ruu harshly commented, wearing just as sour a look on his face as his daughter.

The star of the night snapped, "Oh shut it!" with raised eyebrows. "Geez, I'm starving here, so could we hurry up and get this over with already?"

"Stuff like that is why you're still just a brat," Donda Ruu stated, frowning further as he reached over with his long arm without even getting up, and placed a large blue flower in his daughter's hair. "I grant my third daughter this blessing for having passed this year safe and sound, and wish her the same in the coming year as well."

As some wrinkles formed around her nose, Lala Ruu muttered back, "Yeah, yeah, thanks." What a heartwarming exchange between the father and daughter pair.

Then, Lala Ruu turned the other way, towards Granny Jiba. The 85-year-old elder's withered fingers reached out and put a small red flower in her great granddaughter's hair.

"Happy birthday... I hope you'll stay just as lively as always, Lala."

“Yeah. Thanks, Granny Jiba,” Lala Ruu replied, suddenly breaking out in a completely earnest smile. Hearing her joyful voice, her father gave a little, “Tch!” from behind her.

Next up, Jiza Ruu approached holding two flowers, red and blue, then took a knee in front of his sister.

“Third daughter Lala, I offer this blessing in celebration of your 13th birthday. I hope that you continue living as a fine young woman who brings no shame to the Ruu name... And this flower is from Darmu.”

Lala Ruu replied, “Thanks,” a humble expression on her face. The second son Darmu Ruu was at the Suun settlement teaching the members of the branch families how to hunt, so he was absent from the event.

From there, the remaining members of her family each approached Lala Ruu in order.

“Congrats... But if you don’t put some more meat on you, the men won’t want anything to do with you, y’know?”

“Shut it, you dummy!”

“Happy birthday. You’ve got a perfectly fine personality, so you just need to do something about that mouth of yours.”

“Ugh...”

“Congratulations. Keep on living properly like you have been.”

“Yeah. Thanks, Granny Tito Min.”

“You’ve grown so pretty. And I love you just as you are too, Lala. Congratulations on turning 13.”

“Gaa!”

“Thanks, Sati Lea and Kota.”

“Happy birthday. I can’t believe you’re already 13, Lala...”

“Wow, what a big flower! Thanks!”

“Congratulations. May you have another happy and healthy year ahead of you.”

“Right. Thank you.”

“Congrats! Here’s a mizora flower!”

“Thanks. Man... the scent of flowers is drowning out the smell of the food,” Lala Ruu grumbled, looking rather embarrassed as she did so. Her hair and top were now full of flowers, and she seemed so earnestly happy that I felt myself wanting to smile, too.

“Congratulations, Lala Ruu. We’re not members of your clan, but will you accept flowers from us too?” I asked as Ai Fa and I finally approached the birthday girl.

“Yeah,” Lala Ruu said with a nod, so Ai Fa placed a blue flower by her hip, while I somehow managed to squeeze in a red one above her ear.

It was no surprise that everyone had picked the same colors to compliment the girl’s splendid red hair and eyes as blue as the ocean.

13, huh...? Well, I guess she looks about right for that... I thought to myself.

Her height was pretty average and she was slender, plus although she had a really nice face, the expressions she wore were generally childish. That sort of imbalance seemed fitting for the age of 13, somehow.

She had a mouth on her and was a bit androgynous, but four years from now she would surely be as much of a beauty as Reina Ruu, and by the time she was Vina Ruu’s age, she was sure to be positively stunning. Well, those thoughts were probably a bit rude, but at any rate, she was a cute, charming girl.

“Well then, let’s get this dinner started. Asuta helped us to prepare it today, too,” Mia Lea Ruu stated, standing to portion out the soup.

“Ah, so that really was it,” Lala Ruu said with a shrug of her shoulders. “I definitely noticed you trying to be all sneaky with Reina. I’m certainly grateful, but you’re not going to make me eat something weird, are you?”

“Well, let’s just say I hope it’s to your tastes, I guess.”

With that I approached the stove meant for keeping food warm and took the lid off a pot.

Instantly, the aroma of tarapa filled the room.

“What, you used tarapa? That’s the same as always, isn’t it?” Ludo Ruu complained.

Vina and Lala Ruu brought back the excess tarapa sauce from the stalls, so it must have been a part of their meals each and every day.

“Sorry about that. It’s just that tarapa sauce went best with the dish for the day. But I really did prepare it special.”

Rather than just using the leftovers from the stall as is, I carefully taste tested it while adding the secret flavors of Jagar-made tau oil and Sym-produced chitt seeds. By the way, chitt seeds were a powerful spice like red chili peppers, so I really did just add a bit to serve as a hidden flavor.

And inside that specially-prepared tarapa sauce was sautéed sirloin, cooked to a golden brown. As I scooped the chunks of meat out one by one, I also accepted my secret weapon from Ai Fa. The only ones who knew of the ingredient were my clan head, who had personally tasted it in the Fa house, and Vina Ruu, who had accompanied me to The Sledgehammer. The Sym-produced good was just too expensive, so I didn’t even use it in my cooking for the inn.

“What’s that?” Ludo Ruu asked, his eyes opening wide. The women all seemed super interested, too.

It was a white, semicircular object that was around 15 centimeters in diameter and five centimeters thick. Originally it had been fully circular, but well, we had already used quite a bit in our dinners at the Fa house. Though the surface was white, it was a pale yellow where it had been cut.

For the full original ingredient, it had cost 20 whole red coins. It was a luxury item that the owner of The Sledgehammer had purchased for his own use rather than to sell, which he fortunately was willing to sell to us in turn.

“Is it poitan? No, that’s not it... Is it food?”

“It is. The folks of the Eastern Kingdom of Sym make it from the milk of an animal called a gyama that lives there, and they refer to it as dried milk. Back where I come from we called it cheese, though.”

Using my kitchen knife, I cut that gyama cheese into slices around 7-8 millimeters thick.

I placed a piece atop each of the tarapa sauce-coated sautés, and as the cheese started to get nice and gooey, an indescribable aroma spread throughout the room.

“Whoa, what is that...? What a strange smell...”

“Right? It’s not an ingredient you see at all in the post town, but it’s supposedly full of nutrition and will help make you nice and strong. It may seem a little tricky to eat at first, but folks who like it generally *really* like it.”

My clan head, for example. For Ai Fa, hamburger steaks with sweet fruit wine sauce and this added on top had become her favorite dish. I had just said that tarapa went best with it before because I knew the Ruu clan head wasn’t all that fond of sweet sauces.

“Well then, let’s get this celebration started,” Donda Ruu stated in a serious tone, then began the pre-meal ritual. And once he finished reciting that, the banquet finally kicked off.

In a pleasant surprise, the first one to speak up was the birthday girl herself.

“Whoa, what is this?! It’s really good!”

“Yeah, it’s yummy!” Rimee Ruu agreed.

With that, I breathed a sigh of relief and bit into my own sauté.

The gyama cheese had a flavor reminiscent of Camembert. There was a definite richness to it, but it wasn’t too quirky of a flavor. And yeah, with the whitish color and creamy texture, it really did remind me a lot of Camembert.

It certainly wouldn’t be necessary to explain how well tomatoes and cheese went together. The tomato-esque tarapa blended with the creamy taste of the gyama cheese, and elevated the clear flavor of the loin meat.

I still felt it probably went best with the hamburgers, but this sirloin sauté didn’t exactly lose out to that, either. I even unwittingly broke out in a smile from how tasty it was.

“Hey, this cheese stuff is definitely tasty, but...” Ludo Ruu quietly started. Concerned that he didn’t like the dish, I turned his way. “What’s with this tarapa sauce? It tastes different than normal, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah, I did a little extra on that end, too. I added tau oil and chitt seeds, and also fine-tuned the ratio of diced aria and fruit wine, too... Is it better normally, then?”

“That’s not what I’m saying. It’s crazy tasty. In fact, it’s almost *too* tasty, and that’s what caught me off-guard.” Ludo Ruu ripped off a chunk of baked poitan, dipped it in the sauce, and then tossed it in his mouth. “Yup, that’s good. Now that I think about it... it’s been a really long time since I’ve had your cooking.”

“Really? But you did some snacking when you were on guard duty, and you taste tested the cubed giba meat stew, didn’t you?”

“That’s not what I mean. I was talking about when you seriously give it your all to make dinner. And so, y’know...” Ludo Ruu said, hesitating and looking over his family.

The one to ultimately reply was Granny Tito Min.

“It’s not like you to try to act all considerate like that, Ludo. You can just come out and say something’s delicious, can’t you?”

“No, but...”

“It caught me off guard, too, Asuta. It seems your cooking skills have improved quite a bit.”

“Huh? Really?”

“Yes, definitely. Thanks to the lessons you’ve given us, we’ve grown able to make a variety of different dishes. Reina and Mia Lea in particular have gotten so skilled that I wouldn’t have expected there to be that much of a difference between their cooking and yours, and yet...”

“Oh, stop that. There’s no way that we could ever measure up to Asuta,” Mia Lea Ruu chimed in with a grin. “Still, I was surprised, too. Your cooking truly is delicious. We should be making it in mostly the same way, so how is it that it tastes so different?”

“That’s because anything and everything about it is different. There’s of course his handling of the knife and management of the flames, and then there’s also how much of which ingredient he uses, how he adjusts things after

testing the taste, and other little things I don't even know how to explain. Asuta's methods are completely and utterly different from ours."

Reina Ruu had been the one to say all that.

Since Lala Ruu was seated up at the head today, Reina Ruu and I were actually a bit closer to each other than usual. And so, I could see the admiration shining calmly away in her eyes even brighter than usual as she looked my way.

"I was quite surprised as well. I suppose it's only natural that you would improve after cooking hundreds of meals day after day for work. But still... I really was taken off guard."

"I think 'hundreds' is a bit of an exaggeration..."

Still, it was true that I was spending most of each day cooking. And it was my creed to give my all each and every day, but still, it was a little embarrassing to hear such direct praise.

"But putting myself aside, you've grown a lot too, Reina. Go ahead and try that soup to see, Asuta," Mia Lea Ruu stated.

I nodded back and picked up my plate of soup.

The giba soup had tau oil added, and the meat in it had turned a light brown. Mia Lea and Rimee Ruu had been the ones to make it, but the one to do the final taste testing and fine tune it with tau oil and salt was Reina Ruu.

I scooped up a spoonful, took a sip, and instantly shouted out, "Wow, that's delicious!"

Reina Ruu broke out in a joyful grin.

"Reina's the one who thought up that seasoning. She didn't seem to do anything too tricky, so why is it that the taste turned out so different, I wonder?"

She didn't do anything tricky... That certainly seemed to be the case.

She had made broth from the meat, then added salt, tau oil, and pico leaves for flavor. I didn't think just adding tau oil should have brought about such a change, though.

The vegetables in the soup were aria, chatchi, and gigo. To relate them to foods from my world, that was like onion, potato, and yam.

The choice to add in gigo cut into circular slices was a really good one. And I'd actually been using tau oil quite a bit since first purchasing it, too. Thanks to that, I could say it really was quite a bit like soy sauce, which made it a great match for the gigo.

Even with all that in mind, this still sure was seriously tasty. Since she hadn't used any complicated tricks, that flavor was down to the balance of seasonings and ingredients, as well as how she managed the flame. And I had to say, she had handled all that perfectly.

The real clincher in the dish was probably the tau oil. Actually, I had gotten to try some soup without any in it around ten days back. And back then, the taste hadn't had anywhere near as much of an impact on me. So by adding the tau oil, the taste had improved dramatically. Plus, by increasing the amount of seasoning being used, that meant the balance was more important than ever before.

However, that wasn't enough to explain everything. After all, this soup tasted even better than what I made personally.

The flavor had a depth to it. Beyond the refreshing sweetness from the tau oil, I could sense a subtle fragrant flavor. And that was where the greatest difference in the overall taste was coming from.

"Did you... add grilled meat in addition to raw when making the broth?" I saw Reina Ruu's eyes open wide in shock. "And that's not all. This charred soy sauce flavor... Did you sauté ground meat in tau oil and add that, too?"

"That's amazing! How did you know?"

"Ah, so I was right? That was pretty much all just guesswork... You're the amazing one here, Reina Ruu."

"No, it's still you. I can't beat you at all, Asuta!"

As she said that, though, her eyes sparkled with joy.

Just what sort of face was I making, though? This was probably the first time I

had truly thought someone else's cooking was delicious since coming to this world.

And I wasn't feeling that way towards a dish that used unknown foods from the south or east, but rather one made from the exact same ingredients I used. To put it bluntly, I felt incredibly moved.

"Hey, kid," Donda Ruu suddenly called out. I was still half in a state of shock, but I managed to turn his way. "Two days from now, there's going to be a bit of a banquet to celebrate all the giba we've hunted. Could you help man the stove for it?"

"Huh...?"

Donda Ruu had once again finished eating before everyone else, and was currently gulping down a container of fruit wine.

Lala Ruu's head swiveled to stare intently at her father's perpetually displeased-looking face from the side.

No, it actually wasn't just her. Pretty much everyone's eyes were opened wide in shock as they gazed at the clan head.

"I-I can really help out with the preparations for the banquet?"

"I'm the one asking you, y'know." Donda Ruu's always-fierce blue eyes were glaring right at me. "On that day the men under the Ruu will gather, and we'll hold a contest of strength. I'd like to have you grill up the giba meat that'll be given to the winner. What do you say...?"

"If you'll have me, then I'll gladly accept," I replied despite not really having time to get it through my head.

Donda Ruu just quietly muttered back, "I see."

◇

"Thanks so much for today! Your cooking was seriously tasty, Asuta!"

After the dinner ended with a friendly atmosphere and we talked for just a bit, the time came for us to leave the Ruu settlement.

Lala Ruu had been the one to escort us out of the house. Her red hair was

adorned with red and blue flowers, and she had a seriously joyful smile on her face.

“That cheese stuff was such an unusual food, but I really loved it! If my dad gives his permission, could you ask for some for the Ruu clan, too?”

“Yeah. It’s pretty hard to get ahold of, but I can at least ask the owner of The Sledgehammer.”

“Thanks! You’ve really made this a day that I’ll never forget.”

When she was truly happy, Lala Ruu let it show every bit as clearly as Rimee Ruu. And just seeing this smile was enough to completely wipe away my exhaustion from today’s work.

“Still, I never imagined my dad would go and ask you to man the stove, Asuta! I was so surprised that I almost choked on some meat!”

“Yeah, it caught me off guard, too. But it also made me happy... I’m sorry for going and accepting all on my own, though, Ai Fa.”

“Don’t worry about that. Instead, you should feel glad to have one of the leading clan heads of the forest’s edge acknowledge your cooking skills like that,” Ai Fa bluntly replied while holding onto Gilulu’s reins.

Her expression looked kind of displeased somehow, but before I could bring that up, Lala Ruu cheerfully chimed in, “That’s right! And it’s the contest of strength, too! The one to win that’s always either my dad or Dan Rutim! So that means he asked you to man the stove because he wants to eat something tasty, right? That’s amazing!”

“A contest of strength, huh? Doesn’t it seem like Mida would have a real chance, then?”

“There’s no way! Even Mida couldn’t possibly compete with dad or Dan Rutim. Dan Rutim even went and lifted the eldest son of the Maam, who’s bigger than him, right over his head!”

“Ah, so is the contest of strength a grappling competition, then?”

If that was the case, I could certainly see Mida failing to get the better of Donda Ruu or Dan Rutim.

At any rate, all I had to do was put all my skill into preparing a dish for the winner.

“Well then, I guess it’s about time for us to head out. I’ll be counting on you again tomorrow at work, Lala Ruu.”

With that, we finally went to leave.

However, the smiling Lala Ruu went, “Huh?” with a tilt of her head, looking past us. “What are Shin Ruu and Mida doing out so late at night?”

When I turned and looked, sure enough I found the pair approaching from the other side of the plaza. Mida was the one holding a candlestick, and seeing his face illuminated from below was seriously like something out of a horror movie.

“Hey, Mida. We were planning on heading over your way next, but you came to us, huh?”

“Yeah... And Ai Fa’s here too...”

“That’s right. I’m glad to see you looking well, Mida of the Ruu clan,” Ai Fa stiffly replied, her gaze narrowing a bit. “Still, did you lose a bit of weight? Though you’re still quite unusually large.”

“Huh, what are you talking about?! He’s just as soft and flabby as always!” Lala Ruu excitedly chimed in, despite the fact that she was saying something rather rude. It seemed that girls her age were quite frightening in this world, too.

“Asuta, Ai Fa... I’m sorry...”

“Huh?”

“For what? I don’t remember anything happening that you would need to apologize for.”

“But because of me, you aren’t able to sleep at the Ruu settlement, right...? So I’m sorry...” Mida’s fatty cheeks trembled, but his expression didn’t shift. “Once my house is done, I’ll be giving back that other one... So till then, I’m sorry...”

“Your house?” I questioned.

The always calm and composed youth by Mida's side responded, "Mida is currently building his own home under my father Ryada's guidance."

"Your own house! So that's what the lumber you were gathering earlier in the day was for?"

"Yeah... Mia Lea Ruu told me to make one. It's really really tiring, but I'm giving it my all..."

Mida was currently sleeping in the vacant house we always borrowed. That was why we had ended up heading home instead of trying to stay at the Ruu settlement. But was Mia Lea Ruu reading too much into that and going overboard? If so, then I felt plenty bad for Mida, too.

But when I went to voice those feelings, Lala Ruu beat me to the punch and said, "You don't need to worry about that. We would have needed a new house down the line, anyway. And my mom said it made sense to have him learn the techniques, too."

"Ah, right. The general rule is that when anyone but the eldest son gets married, they're supposed to move out of the house, right? And the Ruu main house alone has seven of you siblings, too."

"That's right. And everyone but me and Rimee have already turned fifteen, so they should hurry up and get out already."

"And you'll be able to get married in two years too, huh?" I quietly muttered, only to get a firm slap on the back.

Mida didn't seem to even understand what we were talking about, and his blank gaze turned towards Ai Fa.

"Once my house is ready, will you two come to the Ruu settlement more...?"

"That's nothing for you to worry yourself about. Besides, it's been decided already that we'll visit this settlement again two days from now. But at any rate, that work will surely grant you strength. So keep on striving to your fullest at it."

"Sometimes, I don't understand what you're saying, Ai Fa..."

"I'm saying keep giving it your all."

"Yeah, I will..." Mida replied, his cheeks shaking again.

If he lost a bit more weight, would I start having an easier time reading his emotions? I got the feeling that if that happened, I would more directly come to understand this mysterious being.

“By the way, what are you doing here, Shin Ruu? Do you have some sort of business with Asuta and Ai Fa?” Shin Ruu looked just a bit troubled at that question from Lala Ruu. And seeing that shift in expression, Lala Ruu raised an eyebrow. “What’s with that face? You didn’t want to ask how to perform sacrificial hunting again or something, right? Your house is earning coins now, so there shouldn’t be any need for that.”

“That was over a month back. Please just drop it already.”

With that, Lala Ruu turned away with a “Hmph!”

As he stared at her angry face from the side, Shin Ruu held out his right hand. Held in it was a truly splendid yellow flower, about as big as a human palm. Lala Ruu glanced over out of the corner of her eye, and in no time at all she was exclaiming, “Wow! That’s amazing! What a pretty flower! Is it a mizora...?”

“Yeah. It was my first time seeing a yellow mizora too, so it really caught me off guard. I happened to find it while out hunting today.”

“That’s so amazing! I never knew there were yellow mizora! I’ve never seen one before, either!” Lala Ruu exclaimed, then she brought it to her face and sniffed. “It smells nice, too!”

“Only members of the same house are supposed to grant blessings for a birthday, but... would you accept this?”

“Huh? You’re giving it to me?” Lala Ruu questioned, looking clearly puzzled.

Shin Ruu just gave a small nod, the same look on his face as always.

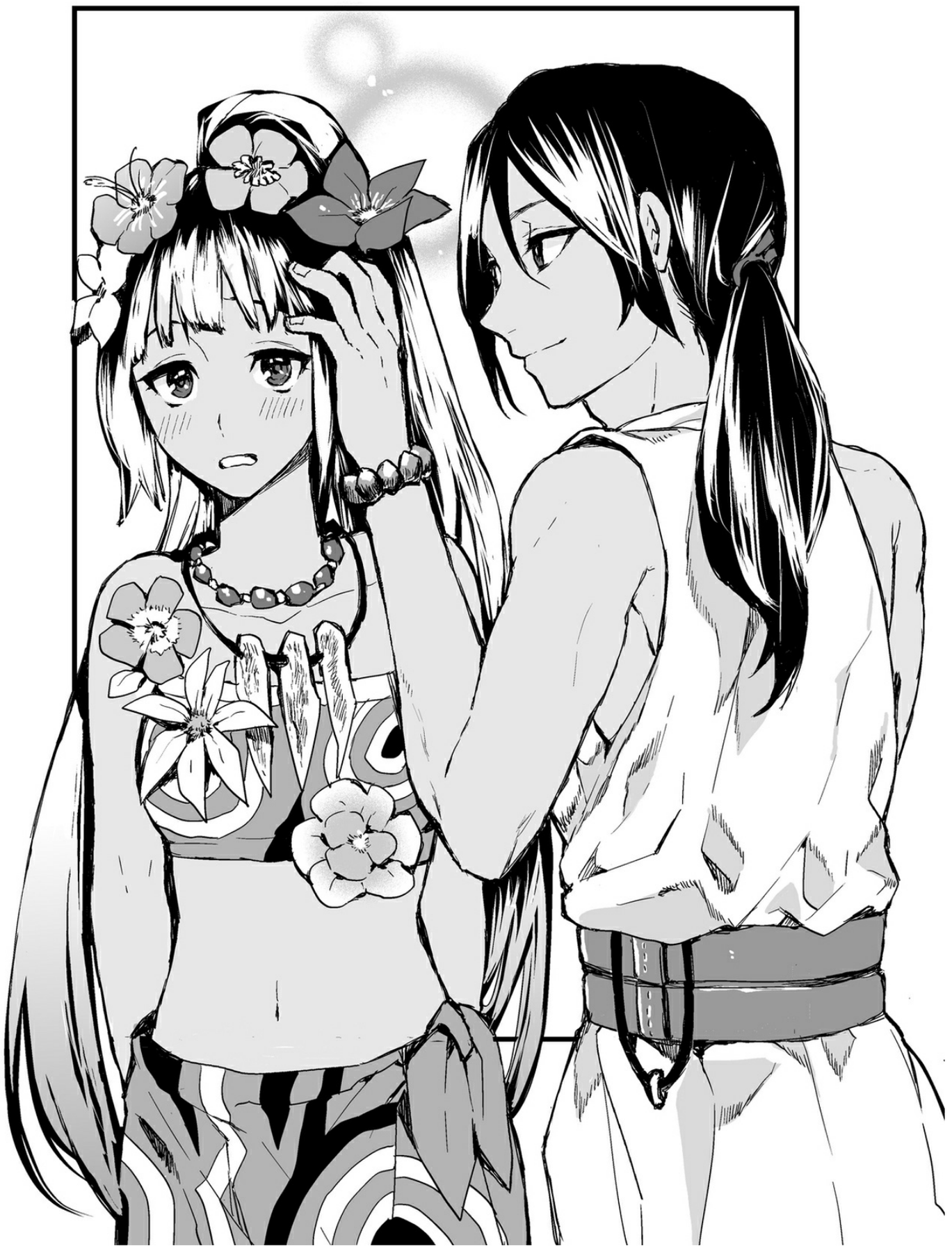
“You’re fond of yellow flowers, aren’t you? And since I happened to find it on the day of your birth, I wanted to give it to you. Is that a problem...?” the boy answered, his composed face looking a bit red. Perhaps that was just due to the light from the candlestick Mida was holding, though. I couldn’t tell, to be honest, but it was abundantly clear that Lala Ruu was blushing, at least.

“Did I ever tell you that I liked them, Shin Ruu...?”

“You did. I think it was back when we were even littler than Rimee Ruu, though.”

“I see,” Lala Ruu whispered quietly, moving one of the flowers adorning her head down to her chest. Then, she turned so that the now open spot was facing straight towards the youth.

Shin Ruu gently placed the yellow flower he was holding beside Lala Ruu’s temple. It was striking how vividly that primary color popped against the girl’s flame-like red hair.



“I’ll be praying from the depths of my heart that this next year is filled with happiness for you, Lala Ruu.”

“Thanks,” Lala Ruu mumbled looking back at Shin Ruu with upturned eyes.

Sensing the mood, I gave my clan head’s arm a nudge with my elbow.

“Okay, well then, it really is about time for us to get going. I’ll see you again tomorrow, Lala Ruu. And Shin Ruu and Mida, you two take care.”

“Ah, r-right! You be careful on your way back, too! And thanks for everything today!”

As they saw us off, the two of us crossed through the plaza while accompanied by Gilulu.

The moonlight actually seemed to be shining down pretty brightly tonight.

“Man, that sure was a great day. Lately we’ve been heading to the Ruu settlement whenever there’s trouble, so it was nice to head there and take it easy for the first time in a while,” I earnestly stated.

“Really?” Ai Fa replied.

Huh? I thought to myself, and turned around to find her seriously frowning.

“W-What’s wrong? You’ve been looking all displeased for a while now. Are you upset about something?”

“I certainly am... Just what exactly was with that soup the second Ruu daughter came up with?”

“Huh? That was ordinary soup using tau oil, wasn’t it? The seasoning made it really delicious, though.”

“Why are you just smiling away like a fool...? Did you not feel anything at all after eating that, Asuta?”

“I wasn’t especially smiling or anything... And what exactly are you so angry about?”

Ai Fa stopped right around when we were exiting the plaza and turned to face me head on.

“Asuta! Tomorrow, make a soup that’s even tastier than that!”

“Huh? What’s this about, all of a sudden? I’d of course like to strive to do that too, but it’s not like everybody’s tastes are the same to start with anyway...”

“I don’t need your excuses! If you won’t promise me that, then I’ll drag you back rather than letting you ride on Gilulu!”

“Alright, I got it! I’ll give it my absolute best shot!”

“Don’t go forgetting those words...”

I didn’t really get it, but it seemed Ai Fa was also taken aback by Reina Ruu’s skills.

I was grateful to see her get so worked up over the matter, and it wasn’t like I just felt casually glad to see the growth displayed by the girl. Reina Ruu wasn’t just my future rival. She had already climbed her way up to that point, here and now. And there was no way that would ever fail to get me fired up.

Perhaps sensing something from my expression, Ai Fa’s frown shifted back to normal and she gave a firm nod.

“As long as you understand. Well then, shall we be heading back?”

“Yeah.”

At last, it was time for the tandem totos ride.

Thanks to the bit of practice I did last night, I had learned how thrilling riding on a totos could be. And as long as Ai Fa was wearing her leather cloak, there shouldn’t be any issue with clinging closely to her...

Or at least that was the thought running through my head, but Ai Fa suddenly started undoing the fastener to the cloak in question.

“H-Huh? Um, clan head...?”

“What is it?” Ai Fa asked as she laid out her removed cloak atop Gilulu’s back. Then, she kicked off the ground and landed atop the totos just as gallantly as always. “Now then, you get on too.”

“Y-Yeah, I will. But why did you go and remove your cloak? It should be fine to keep it on while riding Gilulu, right?”

“Hmm? I simply removed it because it can prove annoying when the wind catches it. That’s no problem at all when I’m riding alone, but with you clinging onto my torso from behind, the gusts that get caught will go right up to my shoulders rather hard.”

“I see. But it’s not like you’re going to be running Gilulu full force, so it shouldn’t be too much of a problem, right?”

“It may not be a serious issue, but it’s still annoying. Anyway, just hurry up and get on.”

Ai Fa stared my way, a clear look of displeasure shining in her eyes.

Having no choice at that point, I grabbed ahold of her outstretched hand and clambered up atop Gilulu’s back. Then, I wrapped both arms around Ai Fa’s waist... and cried out, “I really can’t do this, after all!”

However, my clan head paid my complaint no heed and just gave Gilulu a kick in the side. The totos broke out in a stride in no time at all, and I clung to Ai Fa in a panic. I was grabbing her bare midriff, which wasn’t covered by any clothing whatsoever. Had she been using giba summoning fruit in traps? Because I could smell a sweet fragrance coming from her complexly done-up blonde hair.

“The moon is bright out tonight. Should I run him a bit faster?”

Cut me a break! I screamed out in my head, just in time for Gilulu to energetically pick up speed. I clung as tight to my clan head as I could possibly manage so as not to be thrown off.

Lala Ruu had turned 13, and I had also encountered my first true rival since coming to this world. Yes, the 25th of the blue month had certainly been an eventful day.

Chapter 3: The Sledgehammer

1

Turning back the clock a bit, we first visited The Sledgehammer on the 18th day of the blue month. That meant it was two days after the whole commotion with the Suun clan had come to a close.

Things remained unstable at that point, so I figured it would be premature to try to expand my business at the moment, but selling food to an inn didn't seem like it would impact folks from the west much at all. Plus, Shumiral's group had less than half a month left in Genos at this point, so I decided to go ahead with it.

"Welcome, Asuta of the people of the forest's edge. I'm truly honored to have you visit this establishment."

The owner Nail had gone so far as to exit the inn in order to greet us.

From the place's name I had been expecting an old man with a black beard or something, but he was a young man who had to be less than 30. His hair was dark brown, his eyes reddish-brown, and his skin ivory-white. He had a flat face and a medium build that was typical for a westerner. The one thing that really made him stand out was the fact that he was expressionless and taciturn like an easterner.

"I certainly look forward to working with you, too... Ah, and I'm sorry for coming at such a busy time."

It was just a bit past when the sun hit its peak at the moment. I couldn't tell when I would be done with my work at The Great Southern Tree, so I had chosen to head out as soon as Li Sudra came to replace me at the stalls.

However, the reticent owner simply shook his head and said, "It isn't especially busy. Now then, please come this way. I'll show you to the kitchen."

The Sledgehammer turned out to be a bit of a unique place. Rather than being along the lively stone highway, it was tucked away down a side street filled with

private houses. It was a two-story building but it was rather small, and I never would have guessed it was an inn if not for the sign.

“Well then, we’ll be going. Thanks again, Shumiral,” I said, giving a bow to the man who had led us this far.

However, the silver-haired youth from the eastern kingdom just narrowed his eyes, causing him to look ever so slightly sad.

“Asuta, am I, a hindrance?”

“Huh? No, that’s not it at all. But you’re busy, aren’t you?”

“I would like, to watch...”

He was about half a head taller than me, and was already head of his merchant group at such a young age, but every once in a while he looked almost a bit childish. And this was certainly one of those times.

“I mean, I’d certainly find it reassuring to have you along, but...” I started to reply.

Shumiral’s eyes narrowed in a slightly different way, and he gave a nod.

“I will watch.”

In my head I interpreted that as a happy narrowing of his eyes, but I wasn’t sure what he was really feeling.

At any rate, we all went ahead and crowded into The Sledgehammer. There were four in our group: me, Shumiral, Vina Ruu, and Shin Ruu, who was acting as a bodyguard.

The commotion with the Suun clan had settled down, but things remained complicated with the folks from the castle, and there was that mob from two days back. And so, just Shin and Ludo Ruu remained on as bodyguards for the time being.

I tried asking if they were okay in terms of their hunting work, but apparently they were currently hitting an off season for giba showing up around the Ruu and Rutim settlements. No matter what part of the forest’s edge you lived in, such periods came around three times a year, leading to a half a month or so of rest.

It would be a bit longer till the Ruu clan truly entered into that rest period, and they would be holding a festival of the hunt on the first day of it. However, it would be a few more days before Donda Ruu would ask me to man the stove for that event.

Of course, I had no idea about any of that when I followed Nail into The Sledgehammer. And the instant I did, I was like “Whoa.”

Along the right-hand wall was a reception desk, and right behind it hung the head of some large animal over a door. It must have been stuffed and mounted. At any rate, it looked sort of like a deer or a goat, and it rose out from the wall from the neck up.

“That sure is impressive. What’s that animal called?”

“It is an animal that lives in the eastern kingdom, called a gyama,” the owner Nail calmly responded.

It had a long, protruding snout, and there were horns jutting out on either side of its head like a buffalo. The head was about as big as a human’s, and the curved horns were probably around 40 centimeters long. Its fur was a splendid jet black, and it had a long beard dangling from its neck.

“The people of the east eat gyama. However, it’s rare to get a chance to do so here in the western kingdom,” Nail added as he opened the door behind the reception desk.

It seemed pretty common for inns to connect directly to the kitchen from here. Perhaps it was because they also took orders for food at the desk.

By the way, at least from what I could spy from the reception desk, there didn’t seem to be any customers in the first floor dining room. I figured the folks staying here must have eaten from the stalls during the day, like with the other inns I had seen.

Beckoned inside by a call of, “Go ahead,” I stepped through the door and found a kitchen just as snug as the rest of the place. It looked to be around ten square meters large, with two stoves along the far wall with a pot atop each. Then, there were various cooking utensils dangling from the wooden wall, making for what was pretty much the default kitchen setup.

There was a workstation set up in the center of the room, and on the left-hand wall was an open shelf stuffed with tableware. Meanwhile, to the right there were two water jugs. Yes, it was a truly simple kitchen, full of the aroma of herbs and meat.

However, it had a nice feel to it, somehow.

I felt you could really tell a lot about a person's character from how they kept their kitchen. And so, though I wasn't really acquainted with the young inn owner Nail at all, I could feel myself warming up to him a bit.

"Let's start by going over the conditions," Nail calmly stated. "I'll want between 20 and 30 meals. As for the contents, it should be a dish using giba meat. The price when not using fuwano will be two red coins per meal. And we will begin the day after tomorrow... How many days should the contract be for, though?"

"Right... I currently have my deal with The Great Southern Tree going till the last day of the blue month, so could we match up with that? And then form a new contract again for next month."

"Very well. The period of time will be for the 20th through the 31st. If any of those days end up proving inconvenient for you, then please let me know before the sun hits its peak. If you alert me after that time, there will be a penalty of one white coin. Does that sound fair?"

"Yeah, that's fine with me."

"Well then, that leaves the matter of what the dish will be. You said you wished to serve something different than what you sold at your stalls, correct?"

"That's right. My cooking using Jagar-made tau oil has gotten quite a favorable reception at The Great Southern Tree, so if at all possible I would like to make a dish with an ingredient from Sym, to better suit the taste of your customers from the east."

"I see. I suppose it wouldn't be all that worthwhile to be selling the same dish both in the middle of the day and at night. And so, I would also feel grateful if you could do so," the owner replied, as expressionless as always. We had been asked strongly to come, but I couldn't sense any of the passion Shumiral had

mentioned coming from the man. “Still, an ingredient from Sym, is it...? Perhaps because the nation is further than Jagar, they don’t show up about town as often.” Even so, Nail headed to the back of the room, then returned with two ingredients from the pantry. One was a small bundle wrapped in cloth, while the other was a bundle large enough to be a big armful. “This is dried milk.”

“Dried milk?”

“It is an ingredient made by drying gyama milk. It’s just as nourishing as the beast’s meat.”

That had been my introduction to the ingredient that would later serve such a key role in Lala Ruu’s birthday dinner.

“That smell! It’s cheese, isn’t it?!”

“Cheese?”

“Yeah. That’s what they called it back where I come from, at least. Man, to think I’d find cheese in this worl— Er, here in Genos.”

“Dried milk is almost never sold in the post town. Generally, gyama and karon dried milk can only be purchased in the castle town. However, I buy it specially from merchants of Sym that I’m acquainted with.”

“The Silver Vase, also sold him, dried milk,” Shumiral chimed in, and Nail gave a vacant nod. Of course, both of them remained calm and expressionless all the while.

On our side we also had Shin Ruu, who was quiet and not overly expressive either. And so, it hadn’t taken long for Vina Ruu to get bored and start fidgeting with the tips of her chestnut colored hair.

“Gyama dried milk is an everyday item in Sym, but it doesn’t show up in the western kingdom often, so it commands a rather high price. And since there’s only so much of it to be had in general, it doesn’t seem all that suited to dishes meant to be sold. Even I purchase it purely for my own use.”

“It’s expensive? How much does it cost?”

“20 red coins for one around this size.”

I see. It was about 15 centimeters in diameter and five thick, so that price

certainly made it quite a luxury item. If I went and used it carelessly, it could easily send production costs skyrocketing.

“Still, it sure is tempting. Could I possibly buy some to use personally?”

“I could yield this one bundle to you. Would you like to try a taste?”

“Yes, please!” Unheated gyama cheese had a mild yet rich flavor, like salty Camembert cheese. “Man, this is tasty! Please let me buy it! Ah, do you two want to taste it too...?” I asked Shin and Vina Ruu, but they just shook their heads. I guess it just wasn’t in the nature of the people of the forest’s edge to show an interest in such luxury items. “Well then, what’s this one?”

“These are called chitt seeds.”

When he undid the bundle, I spied what looked like bright red soybeans packed tightly inside. That coloring made them look seriously spicy, and they gave off a pretty powerful smell, too. Yeah, this was definitely a spice. From the smell, I was guessing they were something like red peppers.

“They seem spicy. Do folks from Sym like spicy foods?”

“Yes. Chitt seeds, are very important,” Shumiral answered. “Gyama meat, has a strong, stench. Even more, than giba meat. And so, we eat it, with chitt seeds. Also... I am fond of, pickled chitt.”

“Pickled chitt? You do that with meat?”

“No, with vegetables.”

“Pickled chitt refers to tino and the like pickled in chitt and salt,” Nail added.

“Ooh, that sounds delicious.”

Nail gave a single nod, then disappeared into the pantry again. When he showed back up, he was holding a small wooden plate in his hands. Two bites worth of tino soaked in a bright red sauce sat atop it.

Tino was a vegetable that closely resembled cabbage. It was so light of a green that it was nearly white, and was chopped up to just the right size, drizzled in red chitt sauce, then sprinkled with little dark green vegetables that reminded me of garlic chives, which were diced up even smaller.

Thanks to its appearance and that sour yet spicy smell, it seemed just like kimchi to me.

“It certainly smells good. There’s chitt and myamuu... and is that some sort of fish sauce?”

“Fish sauce...? Pickled chitt uses salted maru.”

“Maru?”

“Yes. Maru is a type of small shelled animal gathered from rivers. Westerners like eating salted maru alongside alcohol. And at my place, I use it as an ingredient in pickled chitt,” Nail stated matter-of-factly. “Ingredients from Sym are rather difficult to get ahold of here in Genos. And so, I tried to recreate the taste of pickled chitt using western ingredients... I pickle the tino in salt overnight, then make the sauce from chitt, salted maru, myamuu, diced pepe leaves, and grated ramam.”

It was a serious onslaught of unfamiliar names there. I had probably seen the things at shops around town, but there were so many ingredients I didn’t know the name of, much less the taste. I still had an awful lot I needed to learn.

At any rate, the pickled chitt was right there in front of me, here and now. And when I gave it a bite, it turned out to be just as spicy and sour as I had expected.

It had a complex and stimulating, yet also rich aroma and flavor to it. The strong scent of myamuu and delicious animal protein taste seriously spurred on my appetite. And the heavily pickled tino was soft and supple, with a texture every bit as exquisite as napa cabbage.

As for the heat, well, it was certainly spicy. I’d probably end up hurting my tongue if I ate too much of it. However, the aftertaste was actually rather refreshing. Yes, it certainly didn’t fall short of the kimchi I was familiar with. Plus, it had seriously been some time since I had tasted any sourness, too.

“How was it? There are westerners who are quite fond of such spiciness, too.”

“It was delicious. I seriously loved it. But still... it probably costs quite a bit too, doesn’t it?”

“No, pickled chitt is ultimately just a side dish. Customers generally don’t wish to eat a lot of it, so I fill up small plates like this and charge half a red coin.”

“I see... So you don’t add pickled chitt to meat dishes or stews, then?”

“Not just chitt, but pickled chitt? I don’t believe even easterners eat it like that.”

“Is that so? So they wouldn’t be too open to that sort of dish?” I asked Shumiral.

The youth silently shook his head.

“That sounds, unusual. But I, would be interested.”

“I see.”

With that, my brain started racing with recipes like pork kimchi and kimchi hot pot.

Perhaps those would be too simple, but I had placed a restriction on myself for this job: keeping the cooking time to a minimum.

I had never expected I would end up getting work from another inn so quickly, which is why I went ahead with cubed giba meat stew for The Great Southern Tree. I didn’t exactly regret that choice, but it took quite a bit of time to prepare the dish. Currently it took two and a half hours, but even as I grew accustomed to the process, I couldn’t see myself getting it below two hours.

So, including preparations and cleanup, my work time in the post town came out to around six and a half hours. If I spent much more of my time preparing food for inns, I may well no longer be able to work the stalls at all.

It was ultimately down to my personal preferences, but I found the thought of leaving the work of directly interacting with customers in the stalls solely to the women rather sad. And so, my secret goal was to come up with a dish for The Sledgehammer that wouldn’t take too long to prepare.

“Well then, if I come up with a dish that uses pickled chitt, would it be possible to purchase what I need from The Sledgehammer?”

“Ah, so you’re talking about purchasing the pickled chitt I make to use in your cooking? That’s a rather interesting proposal.”

“If that doesn’t work, though, I can always come up with a dish using fresh chitt.”

“No, I would be overjoyed to have more customers enjoy my pickled chitt. And I’m truly intrigued by what sort of dish it will be, too.”

Even as he said that, the face of The Sledgehammer’s owner remained completely expressionless.

2

“And so, I’ve come up with new dishes!”

That night, I wasted no time in having Ai Fa try out my new creations.

Rather than pork kimchi, I made giba chitt, and in place of kimchi stew, I prepared chitt stew. Faced with the bright red meat dish and soup, Ai Fa wore a complex expression on her face.

“Asuta, let me say just one thing.”

“What is it, Ai Fa?”

“I’m well aware of your skills at manning the stove, but... This food appears to have gone rotten.”

“Ah, yeah, I can certainly see that. But it’s alright! Decay and fermentation are totally different. It’s like how fruit wine is sour, and it’s definitely not bad for you!”

“If you say so, then I’m sure it’s true,” Ai Fa replied, but she didn’t really seem to be reaching for her bowl.

There shouldn’t have been any issues in terms of appearance. After all, tarapa is already plenty red, so I felt I just had to worry about the strong sour scent.

And I personally felt that it had come out pretty darn good. I had used sirloin for the giba chitt, and tau oil on top of the pickled chitt as my secret ingredient, then added just a touch more myamuu. As for the vegetables I heated up alongside it, I went with thinly sliced aria and pula cut into strips. Since pula resembled bell peppers, and the garlic chive-esque pepe leaves were already part of the pickled chitt, they added a nice vibrant green to the dish.

As for the chitt stew, I slowly cooked up some cubed shoulder meat and thinly sliced thigh meat, then added enough tau oil to be a main flavor in the dish rather than just a secret ingredient, making for a rich, full flavor. For vegetables, I went with aria and tino. It was a shame that I hadn't yet found any substitutes for napa cabbage, tofu, or konnyaku noodles, but the stock from the giba meat went so well with the spiciness of the chitt that I honestly couldn't stop myself from drooling.

"Still, I'm well aware that the people of the forest's edge tend not to like overly strong flavors, so you probably won't have built up a tolerance for spiciness and sourness. So I went ahead and prepared normal grilled meat and soup, and this is just for a taste test. But won't you please give it at least a bite?"

Ai Fa didn't respond.

"Ah, if you don't want to that badly, you don't have to force yourself to eat it..."

"Who said I wouldn't eat it?" That got her going. She decisively reached for the plate with the chitt stew. But just sniffing it up close was enough to cause her gallant-looking eyebrows to droop listlessly.

"H-Hey, you really don't need to push yourself. I only made a single person's worth of each dish to start with, so if it's too much for you I can finish it all off myself."

"I told you, it's fine!"

Ai Fa's eyebrows raised back up, and she grabbed ahold of her spoon. Then, she scooped up a bit of bright red soup and giba meat and bit down, only for all emotion to vanish from her face, as if she were from Sym.

"What do you think...?"

Ai Fa silently sat down at the plate. Remaining completely expressionless, she chewed away at the contents of her mouth.

I anxiously watched over her while wondering if it was alright, and before long Ai Fa beckoned me over with a single finger. It seemed like a rather rude gesture for her, but I went ahead and scooted over her way, only for a sharp

swing to smack me in the back of the head.



“Ow! What are you hitting me—?” I started to complain, only to hold my tongue.

Something was clearly different. Ai Fa was covering her mouth with both hands, her eyes were tearing up, her face had gone bright red, and her legs were fidgeting where she sat.

“Ow! That’s hot! It’s like there’s a fire in my mouth! What in the world did you make me eat?!”

“Ah, er, sorry...”

“Sorry’s not good enough!”

Ai Fa stood up and almost flew over to the water jug next to the stove.

“Ah, Ai Fa, drinking water probably won’t get rid of the spiciness.”

I had heard that to neutralize the spiciness of chili peppers, it was best to go with something full of lactic acid, like a lassi. And from my personal experience, a hot tea was also effective. The habanero fried rice I had once made half as a joke ended up super hot, and so I ended up gulping down warm tea that my childhood friend Reina suggested, and was amazed to find how well it put out the fire in my mouth.

Meanwhile, cold water would not only fail to deal with the spiciness, it could even amplify it. It would bring relief while drinking it, but once that coolness wore off, even more heat would spread throughout your mouth. I didn’t exactly understand the logic behind it, but apparently the spice from peppers wouldn’t dissolve in water, and so it just spread more spiciness throughout your mouth when you tried to rinse it out.

But regardless of all that, my beloved clan head ladled out several scoops of water and gulped them down, collapsed to the floor with relief... and then in no time at all was holding her mouth and twitching her legs again.

“A-Ai Fa, try eating some of this ordinary soup! It’s a little hot, but the giba fat may help wash away the spiciness!”

With that, she came rushing back over my way with incredible speed. However, she didn’t even look at the soup I was pointing to. Instead, with tears

in her eyes, she rained down blows upon my head. She may well have been holding back plenty, but she still possessed the strength of a hunter. And so, it honestly felt like my eyes were about to pop out of my head.

Around a minute or so later, my clan head was slumped on the floor breathing heavily, while I leaned against the wall with a mild concussion.

“That’s the first time I thought I was going to die from eating something...”

“I’m seriously sorry, from the depths of my heart...”

After another minute’s worth of rest, we got back to eating dinner.

“I’m going to put a strict ban on the people of the forest’s edge regarding chitt. Thanks to your efforts, a great number of your brethren may have been saved, Ai Fa... Well, I guess I’m the only one who would bring such a thing here anyway, though.”

“Hmph!”

“Ah, I really am sorry. And look! I’ve got meat and soup ready for you, too!”

It was the standard thick slice of sirloin steak coated in fruit wine sauce. As for the soup, it had a mild flavor and was made with tau oil.

As for me, I had the bright red giba chitt and chitt stew sitting in front of me.

I hadn’t imagined I really would end up needing to eat all of it...

My myamuu giba and cubed giba meat stew had received criticism for their overwhelming flavor, but this was the first time I had seen her completely give up on a dish. I was a bit down over having to eat the whole chitt-filled dinner myself, but more than that, I was just plain bummed to have Ai Fa reject my cooking.

Well, I’ve just got to take this as a good learning experience. From here on out, I should make my test dishes in smaller portions, I thought to myself as I sipped on the chitt stew.

It was certainly spicy. But it was tasty, too.

Apparently, incorporating the tau oil had proved a big success. My mouth was of course filled with a spicy heat, but it wasn’t overly sharp, so it didn’t drown

out the delicious flavor of the dish.

The tino from the pickled chitt was all mushy and soft, while the fresh tino I added later remained crisp and crunchy. They were the same ingredient but had a completely different feel, and seemed to go rather well together.

I had added a heaping helping of aria, too, but around half of it seemed to have dissolved. However, that helped to provide further depth to the soup, too. Aria really was a wonderful ingredient, and not just for its high nutritional value.

As for the all-important giba meat, I boiled it for around 80% as long as usual, just enough so that the shoulder and thigh meat, which were on the tougher side, still became soft enough by the end. I couldn't shave down the boiling time any further though, so the dish's prep time may have been a bit over the time limit needed for serving at The Sledgehammer.

Hmm, which one would be more to the owner's taste, I wonder... I'm finding it hard to judge which dish is better, honestly.

After giving my mouth a bit of a break by eating some baked poitan, I went ahead and grabbed the plate of giba chitt.

This was also a simple dish designed to make the ingredients in it really shine. I had adjusted the taste a bit with myamuu and tau oil, but I had essentially just sautéed up giba meat and pickled chitt.

I used up a large amount of rib meat when making cubed giba meat stew and myamuu giba, so for the giba chitt, I went with loin meat. That was the softest of the cuts, and I had taken care cutting around the hips where there were the most tendons, so it should have been perfectly suited to such a dish.

At any rate, I went ahead and tossed a bit of giba meat with a heaping helping of aria and chitt into my mouth.

It had a suitable texture, and was plenty tasty, too.

The giba meat had a wonderful presence to it that in no way lost out to the powerful spiciness of the pickled chitt. And the bitterness from the bell pepper-esque pula mixed in here and there provided a real lovely accent.

In terms of seasonings, all we had in the Fa house was rock salt, pico leaves,

myamuu, and fruit wine, but a few days ago I got ahold of tau oil, and today I got these chitt seeds. Suddenly, the number of taste variations I could achieve had expanded dramatically, which sort of left my tongue and stomach feeling a bit overwhelmed.

Still, I couldn't help but feel truly happy.

"Hmm? What is it, Ai Fa?" I asked, as she was tugging on my vest.

Her face was looking a bit frightening again for some reason.

"Give me that."

"By 'that,' do you mean this giba chitt? But it's just as spicy as that chitt stew."

"But I still haven't eaten that dish."

"Ah, but you really don't have to go pushing yourself."

"Just hand it over already."

The way her brow and nose wrinkled reminded me of a growling wildcat.

And so, having no choice, I held out the plate.

"I'm begging you, just don't hit me because it's spicy, alright?"

"So annoying..." Ai Fa muttered, and then glared at the giba chitt as if it was some hated enemy who murdered her parents. After a few more seconds of hesitation, she bit down on the spoonful of meat dyed bright red.

It didn't take long at all for her to tear up again as she chewed. However, rather than running wild like last time, she instead simply sipped the giba soup.

Then, as she bit into a baked poitan, Ai Fa suddenly muttered with teary eyes, "Hand over that one, too."

"Huh? The chitt stew? There's no need for you to punish yourself that much."

"Stop blathering and just do it."

Without even being given a chance to argue, the chitt stew was also snatched away from me.

After a few more seconds of hesitation, Ai Fa took a bite of that, too. And sure enough, her eyes were left awfully wet.

“H-Hey, Ai Fa, are you alright?”

“It’s nothing...” she muttered, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. She seriously looked like a small child at the moment. “Alright. I’ll eat half, and so will you.”

“Huuuuuuh?! That’s totally nuts! I’m telling you, you really don’t need to push yourself!”

“I’m doing nothing of the sort. I simply want to eat it.” As she said that, she was biting into a baked poitan to cleanse her palate, which left the statement feeling rather unpersuasive. I mean, I felt sad to have Ai Fa reject my cooking, but I certainly didn’t want her to force herself like this. “What’s with that face...? Are you not going to let me eat it even when I tell you I want to?”

“No, but...”

“I really do want to eat it. When I do, it hurts the inside of my mouth and causes me to tear up, yet I still want more for some reason. It’s like I’ve been hit by some sort of wicked curse,” Ai Fa said, taking another bite of the giba chitt.

Wait, was she not worrying about my feelings, but instead caught up in the addictive nature of spicy foods?

“Ow... Asuta, my lips aren’t swelling, are they?” Ai Fa asked, suddenly bringing her face real close to mine. Her lovely pink lips shone, looking just a bit moist.

“Your lips are just as wonderful as always.”

That earned me a smack to the temple.

“To start with, you just looked to be enjoying it so much that I couldn’t help but want to eat it, too! What troublesome dishes you’ve gone and made!”

“Still, if you really do think it’s tasty, then I’m glad.”

“I honestly can’t tell if it is or not. But I can’t help wanting to eat more.” Then, as she sipped more chitt stew, her eyes teared up and she muttered, “It really does hurt, though...”

3

After the sun hit its peak the following day, I had arrived at The Sledgehammer with the same group as before.

“Sorry for the wait, but these are the dishes I made with the pickled chitt.”

With that, I placed two plates each in front of Nail and Shumiral, who were standing there expressionlessly.

For the chitt stew, I reheated what I had made at home, whereas the giba chitt was prepared fresh here in this kitchen.

When it was heated up, the aroma of the pickled chitt was seriously amplified. And though Vina and Shin Ruu maintained polite, neutral expressions, they casually evacuated over towards the window.

“I see. These certainly are different from dishes made with raw chitt. I look forward to trying them,” Nail stated, grabbing his plate of giba chitt. “Still, doesn’t purchasing the pickled chitt from me add quite a bit to the cost of ingredients? Will you be able to turn a profit like this?”

“Yes. The cost of making these dishes is around double that of my other ones, but it would take a good bit longer to prepare something using raw chitt, so I figured it would be good to go with this.”

Using raw chitt seeds would certainly bring my costs down quite a bit. However, I figured it would require quite a bit of experimentation to come up with dishes that could match these ones that used Nail’s homemade pickled chitt.

Of course, I did intend to try my hand at coming up with such dishes from here on out. After all, I didn’t want to just rest on my laurels because I could get giba meat for so cheap right now, and go around treating costs as some sort of secondary concern.

And besides, Shumiral would be leaving Genos in less than half a month. And so, I wanted to present him with the best possible dish, here and now. That was another reason I was going forward with the giba chitt and chitt stew.

“Well then, thank you for this food.”

Nail and Shumiral both picked up their spoons, and the two of them started

with the giba chitt.

And after eating that one bite, Shumiral's narrow eyes opened wider than I had ever seen before. However, rather than offering any impressions, he instead grabbed the chitt stew and sipped some, then silently closed his eyes.

"What do you think?" I hesitantly questioned.

That was instantly drowned out by the loud shout of, "Delicious!" though.

Naturally, that had come from Nail rather than Shumiral. The inn owner was standing there trembling as he held the plate of giba chitt.

"What a striking flavor! It really is the taste of my pickled chitt, but that's not all, is it? Myamuu? Is that what you added?"

Mere seconds ago the man had been just as expressionless as Shumiral, but now he was facing me with a look of clear astonishment.

"Ah, y-yes, that's right. And I also used a bit of tau oil."

"Tau oil, is it?! Hmm, this is delicious! Still, the real clincher is clearly the giba meat! It just goes perfectly with the pickled chitt!" With that, Nail grabbed hold of the chitt stew and audibly slurped some down. "This is great, too! The flavor has such depth to it! It's completely and utterly different from a stew made by just adding crushed chitt seeds! I never imagined pickled chitt could be used like this... Ah, it's so good! I feel like I could eat plate after plate of it!"

"I-I'm honored."

As I stood there utterly dumbfounded, Nail finished gulping down the chitt stew in no time flat. I didn't know if it was from his excitement or the spiciness of the chitt seeds, but his pale skin had gone bright red and he was sweating heavily.

"This is absolutely certain to make my customers happy! Ahh, to think my pickled chitt could be used to make such dishes! You're just as skilled a chef as I had heard, Asuta! I must give my thanks to both the western god Selva and the eastern god Sym for having been given the chance to meet you! This cooking is just so—!" Nail exclaimed, only to suddenly snap back to his senses and turn in a panic towards Shumiral.

The youth from Sym looked back at the inn owner with just as expressionless of a face as always.

“I-I’m so sorry! I went and so openly exposed my emotions in front of you, a customer from the east...”

“It is, no issue. You are, a precious friend, Nail,” Shumiral calmly responded. Even so, Nail remained red-faced and hanging his head.

“What did you think, Shumiral?” I threw out there, feeling a little awkward thanks to the long silence.

The man from Sym turned my way, his eyes narrowed even more than Jiza Ruu’s.

“It was, very delicious... More so, than any other dish, I have tasted.”

With that, for the first time ever, I saw the corners of his thin lips lift up ever so slightly, forming a clear yet subtle and gentle smile.

“I am also, embarrassed to show, such emotion... But it is, very tasty.”

“Th-Thank you very much.”

I could feel a bit of a lump forming in my throat.

Meanwhile, Nail had pulled out a hand towel to wipe away his sweat, then stated, “Ah, that really was a surprise,” sounding like he had mostly regained his composure. “They’re both delicious. I honestly don’t feel like I could choose between them. Would it be possible to offer both, changing each day?”

“I don’t mind, but this soup dish requires time to boil. If it’s alright, I would prefer if you could keep heating it with a light flame until the meat gets soft after I finish up and leave...”

“That’s no issue. I’ll turn a profit just from you buying thirty orders of pickled chitt each day, so I’ll gladly accept that task.”

Apparently, the number had been set at 30 meals at some point.

And with that, my work with The Sledgehammer was fully set in place.

“You’re an unusual man, Asuta. What’s a chef like you doing in the post town? Do you perhaps come from a castle town somewhere?”

“Ah, no, I wasn’t born anywhere that grand. It’s just that back where I come from, it wasn’t rare at all for someone to make a living as a chef.”

“My apologies if this is too personal of a question, but where were you born? It must have been somewhere in the western kingdom, right?”

It was my first time in a while getting that question.

“I don’t come from this continent. I was actually born in an island nation known as Japan. And I don’t know how, but one day I suddenly woke up in the forest of Morga.”

“Japan... I haven’t heard of it. The Northern Kingdom of Mahyudra is the only one with ties to anyone from overseas though, right?”

“Is that so? I honestly don’t have even the slightest idea how I ended up here on this continent.”

Nail tilted his head and looked puzzled, while Shumiral narrowed his eyes and seemed to be thinking. Somehow, that made me feel real nervous.

“Well, it certainly makes sense to me that you weren’t born here in the western nation. I suppose that’s how you’re able to live at the forest’s edge without any problems, and get along so well with the people there,” Nail stated, maintaining a polite neutral expression, but now seeming quite a bit more talkative than when I first met him. “I think that’s simply wonderful. When I was young I visited Sym and was entranced by the wondrous culture I saw, but I wasn’t able to bring myself to abandon the western god and move there. But still, I can’t help but think... Why aren’t the people of the four great kingdoms more able to compromise with one another?”

“Ah, but the western kingdom is friendly with both Sym and Jagar, isn’t it?”

“That’s certainly true. But that doesn’t mean that their citizens can become family. If a child is born between them, then they have to choose a god and be raised without either their father or their mother.”

That was my first time hearing that.

With that, Nail broke out in a thin, awkward grin.

“And so, even though I had decided if I were to take a wife she would be an

easterner, I couldn't work up the resolve to either give up the western god or force her to give up her god. That's how I ended up still unmarried at this age."

In that case, the owner of The Great Southern Tree, Naudis, had to have a rather complex background, having both southern and western heritage. I had thought such hardships were limited to people born of enemy nations, like how Kamyua Yoshu was a child of both the west and north.

"Thanks to that, I've had a strong interest in you for a while now, seeing how you overcame such barriers and live as a person of the forest's edge. To be frank, I was jealous of how freely you acted, but... You were never a child of the four gods to begin with, were you?" Then, Nail brought his face in rather close. "Abandoning a god isn't something just anyone can bring themselves to do. That's surely why the people of the forest's edge have lived with such misfortune, having abandoned Jagar to become children of Selva. And that fact always pained me greatly. But Asuta, you have no god, and I'm sure you coming to them will prove a great turning point. Please, continue guiding them towards a better fate."

"All I'm capable of doing is cooking food, though..."

"Isn't that plenty?" Nail replied, this time unable to hold back his smile. There was enough warmth behind it that I couldn't help but wonder if he would be better off not forcing himself to be so expressionless.

◇

After that, we wrapped up at The Sledgehammer without any further incidents of note, and then left the place with time to spare.

As we walked down the small path, there were occasional passersby, though not as much as on the main road.

But at any rate, Shumiral quietly called out as we went, "So Asuta, you are not, from this continent?"

"Huh? Yeah, that's right. I guess I hadn't really had a chance to bring that up..." I believe I had mentioned I came from a country called Japan, but I must not have gone so far as to explain that it wasn't on this continent. In my mind, folks wouldn't care one way or another about stuff like that, but Shumiral

looked listless for some reason when he heard. “Sorry. Should I have brought it up sooner? I wasn’t really trying to hide it or anything...”

“No. Where you were born, doesn’t matter. I think of you, as a foreign friend. But now, I understand a bit, why you seem, so mysterious... Asuta, your star, can’t be seen.”

“Star?”

“My comrade, reads the stars. He saw, the fell star, disappear. But he could not, find your star.” I could spy his beautifully shining black eyes behind his narrowed eyelids, staring thoughtfully my way. “I was worried, about your future. So I tried, to have that comrade, read your star. However, he couldn’t do so... He said, you do not exist.”

“That’s...” I started to argue, but then I stopped.

It felt like a concern I kept buried deep inside was suddenly bubbling up. But before I could firmly grasp it, Shumiral suddenly grabbed hold of my hand.

“But you, do exist, Asuta. You are, my precious friend... As long as, you will, accept me, as such.”

“I think of you as a precious friend, too, Shumiral.” My face was stiffening up, but I forced myself to smile. “Perhaps this isn’t the sort of thing I should be saying to a customer, but I’ve felt that way for some time now. It makes me very sad to think that we’ll have to say farewell in just ten more days or so.”

“Even apart, we will still, be friends. And the Silver Vase, will return, to Genos. Even after, returning to Sym, we will come back, to Genos, many times. I will, look forward, to seeing you again.”

At the end of the blue month, the merchant group that Shumiral led would leave Genos to continue doing business throughout the western kingdom. They would finish up by heading to the capital and then returning to Genos in half a year’s time. Then, they were set to return to their home country of Sym.

As long as we both kept on living, we would have countless opportunities to see one another.

Yes, as long as we lived...

And, as long as I wasn't flung into some other world again.

Still, even if that did happen...

I would surely never forget the people I met here.

Even if I was sent to another new world, or even returned to my old one and met my end in that blazing inferno, until the moment my consciousness burned up, I would never forget this life I lived and the people I met. With that determination burning anew in my chest, I smiled back at Shumiral.

"Thank you. No matter how far apart we may be, I'll always keep on praying for your safety."

"This feels sort of like watching a man and woman exchange vows, somehow..." Vina Ruu chimed in from the side, sulking quite a bit. "Besides, you all are staying in town for over ten more days, aren't you...?"

"Yes. We will be here, till the end, of the blue month." Shumiral's eyes narrowed and he looked a bit troubled as he let go of my hand. "We have, 12 more days. I would be glad, to get to eat, your cooking throughout, Asuta."

"Right. I'll strive my hardest to make something good and tasty for you each and every day."

Perhaps it was none of my business, but I couldn't help but wonder if he had given up on Vina Ruu.

And then, I thought that over again. Shumiral and Vina Ruu were born serving different gods. At least officially, the people of the forest's edge were citizens of the Western Kingdom of Selva, after all.

If the two of them got together, then one of them would have to change gods. And I had just heard from Nail how difficult of a matter that really was.

And besides, Shumiral was the leader of a merchant group with ties to Genos castle and even the western capital, while Vina Ruu was the eldest daughter of one of the clan heads now leading the forest's edge. Abandoning a god also meant casting aside that position and status... as well as a great many comrades. It certainly wasn't something that could be done lightly.

Wait, I don't even know for certain if Shumiral has feelings for Vina Ruu to

begin with, so what point is there to me worrying about it?

But on the off chance that my hunch was true, all I could do was pray that things turned out in a way that wouldn't leave anyone feeling devastated.

Even if they had different gods, they still were born in the same world, weren't they? So if they couldn't find happiness, then my future sure looked awful bleak.

And so, even though it wasn't quite in my nature, I prayed deep down in my heart that my precious friends had a bright path stretching out ahead of them.

Chapter 4: The Journeying Friend and the Thrifty Girl

1

I officially entered into my contract with The Sledgehammer three days later, on the 22nd of the blue month.

After work, I met with Kamyua Yoshu to once again discuss the matter of totos ownership, after which I went ahead and asked about the culinary lifestyle of travelers, which I had been interested in for a while now.

“Hmm. Honestly, we keep things pretty plain when it comes to food. After all, whenever it takes more than a day to travel between towns, you’ve got to fill your stomach with portable rations. And I may have mentioned this before, but the jerky sold in the post town is the prime example of that sort of stuff.”

We were currently in the restaurant portion of The Kimyuus’s Tail.

Ludo Ruu stood beside me as a bodyguard, while Kamyua Yoshu was accompanied by his apprentice, Leito.

“The most common and cheap way to handle things is to boil poitan in water, then mix in dried aria and jerky. Folks with a bit more to spend will add in rock salt and herbs, but well, you can probably still guess at how that tastes. Even the cheapest meals here in the post town are better than that.”

“Huh, boiled poitan, aria, and jerky, is it...? If that aria and meat were fresh, that’d be the exact same as the giba stew eaten at the forest’s edge,” Ludo Ruu chimed in as he leaned against the wall rather than sitting in a chair. Kamyua Yoshu turned and shot him his usual smile.

“I’m sure that’s because your ancestors learned how to make that from the townsfolk. Otherwise, I doubt the people of the forest’s edge would have any way of knowing how much of which vegetable to eat in order to live healthy lives. After all, they didn’t ever have a chance to buy such things before coming to live here.”

“I see. And so, aria and poitan became staple foods at the forest’s edge because they were the cheapest and most nutritious. Now that you mention it, that makes sense,” I said.

With a joyful nod, Kamyua Yoshu replied, “Right? If people eat the proper amount of aria, poitan, and meat, then they’ll be healthy. And since they’re cheaper than other veggies, there’s no reason to argue. It’s not just travelers who eat dried aria and jerky mixed into poitan broth regularly, though. Soldiers do, too.”

“Soldiers?”

“Yeah, not the town guards, but the soldiers who go out and fight on battlefields. Of course, the noble officers likely all stay safe and sound in their fortresses gobbling down delicious food.”

I just let Kamyua Yoshu’s joking around wash over me and muttered, “I see...”

“Still, why are you interested in how travelers eat, Asuta? You’re not planning on leaving Genos and heading off for Jagar or Sym, are you?”

“Of course not. It’s just that some Sym merchants are going to be purchasing giba jerky from me soon, and I was wondering how it would be eaten.”

“Hmm? Then why not ask them directly? Folks from the east and south may treat portable rations differently, after all.”

“Ah, no, they won’t be eating it personally. They’re planning on selling it as they travel. And so, the ones actually buying and eating it will be westerners, which is why I wanted to hear your opinion.”

With that, Kamyua Yoshu clapped his hands together and said, “Oh, I see! So it’s a case of resale, is it? It’s true that the further you get from Genos the less prejudice you’ll find against giba meat, so they may well be able to do good business like that.”

“Is that so? But now that I think about it, they’ll be buying it for the same price as karon jerky. So if they’re selling it elsewhere, they’ll of course have to do it for a higher price. Will that really sell?”

“I don’t think you need to worry about that. Both karon and kimyuus are

cheap here in Genos. In towns without big farms, meat costs go way up.”

I see, I thought to myself.

It was a bit frustrating to admit, but the more I asked, the more useful information I heard. Apparently Kamyua Yoshu was a good bit more informed than most, seeing how he spent over half of each year traveling around.

“Karon and kimyuus are raised on farms, aren’t they? Is that why the price stays so stable?”

“That’s right. Though the neighboring town of Dabaag is the one that’s famous for its big karon farms. Still, it’s close enough that you can get there in half a day by totos, so a massive amount of meat shows up here in Genos every day... Though all you can get here in the post town is karon leg meat.”

“Huh? Really?”

“Yup. The softer and tastier torso meat pretty much all gets bought up by the castle town. And so, the karon meat you can buy in the post town is pretty darn cheap.”

I couldn’t exactly just ignore that statement.

“Sorry, but in that case, does that mean all the karon jerky sold in the post town is made with leg meat, too?”

“Yeah, I’d say so. After all, only travelers and soldiers eat the stuff. So I’m pretty sure they just use the front legs, too, which are even cheaper and worse tasting than the hind legs. Why are you asking, though...? You’ve got a really serious look on your face for some reason.”

“Ah, no, it’s just that I’ve been using giba rib meat at the stalls lately... In other words, I’ve been making the jerky from meat that comes from around the chest. Leg and shoulder meat has a lot less fat, so I figured that’d taste way worse when it was made into jerky.”

So why was it still selling poorly, then?

Perhaps seeing how much I was brooding over the matter, Kamyua Yoshu started stroking his chin.

“It’s true that the giba jerky you gave us before tasted a whole lot better than

the stuff sold in the post town. However, the travelers who buy jerky aren't really thinking about taste, y'know? After all, they're just going to soak it in poitan broth when they eat anyway, so that'll completely override any fine differences in terms of taste."

"Then what about keeping poitan that's been made into a flour on hand? Then they would be able to eat baked poitan wherever they went. And then they could boil up jerky and dried aria in plain water and it'd taste much better, wouldn't you say?"

"Yeah, that's a wonderful idea. But the people of the forest's edge are the only ones who know how to make poitan into flour and then bake it up like fuwano, right?"

"Ah, that's true. Then if we spread that technique throughout the post town..."

"Ah, I don't know that that's such a good idea, Asuta," Kamyua Yoshu chimed in, his tone shifting just a bit as his usual aloof smile gave way to an incredibly calm, mature-looking grin. "Currently, you sell giba meat in the post town. And if you move 100 or 200 meals, that much less karon and kimyuus meat sells as a result. So why do you think you've been able to keep on doing business without anyone interfering?"

"Why...? Isn't it because the townsfolk are afraid of the people of the forest's edge?"

"I don't think that's it. Like I said before, the ones selling meat in town are the folks from Dabaag. People selling meals from stalls may well get annoyed if their sales dropped, too, but most of the folks running those are inn proprietresses and the like, trying to earn a bit extra for their families. And so, even if they had to close up shop, they wouldn't exactly be left out on the street."

"Right..."

"Similarly, the folks from Dabaag shouldn't be suffering serious enough losses to raise a fuss. After all, they don't just do business with Genos, and sell dozens of the animals each and every day. Plus, it's just been the cheaper leg meat that's selling less. However... I'd say you should be a bit more careful when it

comes to poitan.”

My eyes must have been saying, “Why’s that?” as Kamyua Yoshu placed one elbow on the wooden table and gently smiled.

“That’s because the ones who cultivate fuwano are the folks from the castle town. The townsfolk of the post town raise the cheaper poitan, while they handle the more expensive fuwano. And if folks around town learn how delicious poitan can be and stop eating fuwano entirely, some nobles with farms to the north will end up suffering heavy losses. You can imagine how dangerous that could be, right?”

“Well, it’s not as if I don’t get that, but...”

“Ah, it’s not like I’m saying you absolutely can’t. I’m just saying that it’d be dangerous to try something like that now, when you’re trying to reforge your bonds with the folks from the castle. At the very least, though, I’d like you to keep in mind that that delicious way of preparing poitan could act as a blade pointed towards the nobles.”

I didn’t know what I should think about that.

“In order to keep on living, sometimes you need a blade. But if you make a mistake about when to use it, you can end up wounding your allies, too. So you should be careful when it comes to handling it,” Kamyua Yoshu stated, once more breaking out in a wide grin.

2

After saying farewell to Kamyua Yoshu, I headed back to the Fa house only to find a number of women there waiting for me.

“Hey, you all sure got here early. Hmm...? What’s that?”

“Ah, yes, it’s the jerky we promised.”

They belonged to the clans I had asked to help make the jerky I would sell to the Silver Vase, and they were delivering it in quite a timely manner.

Shumiral’s merchant group from Sym had ordered 40 kilos of jerky in total. And I saw this as a good opportunity to share the wealth, so I decided to

request that other clans not only provide the meat, but also help to make the stuff.

“Thank you. Well then, allow me to check a bit from each.”

With that, I welcomed the women inside the house as Li Sudra and I carried in our luggage from work.

There were women from three clans gathered here: the Fou, the Ratsu, and the Gaaz. And the Ratsu and Gaaz in particular didn’t live all that close, so that really was my first time ever seeing those women.

“Well then, I’ll go first,” the Fou woman stated, holding out a large bag meant for carrying vegetables.

When I opened it up, the jerky stuffed inside came tumbling out. I randomly grabbed one of the chunks cut into about the size of my palm, and shaved off a bit from the end.

The hard, bark-like chunk of meat was made by removing as much moisture as possible with pico leaves and salt, then smoking it. When I tossed that chunk into my mouth, there was a powerful salty flavor with an herbal taste, as well as a condensed meaty deliciousness.

Yup, there was no problem here in terms of taste. The meat used had definitely been properly bloodlet.

Then, I moved the jerky atop a cutting board, and sawed down the middle with a knife. It sure was tough. But that was good, as it proved it had properly dried out and hardened all the way to the center.

“Alright, this is perfect. Good work. Umm, please hold on just a moment...” I portioned out some of the coins we had earned from our sales today, then handed them over to the Fou woman. “Here are seven white and seven red coins. Please check that over.”

“Right...” the woman said, her face stiffening up just as much as the jerky.

Seven white and red coins... Converted into horns and tusks, it would be around six giba worth.

It was pretty rare to be able to sell such a large amount of jerky. And so,

chances to earn this much wouldn't exactly be common from here on out, either. Plus, even if another such opportunity did pop up, I'd want to be fair and offer it to different clans. And so, I had to repeat myself over and over again when I offered the job, as it was certainly a pretty exceptionally high payment.

"Well then, could I test the next jerky?"

There were no issues with the jerky from the Ratsu and Gaaz women, either.

And each woman honestly looked more relieved than joyful when accepting the payment.

"Asuta, I believe we'll be delivering the Sudra clan's jerky tomorrow too," Li Sudra stated from beside me, giving a polite bow as she did so.

It was then that there was a knock on the door.

"It's me, Ama Min Rutim, along with four women from under the Ruu. Are Ai Fa or Asuta around?"

I stood up, thinking, *Ama Min Rutim again, huh?*

She had visited the Fa house both yesterday and the day before, first bringing one totos, and then three more.

I was worried I would find even more of the large birds waiting for me there as I hesitantly opened the door, but fortunately all I saw were women of the forest's edge. However, one of the members of the group was rather unexpected. The slender little girl's dark brown hair was drawn up into a shape reminiscent of an onion... It was the former youngest daughter of the main Suun house and current member of the Rutim, Tsuvai.

"Hey there. I hadn't expected I would be seeing you three days in a row like this. So, what's going on today, Ama Min Rutim?"

"Ah, yes... Today I've come here to escort my clan member, Tsuvai. There's something that she said she absolutely wanted to ask you... but could you complete your business with these folks first? They finished making their jerky and wished to deliver it."

They were women from the Ririn, Muufa, and Maam, which were clans that fell under the Ruu that I wasn't at all familiar with.

I wanted to prioritize houses suffering from poverty when it came to splitting up the work making the jerky, but only the Fou, Ratsu, and Sudra were able to learn how to successfully bloodlet a giba in time. And so, I ended up asking the Ruu clan to provide the rest. Mia Lea Ruu was the one to then suggest having the less fortunate clans under them take care of it, rather than leaving it up to the Ruu or Rutim.

Even though they shared blood and bonds with the Ruu, apparently there wasn't all that big of a difference between them and small clans like the Fou or Ratsu. And in fact, the women here now weren't anywhere near as adorned as the Ruu, and had a sort of simple, plain feel about them.

Still, whether they were well off or not, all people of the forest's edge seemed to be diligent and earnest when it came to work. None of the dried meat had any problems, and it was all more than good enough to be sold.

"Alright, there don't seem to be any issues at all. Good work, everyone. I'll be counting on you all again if the chance comes around."

"We must thank you, too. Um... Asuta of the Fa clan, would it be alright for us to stay and watch your work?" the Maam woman asked.

"I don't mind," I replied, then turned towards the still silent Tsuvai. "But before that, what did you want to talk to me about?"

It wasn't going to be some serious matter involving the Suun clan, right?

Tsuvai just snorted, "Hmph!" and crossed her slender arms in front of her chest. "Let me just say, it's going to take a while. It may even last till after the sun sets. Is that alright with you?"

"That'd be a problem. After all, I still have to prepare for tomorrow and get dinner ready."

"Then just go ahead and listen as you work! But I've got no intention of heading back to the Rutim house until I hear an answer that satisfies me!"

She was looking more and more restless.

Having little choice, I went ahead and started my prep work by dicing aria as I lent an ear to Tsuvai.

“Asuta of the Fa clan... You entrusted this task of making jerky to seven clans, didn’t you? I’d like to confirm something about that with you.”

“Huh? You wanted to talk about the jerky work?”

“That’s right. What else is there to discuss?”

It hadn’t even been six days yet since Tsuvai’s grandfather Tei Suun had passed away. And so, I had been half prepared for it to be something related to that, but apparently my concerns had been completely off the mark.

“You paid seven white and seven red coins for the work, didn’t you? And to make it would require the rib meat of two large giba... Is that all correct?”

“Yup, that’s all true.”

I had asked for a bit under six kilos of jerky from each of the clans. To make that much would require around 15 kilos of rib meat. That was just how much moisture was lost when making sure it was properly preserved.

“Then why is it that you only pay the Ruu clan 12 red coins...?”

“Huh?”

“The Ruu sell the Fa a single full giba pretty much each and every day, right? You only pay 12 red coins for that, but you pay a full 77 for just the chest meat used in the jerky? Those numbers simply don’t make sense,” she chirped away in her shrill voice, her big round eyes with prominent whites glaring at me.

As I diced away at the aria, I went, “Let’s see...” and ran some numbers in my head. “First off, let me just say that it’s always bothered me how ridiculously cheaply I’ve been getting fresh meat. But since it still doesn’t have an established market price, it’s been stuck at the same value as one giba’s horns and tusks.”

To be more accurate, Mia Lea Ruu pressured me into accepting that rate, saying they didn’t need the meat anyway and wouldn’t mind just giving it to us for free.

“So, how did you decide on the price of the jerky...?”

“For that, I set the price the same as the jerky that they sell in town from an animal called a karon. So the cost for the total amount I requested works out to

600 red coins. As an intermediary and for our labor, the Fa clan is taking ten percent, while the rest is split among the seven clans who helped out."

"If the seven clans got 77 red coins each... that would add up to 539 coins total, leaving 61 for the Fa house. Hmm, I see. Those calculations seem to work out after all."

By that point, the eight women surrounding us started looking obviously confused. They probably couldn't keep up with those calculations, and may not have even understood what they were for to begin with.

But Tsuvai paid them no heed and just kept getting more into it.

"In that case, shouldn't you match the price of raw meat to what it goes for in the post town, too? How much does that karon meat you mentioned cost? Surely it's not just 12 red coins for a whole animal's worth."

"I still haven't really visited a butcher's shop yet. But apparently it makes a huge difference in cost if you're just buying for your house or in bulk for an inn or whatever. Not that it'd be as cheap as 12 red coins either way, though."

"Yeah, but how much are we talking?"

This time, I was the one running the math through my head.

When buying for a single house, karon meat supposedly cost a bit under a single red coin for a hundred grams. But for The Great Southern Tree, that came down to 0.37 red coins for the same amount.

Meanwhile, I was buying about 40 kilos of giba meat from the Ruu clan for just 12 red coins. I didn't quite know how big karon were to calculate out how much meat would come from one of the beasts, so all I could do was assume it weighed around as much as a giba.

So, with that in mind...

For personal use, one kilo would be ten red coins, and 40 kilos would come out to 400.

In bulk for business use, one kilo would cost 3.7 red coins, and 40 kilos would be 148.

That was quite a difference, but most folks probably wouldn't go around

buying 40 kilos to use in their house. After all, the reason the personal price was so much higher was because folks just wouldn't buy so much at once.

"For now, I've calculated it out to something like 148 red coins when buying in bulk for a business."

"In that case, you're paying the Ruu clan less than 10%!" Tsuvai wailed, shooting me a seriously doubting look. "And isn't 148 red coins still a bit too low, anyway? How much would the same amount of jerky be?"

"When making jerky, over half the weight is lost in the process. But if you want to compare the prices between raw meat and jerky... Hold on just a moment, alright?"

The price for karon jerky was 1.5 red coins for a hundred grams, if I recalled correctly. And the bulk price for raw raw meat was 0.37 coins, so...

"Right, jerky costs about four times as much as raw meat."

"Four times?! Why is it so expensive?!"

"You need salt to make jerky, so it probably comes down to ingredient costs, right? And then there's the fee for the work, plus the people making it and selling it are often different, so all that must drive up the price."

"I still can't accept it... I get the feeling I'm being tricked, somehow."

Right, in that case, I needed more thorough calculations.

And so, I considered a case of turning ten kilos of fresh meat into jerky. First off, after using the pico leaves, salting the raw meat, and smoking it, that would be down to about four kilos. And you need to use five percent of the meat's total weight in terms of rock salt, so that'd work out to 500 grams. And that much would cost three red coins.

The raw meat itself would be 37 red coins, so it would come to exactly 40 when adding in the cost of the rock salt. And since jerky cost 1.5 red coins for 100 grams, four kilos would work out to 60.

For the cost/price ratio, that would be the ingredient cost of 40 over the selling price of 60 times 100, or 66%.

I'd say that not only wasn't a high price, it was an extremely fair one.

And so, I went ahead and conveyed those precise numbers and my conclusion to Tsuvai.



“The raw meat is 37 red coins, and it’s sold as jerky for 60. Subtracting out the cost of the rock salt, that leaves 20 red coins of profit. And you’re saying that’s cheap?”

“It’s almost too cheap for Genos, I’d say. After all, the basic principle there is to aim for small profits but quick returns. For example, if you switched in the cost for karon meat to the dishes at my stalls, then I’d be earning around the same amount.”

Because I prepared the meat in advance for the giba burgers, that kept the cost/price ratio down at a mere 25 percent, but if I set it at the same rate as karon meat, that jumped up to 65 percent. In other words, that was the norm for other stalls serving light snacks.

“Hmm... So, you beat down the price of the meat you’re buying from the Ruu clan so low because you wanted to earn more profit, then?”

“No, that’s not it. I’ve tried to negotiate to pay them more over and over again, but Mia Lea Ruu has firmly shut me down every time. She just says they’d be returning the excess meat to the forest, otherwise.”

Maybe this was a good chance to set a fair, reasonable price for giba meat sold here at the forest’s edge. This girl just had such an unusually strong economic sense that I couldn’t help but feel that way.

“Well then, Tsuvai and Ama Min Rutim... Could I have you inform Mia Lea Ruu that I really would like to revise the price of giba meat? I’d like to buy meat from other clans than just the Ruu in the future, so it would be good to set a proper rate.”

“Ooh, then were you thinking the same 148 red coins as karon meat? That would mean the price shooting up to over ten times as much in an instant.”

“I wouldn’t mind that. In fact, I’d say that’s what we should do. After all, my ultimate goal is to steadily work towards that point where the townsfolk are willing to pay that much for giba meat.”

With that Tsuvai finally went silent, and then she looked me up and down as I stood there, having finished dicing the aria.

“...Very well. You really are aiming for a situation where all the people of the forest’s edge can earn coins, rather than just thinking of your own profits.”

“Yeah, that’s right. This may sound ridiculously arrogant, but the Fa clan doesn’t really have anything to use money on even if we keep earning more.”

“But if you have the coins, then you can buy anything, right?”

“Really? I don’t think you could buy bonds and trust between people, though,” I replied in a joking tone.

Tsuvai answered with a “Hmph! I figured I’d be questioning you till the sun set, but it looks like we’re done already.”

“I’m glad to hear it. And it felt like a really meaningful conversation to me too, Tsuvai,” I replied, not out of flattery or politeness but instead based on my true feelings.

Here at the forest’s edge, Tsuvai was probably seen as quite a nonconformist for being so obsessed with money. But I figured if we’re seeking even greater prosperity for the forest’s edge, folks with firm economic sense like her would be absolutely essential. And besides, I was easily the biggest nonconformist around, so it was like I found someone I could talk to on the same level. Honestly, I couldn’t help but secretly feel glad that the girl had ended up falling under the umbrella of the Ruu.

“Well, my business here is done. What do you want to do now, Ama Min Rutim?”

“Let’s see... Even if we hurry back, there isn’t any work left to be done, so I suppose we could also watch as Asuta cooks,” she responded with a satisfied smile. Faced with that, Tsuvai’s body trembled as she looked a bit uncomfortable.

It was then that, with no warning whatsoever, the door swung open from the outside. And since such actions were only permitted from members of the house, it was of course Ai Fa. She was once again shouldering a 60 kilo or so giba as she glanced over the room with a piercing glare.

“Welcome home, clan head. You caught one again today, huh?”

Two days ago she had resumed her work as a hunter, and she had already brought back two giba. And it wasn't even supposed to be a period where they were thriving, which only made the accomplishment all the more astounding.

I had greeted Ai Fa with a smile, but she wore an incredibly chilly expression. Then, she just muttered, "You seem like you're having fun again today," only to slam the door shut rather than coming inside.

What did she mean by that? I honestly had no idea.

I guess the one key difference from usual was that I was currently surrounded by nine women. I mean, there were always women hanging around, but I suppose this really was more than normal.

"I'm sorry, Asuta..." Ama Min Rutim said with a bow of her head.

"Huh? Ah, no, you didn't do anything you need to apologize for."

"Really?" she replied while tilting her head a bit, then came in close to whisper in my ear. "But aside from me and the Sudra woman, everyone here is young and unmarried. I can see how that could leave Ai Fa feeling rather unamused."

It honestly caught me a bit off guard, seeing Ama Min Rutim's face up this close. She was always so composed and well-mannered, so it was rare to see her give such an innocent smile fitting to her age.

And so, the 22nd day of the blue month came to a calm, relaxed close.

Chapter 5: The Girl and the Entrails

1

It was the day after Lala Ruu turned 13: the 26th of the blue month. I was once again busy with my work preparations, only for Ai Fa to come back shouldering yet another giba.

“Whoa, you caught another one? You haven’t even been back out in the forest for ten days yet, but that makes three, doesn’t it?”

“Hmph... Today’s giba is rather young, though. I’ll probably only get two coins for each of its horns and tusks.”

Even if it was young, it couldn’t have weighed less than 40 kilos. And it may not have been all that tall, but it seemed plenty plump.

After giving a nod to the Fou and Din women staring at her with admiration, Ai Fa passed in front of the stove and set about hanging the giba from a branch. And as she did so, she called out, “I’m back, Gilulu,” to the totos tied to another nearby tree.

It sure made for a tranquil sight.

The meeting with the folks from the castle was in just four days, so would we be able to maintain this peaceful lifestyle after that? I couldn’t help but ponder the matter, but then an older woman let out an impressed-sounding, “Ooh, you sure are skilled.”

Turning to look, I saw Toor Din transferring freshly baked poitan to a wooden plate. Despite the fact that they hadn’t mixed in any gigo, they really had come out nice and plump. And that light golden-brown color they had made them look seriously tasty.

“That’s for sure. You really are talented, Toor Din.”

“No...” the girl replied, casting her gaze downwards. Her expression hadn’t shifted much, but her cheeks were ever so slightly red. Adorable.

Toor Din was a ten-year-old girl who had once belonged to one of the Suun branch families. Her dark brown hair hung down on either side of her neck, and her eyes were blue. And though she had a rather cute face, her expression was always sorrowful and listless.

However, I believed that was due to how the girl's heart had withered away from being forced to live under the bizarre rules of the Suun settlement. But she occasionally let slip an innocent smile, or showed her inherent kindness through her actions. And so, I couldn't help but feel that she would have been an energetic, carefree girl like Rimee Ruu had she just been raised normally.

"Looks like you've already perfected baking poitan, Toor Din. If you bring along some giba meat, I could show you how to cook with that too. What do you say?"

With that, Toor Din's face grew even redder, and she muttered, "But..."

"Asuta of the Fa clan. Normally, dinner is to be made at your own house's stove. We've been fine baking poitan here, but I believe going so far as to grill giba meat would mean going against the customs of the forest's edge," Jas Din, elder sister to both the Din clan head and Toor Din's late mother, chimed in. With her gentle but stern gaze, she made for quite a commanding presence.

"Ah, right, I had forgotten that was the custom. That was why everyone's just watched when it came to preparing anything but poitan, huh? But... isn't it pretty tricky to learn the techniques just by watching?"

"That's true. But Toor Din here once received your instruction in preparing food for the clan head meeting, and she's grown rather skilled at manning the stove."

The more Toor Din was praised, the lower and lower her gaze seemed to fall. It was a rather sad thought, but folks from the branch families like her seemed to be stricken more by kindness than by animosity.

At any rate, Toor Din let out a little, "Ah..."

Following her gaze, I found she was looking at Ai Fa, who had finished peeling the pelt and set about removing the innards.

"What is it?" I tried asking.

But all I got back was, “Nothing...”

Back at the Suun settlement, the men avoided hunting as much as possible, so they ate torso meat, too. In that case, she should have been perfectly accustomed to seeing such things.

“The entrails, huh...? Back where I come from, there was this animal a lot like a giba. From what I heard, its innards could be made into pretty tasty dishes, but I wonder what a giba’s taste like...” I tried throwing out there, feeling like I would somehow regret it if I let the conversation die off there. And with that, Toor Din turned to face me with a look of amazement.

“Th-They ate giba entrails back where you came from?”

“Hmm? It wasn’t a giba, but a real similar animal. But yeah, they did. And since the taste of the meat’s a lot alike, I figured maybe a giba’s innards would taste good, too.”

“T-They do!” Toor Din responded, far louder than I expected from the shy little girl. However, before long her face went beet red and her gaze fell further than ever before.

Jas Din and the Fou women around her all just stood there looking confused.

“Ah, did you perhaps eat giba innards at the Suun settlement?”

“Yes...” she replied so quietly her voice was hardly audible.

“Giba innards, is it? So the Suun clan was so desperate not to do their giba hunting work that they would even eat such gross-looking things?” Jas Din questioned, her stern gaze quietly turning Toor Din’s way.

“Ah, no, but innards were treated as a delicacy back in my home country, too. And they provide different nutrition than meat, so they’re also valuable in that way,” I replied, half out of a desire to cover for Toor Din and half out of an interest in cooking with entrails. “To be perfectly honest, I’ve found it frustrating just throwing giba innards away. Hey, Toor Din, would you mind telling me how you prepared them?”

“Huh...?” she questioned, her gaze looking clearly troubled.

Jas Din gave a small sigh, then patted Toor Din on the head.

“You owe Asuta of the Fa clan a great debt, don’t you? I won’t say something like this would be enough to repay it, but I also don’t think you should go holding back at a time like this.”

“Right...” Toor Din replied with a nod, then her downcast eyes turned my way.

And if I wasn’t mistaken, I thought I saw a bit of happiness faintly kindling in her blue eyes.

◇

“I don’t really understand the details. But I do know we just set aside the especially smelly parts, then washed the rest carefully,” Toor Din stated, and so we moved to the washing area.

As for the innards, we tossed them all into a pot and carried them along with us. And we were accompanied by Jas Din and the mostly indifferent Fou women, making for a group of five. Ai Fa, however, still had to dissect the giba, so she didn’t come with us.

“First off, we got rid of this bit,” Toor Din stated, grabbing a small chunk of flesh from out of the pot. It was a round little lump about the size of a ping pong ball, and had a nasty color to it. In all likelihood, it was the bladder. “And then this part, too.”

This time around, she lifted up a hefty chunk of reddish-brown, the liver. Then, she removed what looked like a pale yellow-green little bag sandwiched in there, the gallbladder.

I had been taught by hunters way back when that the bladder and gallbladder needed special care when removing the innards, as if they ruptured, a horrible stench would spread to the meat.

“And we also threw out this part when the giba was having a baby, but this one looks fine.”

It was a white, thin, winding bit. From her description, I assumed it had to be the uterus. In other words, this giba was a female.

“Hmm, I see... And then you wash them all off, huh? Which one should we start with?”

“Ah, before that, we have to make a cut into this one and this one and scoop out all the stuff inside.”

She was referring to a swollen, pink winding bit attached to one end of the large intestine, and a long, narrow, wrinkly white organ. That was probably the rectum, with the pink thing being the stomach.

That made sense. It was such a plump giba that it must have been eating to its heart’s content when it was alive. And the remains of all that still sat in the stomach, so we needed to start by removing it.

As for the rectum, it was connected to the anus, so it should have been obvious just what we needed to get rid of from there. Still, as a newcomer when it came to cooking entrails, I was a lot more concerned about the contents of the stomach.

“Umm, giba don’t just eat fruits and vegetables, but also lizards and snakes and bugs and the like, right?”

When I said that, Toor Din tilted her head.

“Yes... Now that you mention it, sometimes when we cut that bit open, lots of snakes came spilling out.”

“Ugh, I knew it!”

“But they were dead, of course. Some were venomous, but there wasn’t any danger since they weren’t alive anymore.”

“I mean, that’s true, but still...”

“Are you scared of dead snakes, Asuta?” Toor Din asked with a giggle and a smile. It was a really cute face that she was making. “In that case, I’ll take care of it. Could I borrow your knife, Asuta?”

“Ah, no! I can’t go cooking intestines if I’m scared of what’s in the stomach!”

With that, I worked up my nerve and unsheathed my blade. Then, I slid it on into the bulging stomach and carefully cut. And as I did, the remains of a great number of fruits, now made dark green after being half-digested, came spilling out.

“There weren’t any snakes, huh?” Toor Din said with a smile while dealing

with the troubling matter from the rectum. It seemed like she may not have even noticed, but she had been smiling for a while now.

By the way, *that* just came tumbling out like fried dough cake, so it wasn't as gross as I had been expecting. Even with the addition of the contents of the stomach, I was just fine as long as I didn't breath through my nose.

At any rate, we had managed to clean away all that offending matter.

After we finished carefully washing our hands with the water flowing from the rocks, next up was dealing with the large and small intestines, which were like squirming snakes, as well as the uterus.

With the narrow small intestine and uterus, we roughly washed the outside, then cut them open and washed them again inside and out. For this step, we also borrowed the help of the other three women present.

It was best to wash them until all the sliminess was gone, but it just wasn't seeming like we could get all of it no matter how much we washed. Perhaps it would be more effective adding some salt or something, but unfortunately here in this world, that would cost a bit too much. And so for today, we had to try to overcome the issue with raw manpower instead.

"Well then, let's try to handle this too in the meantime. Asuta, could you hold that end so that the water doesn't leak out?" Toor Din asked, offering rather precise instructions as she started washing the large intestine.

I held the opposite end just as she said, and in no time at all it filled up with water and ended up looking like one long sausage. Then while holding onto her own end as well, she started squeezing the thing from one end to the other.

Next we let the water out and did it again, repeating the process a total of three times. After that I cut it up into slices of around ten centimeters each before flipping it inside out. Then, we gave the freshly exposed inside surface a good scrubbing, too. It really was a time-intensive task.

Still, with the five of us working together, we got everything cleaned and chopped up into a little mountain of milky white and pink flesh, at which point I had trouble seeing them as anything but ingredients.

"These ones are next. Like with the others, we've gotta start by peeling off

the film.”

What Toor Din held up now was a bit around the size of my palm and shaped like a fava bean. And there were two of them, too. When I thought of organs you have a left and a right one of, only the lungs and kidneys came to mind. And in all likelihood, these were the latter. After clearing the white membrane off, a shiny, smooth red surface like a liver showed itself.

“Asuta, could I have you cut this horizontally?”

“Got it.”

When I cut it open, it revealed a splendid white that reminded me of fatty meat.

“When I was working the stove, we would always tear out this white bit and throw it away... That was because it had a sort of nasty smell to it.”

“Ooh, I see.”

If I recalled correctly, the job of a kidney was to filter the liquid in your body. So did that mean there were toxins stored in here?

I had no way of knowing, but there was something else entirely that I had realized. In all likelihood, Toor Din had always enjoyed manning the stove. That was probably why she had been smiling this whole time.

Up until now, she had been living with the guilt of breaking the taboo and eating the blessings of the forest. And even when it came to cooking giba, the Suun clan only hunted the minimum number necessary, so she ended up having to prepare even the innards.

Even at the mere age of ten, Toor Din must have understood full well just how strange that was. After all, the members of the branch families had it driven into them that it was a secret no one must ever know, or their scalps would be skinned. That was why their eyes had been like those of dead fish.

I couldn’t help but get the impression that in spite of all that, Toor Din had come to enjoy manning the stove, and had even gotten skilled at it. At the very least, enough to have thoughts like, “If you separate this part from here, you can make more tasty meals.”

The people of the forest's edge had kept things simple and had no interest in delicious food. Their basic stance was that there was no need to spend excess time preparing a meal. However, that didn't mean there weren't people out there with the nature and latent potential needed to become skilled at cooking.

Even just in the Ruu settlement, there were folks who had always specialized in manning the stove. For example, Reina, Sheera, Mia Lea, and Tari Ruu all immediately came to mind. And I couldn't help but feel that Toor Din was the same type of person as them.

So now, she could put to use the skills she had gained in secret while breaking taboos as a member of the Suun clan, in a way that she shouldn't feel any shame for in the least. Perhaps that was why she was currently wearing such a joyful smile.

"And then there's this one and this one. I think you can just put a little cut into each of them and then wash out the blood from inside," Toor Din stated, knowing nothing of what I had been thinking as she pointed to the heart and liver. "A whole lot of blood will keep coming out as you wash, but I think it tastes a lot better cleaned..."

"You're certainly right on that point. That's precisely why it's important to have the men bloodlet the carcass when they hunt down a giba."

For 80 long years, the people of the forest's edge hadn't arrived at the idea of bloodletting. But because of the twisted rules of the Suun clan forcing her to eat the innards, which surely had a worse stench than the meat, this girl had ironically come very close to realizing the truth that blood was the source of that smell.

As that thought ran through my head, I worked away at the heart while Toor Din cleaned the liver.

"For the rest, you can just wash them in water. I think just filling the pot with water and letting them get clean that way should be plenty."

With that said, there weren't all that many bits left in the pot.

There were the light pink, strangely soft lungs, and a long, slender white organ surrounded by something like a netting of fat... By process of elimination,

that was probably the pancreas. Then there was the diaphragm, which just looked like a flat chunk of meat to me.

We left washing those up to Jas Din's group, and with that, the finish line was finally in sight.

"Man, this sure is quite an involved process... So, how did you prepare these innards, Toor Din?"

"Well, we generally just boiled them in the stew. But the stench was still stronger than with the meat, so we added lilo and some other herb I don't know the name of..." Toor Din replied, a dark shadow falling over her face. It must have been something the people of the forest's edge didn't know the name of because it was a forbidden blessing of the forest.

"You just boiled them? You never grilled them?"

"Huh? Ah, yes, when we just grilled them, the stench was too strong..."

"Hmm... But you didn't hate eating innards, right?"

If she did, then I couldn't see any reason for her opening up about the fact. After all, she couldn't have enjoyed bringing up the distorted customs of the Suun settlement.

"That's true... I certainly didn't dislike it any more than eating meat. How should I put it...? The chewy texture was sorta nice."

"Chewy, huh? Sounds interesting!" I replied, trying to sound as cheerful as I could manage. Instantly, the serious expression on Toor Din's face gave way to embarrassment as she turned bright red and her gaze fell to the ground again.

I felt a little bad about that, but I figured it was far preferable to forcing her to remember the past.

"Well then, I guess I'll give cooking them a try today! I don't think my methods will get rid of that chewy texture though, so don't worry about that, alright?"

With that, Toor Din gave an angry little "Geez!" and bumped my arm with her shoulder as she kept on washing the liver.

2

Once we finished cleaning up the entrails, we headed back to the Fa house and I returned to my original tasks for the day.

Of course, that's not to say I put off dealing with the innards for later, though. I started off by steeping the heart, liver, and kidneys in salt water to get out even more blood, and then parboiled the other bits with lilo to remove any remaining stench before finally soaking everything in a myamuu, aria, and fruit wine marinade.

It took nearly an hour to take care of all that, so my preparations for work tomorrow ended up getting rather delayed. And so, I hurriedly set about making the patties for the giba burgers and cutting up the meat for the myamuu giba, cubed giba meat stew, and giba chitt. And somehow, I managed to fulfill my quota before the sun set.

"Alright, well then, let's get to cooking with the innards."

We had two stoves set up outside. One of them was cooking the soup for dinner, while I had the other heating up a pot.

"Huh? You're grilling instead of boiling?" Toor Din asked, her eyes going wide with surprise.

"That's right," I replied with a nod. "With the seasonings we have in the Fa house right now, I can bring out a stronger flavor that way. So for now, I'm going to try grilling them up along with the same marinade I use for the myamuu giba."

"So first you boiled them, and now you're grilling them...?"

The forest's edge didn't have any concept of parboiling, so I suppose it made sense that that seemed strange to her. But I was pretty sure fried offal back in my world used parboiling followed by grilling. Well, "pretty sure" probably made that statement sound a bit unreliable. But embarrassing as it was to admit, we didn't eat out a lot at my house, so I wasn't all that familiar with cooking using entrails.

I had to guess that my old man didn't have much interest in such dishes. In

fact, I was pretty sure I could recall one of our regulars saying, “Hey, you should add motsunabe to your menu,” only for him to reply, “Yeah, maybe eventually.”

And so, this was all ultimately guesswork. For the time being, the three I chose not to parboil were the roly-poly heart, liver, and kidneys, instead cutting them finely and steeping them in a myamuu marinade.

As for the bits I parboiled, I cut them up into nice chunks. With that, it was really starting to look like the fried offal that I vaguely remembered. And when I went ahead and tossed the bits steeped in the red sauce into the pot, the sweet aroma of fruit wine and the garlic-esque smell of myamuu filled the air along with a puff of white steam.

“Aah, that smells good,” one of the Fou women muttered excitedly.

“Thanks to you buying the jerky from us, we received so many coins that we should try buying some myamuu for the Fou house, too.”

“That sounds like a wonderful idea,” I replied as I stirred the entrails with a wooden spatula so that they wouldn’t burn. It was then that Ai Fa suddenly peeked over my shoulder.

“Hmm... This certainly has an unusual appearance.”

“But it smells delicious, right?”

“The scent is from the myamuu though, isn’t it?”

It was just as she said.

Still, just how would this go? Would fried giba offal be to the tastes of the people of the forest’s edge? The preparations we did and the marinade should have properly gotten rid of any stench, so it would surely be edible at the very least. But since I pretty much never ate fried offal myself, I couldn’t help but feel a bit uneasy.

“Alright, this’ll be my first go at it.”

The entrails were nice and cooked by now, so I moved them over to the corner of the tray. Then, I moved some onto a wooden plate with a spoon and held it out towards Toor Din.

“Here you go. But let me just say in advance that this is just a preliminary

taste test.”

“Right...”

Toor Din looked a bit uneasy as she accepted the plate. Was she thinking if it was gross, then we wasted an hour or so of work?

Still, the two of us were sharing the responsibility, at least. And so, I moved some to a plate for myself, then took a bite without any hesitation.

The first thing to spread throughout my mouth was the familiar salty-sweet flavor of myamuu giba. Then, as I bit down on the soft entrails, I was pleased to find that nice chewy texture Toor Din had mentioned. It reminded me a lot of poultry, just like you would assume from its appearance. Yup, it really did have a nice, satisfying texture.

It certainly wasn’t gross, nor did it smell.

Actually, what part even was this? It wasn’t all that thick, so it was probably the small intestine or uterus or something. At any rate, my earnest impressions were that it was neither particularly good or bad.

“What do you think, Toor Din?” I asked, turning to look her way.

And what I found was the girl tightly gripping her spoon and plate, wearing an incredibly joyous smile.

“It’s tasty. Really, really tasty... Much, much more than the last time I ate them.”

Ah, really?

Well, I’m sure personal opinions tend to split on dishes using entrails, too, I thought as I went and tossed a bigger chunk into my mouth. And as I chewed away at it, a whole different flavor than before filled my mouth.

“Huh? This is delicious.”

“Yeah. It sure is, isn’t it?” Toor Din chimed in, smiling even more than before.

What was going on here? The chewy texture was even better than the last bit, but more than that, the flavor was on a whole other level. The wonderful taste of giba fat was coming through really strong, now.

From the shape, had that been the large intestine? It was certainly delicious, at any rate.

“Yup, it’s real good. I’d feel confident recommending it to someone, even. So please, go ahead and give it a try if you’re interested, everyone.”

We didn’t exactly have enough to go around, so I was only able to hand a single set of tableware to each clan. The Fou women timidly took hold of the plate, while Toor Din scooped up some fresh innards and handed them to Jas Din with a smile.

As for me, I presented a plate to my clan head.

“Is this really tasty...?”

“It’s delicious. Ah, but it seems the taste varies a good bit depending on which part you get. But I think if you eat a couple bites, you’re sure to find something you like,” I replied, cooking up the heart and liver and whatnot as I did so.

The liver looked just like what I expected, but I could no longer recognize the kidneys at all. As for the heart, it was a bit thicker and almost reminded me of red meat.

As I grilled them all up, I spared a glance over at Ai Fa.

“Well? It’s not bad, right?”

“Yes, it isn’t bad at all... But when exactly should I swallow it?”

“I honestly can’t tell too well myself. If you give it a solid chew, though, that should probably be enough.”

As we had that exchange, the heart and liver finished cooking.

I had at least had stir-fried liver and garlic chives and chicken liver yakitori, but how would this be? Ai Fa was still chewing away, but she handed me back the plate, and I decided to start with trying the liver.

It was definitely good.

The flavor was a good bit richer than the poultry or pork livers I was familiar with, and I couldn’t sense even the slightest stench of blood. If those preparations could earn results this good, then they more than earned a

passing mark. So much so that I couldn't help but regret getting rid of them up till now.

The kidneys had a similar taste and texture to the liver. They didn't have as rich of a taste, but they had a less quirky flavor to them overall. I'd say they were a bit softer, too.

And as for the heart... it was pretty much just like eating normal meat. It looked like grilled red meat, and was even softer than thigh meat.

"Yup, it's tasty. It's easier to eat than fried offal, too. You should give it a try, Ai Fa."

"What is it? It's not meat, right?"

"This is the liver, these are the kidneys, and this is the heart. The liver's a bit on the quirky side, but it's probably packed with nutrition. And the heart's tasty and pretty much just like ordinary meat."

"A giba's heart, is it...?" Ai Fa muttered like she was thinking something, then she went ahead and started with the heart, sure enough. "It's good..."

"Right?"

"Yeah... And I can strongly sense the fact that I am taking in the giba's life," Ai Fa stated, looking incredibly satisfied.

Everybody else was wearing similar expressions, too.

And so, the test batch I had cooked up was quickly finished off by the six of us. And I would gladly take the uncooked leftovers to use for dinner tonight at the Fa house.

With that, our pre-dinner taste testing party came to a close.

"It was all very good... but the preparations take far too long, wouldn't you say? Leg and torso meat is just about as tasty, and they're much quicker to prepare," Jas Din stated after we wrapped up, acting as a representative for the group.

"That's true. I think it would be good for each house to decide if they want to eat them or not. Or it'd be possible to just eat the organs that take less prep work, like the heart and liver... Oh, and I don't think they'd last that long even in

pico leaves, but do you have any thoughts on that, Toor Din?”

“Yes. They may last a couple of days, but we generally ate them on the same day we prepared them.”

“I knew it. Still, I think we’ll probably end up eating everything here at the Fa house as long as time allows. Now that I know they’re tasty, I just wouldn’t feel right throwing them away. And besides... if it becomes possible to sell meat in the post town, then the prices on the meat itself will also go up.”

Jas Din and the others just tilted their heads, seeming like they didn’t understand.

“This giba wasn’t even that big, but I was able to create this much food. So with a large giba, it’d probably be easy to prepare at least one dinner with the innards, right? And if that means I can save one extra meal’s worth of meat, I could sell that in the post town instead. Still, I guess it may not really be necessary to think that much about profits.”

“Ah, I suppose that makes sense...”

“Also, this is a dish that hunters can only eat on the day that they capture a giba. So doesn’t it sort of feel like a blessing granted to them for their hard work? That may be why I feel a need to cook it properly instead of just throwing it away.” Those feelings surely varied from person to person, though. And I had no intention of forcing anyone to do the same as me. “Well, I guess it could also be good just doing it when there’s no extra work on your plate, too. Plus, the innards should provide different nutrition than meat, and a different sort of texture, too.”

“At the very least, I’d say the men would like the heart...” Ai Fa quietly chimed in. “That’s likely a food that fits well to the tastes of hunters. It gives you a satisfying feeling that you’re taking the giba’s life into yourself.”

“I see. You really have taught us quite a bit, Ai Fa and Asuta of the Fa clan,” Jas Din added.

Then, still wearing a gentle expression with a strict gaze, she placed her wrinkled hand atop Toor Din’s head.

“We should aim to eat the innards in the Din clan, too. Toor Din here seems

to love them, after all.”

Hearing that, Toor Din blushed a bit, but she also smiled.

“They’re all chewy and yummy, right?” I unnecessarily chimed in, only for the girl’s face to go even redder as she whacked me in the chest and went, “Geez!”

As my clan head watched over me with a chilly glare, the curtain of twilight fell over the forest’s edge.



Chapter 6: The Ruu Clan Festival of the Hunt

1

It was the 27th day of the blue month. In other words, the day that the festival banquet was set to be held at the Ruu settlement. And also, the end of my third contract to rent stalls in the post town.

After wrapping up business for the day, we returned the stalls to The Kimyuus's Tail like always, then I called out to the place's owner.

"Milano Mas, thank you once again for everything. Umm... Would it be alright to ask to keep borrowing stalls from you from tomorrow on?"

"Renting stalls is good business for me, too. I've got no reason to refuse," Milano Mas replied with his usual sour expression as he checked over the stalls to make sure there wasn't any damage. "But you're going to keep on doing business with The Great Southern Tree, right? So wouldn't renting from there cut down on all the running about you need to do?"

"Ah, that's no trouble at all. So as long as it's not a problem on your end, I'd like to keep counting on The Kimyuus's Tail," I replied, feeling a bit concerned. "But you don't really earn much profit from renting out the stalls and space, do you? And so, I can't help but worry that I've been doing nothing but trouble you... Are you really not getting put into a worse position by getting involved with us?"

"You sure do prattle on all the time, don't you? Like I've told you, if you were a hassle I would've long since tossed you out."

Having finished checking the stalls, Milano Mas turned my way with an even more annoyed look on his face than before.

It had been the same with Leito, but I really couldn't spy any serious changes in the man, even after all that stuff with the Suun clan. Though I got the feeling that his gaze was a bit less harsh and he was talking to us just a little more. But it'd be rude to go and say out loud just how happy that slight change made me feel.

Still, it's already been over ten days since all that commotion... I thought to myself, unable to keep from feeling surprised at the fact.

Since the meeting with the folks from the castle was postponed to the 30th of the blue month, these past ten days had been completely peaceful. Of course, the feelings the townsfolk had towards the people of the forest's edge still remained, and so we got no shortage of questioning, suspicious gazes. But at least on the surface, everything was peaceful.

The sales at the stalls had stabilized at around 140 meals, and my cooking for the inns sold out every day. However, we had no choice but to wait for the results of the meeting three days from now to determine whether or not these peaceful days would continue.

"More importantly, are you going to be doing business from tomorrow on again, without any days off? Normally folks put in at least one day off at the end of a contract. And it's not like you're especially hurting for money, right?" Milano Mas asked, crossing his hefty arms in front of his chest.

Naturally, we had no problems in terms of cash whatsoever. For my first 30 days of business, I had earned a total of 5484 red coins of pure profit.

5484 red coins... Converted to giba horns and tusks, that would be 457 of the beasts' worth.

On top of that, our Fa clan didn't even use a hundred red coins in a month in terms of daily expenses, and since purchasing the knife and iron tray and the like, as well as the necklace for Ai Fa, I hadn't bought any more expensive items. As for pricey ingredients like tau oil and cheese, they only cost around ten to twenty red coins at most, so they didn't put so much as a dent in our savings.

Ah, and tomorrow we would finally be receiving the wagon we had ordered, which was the greatest expense so far at 1200 red coins, but even subtracting all that out, we still had 3700 red coins left. So rather than having money trouble, I was actually at a loss as to how to spend all those coins.

However, there was still a reason I didn't want to take any days off.

"To be honest, I have regulars from the east and south who're leaving Genos at the end of the blue month. And so, I'd like to stay open for business till then."

“Folks from the east and south, huh...? Now that you mention it, you started making food for an inn that primarily serves easterners too, didn’t you?”

“Yes. It’s called The Sledgehammer, and the owner is a man named Nail.”

“Oh right, that oddball who acts like an easterner,” Milano Mas grumbled, but then he seemed to hold his tongue. A moment later, he put on a pretty serious expression.

I worried that there was some sort of strife between him and Nail, but it looked more like he was distracted by some sort of thought.

“Um, is something the matter...?” I called out, only for Milano Mas to snap back to his senses and shoot me a glare with a bit of anger behind it.

“It’s nothing! If you’re done here, then hurry up and leave. I’ve got my own work left to handle.”

“Sorry. Well, anyway, I look forward to keeping on working with you.”

I still couldn’t help but feel a bit concerned, somehow, but Milano Mas had disappeared into his storehouse, so I had no choice left but to withdraw.

Carrying the pots and ingredients, the four women (Vina, Sheera, and Lala Ruu, plus Li Sudra) and I headed back around to the front of the shop. However, before we hit the main road, we ran into Kamyua Yoshu.

“Hey there, good work today. And thanks for the delicious snack as always, Asuta.”

“No, thank you for the purchase. And it’s been a bit since we last saw each other, hasn’t it?”

The last time I had seen Kamyua Yoshu had been three days or so back, when we settled the matter with the totos. However, Leito had been stopping by each day to purchase a snack for the two of them.

As Kamyua Yoshu casually stood there, he shot us the same relaxed grin as always.

“If I could help it, I’d have loved to have your cooking while it was nice and hot. But I’ve been busy making all sorts of arrangements for that upcoming meeting. Melfried isn’t exactly in a position to just go leaving the castle as he

pleases, so I've ended up having to run all over."

Arrangements for the meeting...

The request to postpone hadn't come from Cyclaeus but rather from Melfried, so he was surely making moves in secret again.

"I'm sure that must be quite an undertaking. And I can only hope those 'arrangements' aren't part of some sort of plot to take down the people of the forest's edge," I threw out there, only for Kamyua Yoshu to spread both arms wide and look upset.

"Why would you think we'd do anything to hurt the people of the forest's edge?! Our goal is to expose Cyclaeus's old crimes."

"Sorry, it was just a joke. Lately when I'm talking to you, my teasing side always ends up showing itself. So sorry about that."

"Ah, well, if that's your true nature, then that may just be a welcome change from my point of view," Kamyua Yoshu replied, scratching his blond hair. "Well, whatever. More importantly, Asuta, I've got something I want to ask you... Is it the grilled dish or the soup on the menu at The Sledgehammer tonight?"

"Huh? It's the soup, but..."

Why in the world was he asking that?

"Ah, I see. Thanks a ton. In that case, I'll go with The Sledgehammer for today. If both of them always offered the same dishes I'd just alternate between it and The Great Southern Tree each day, but as things are it can get kinda tricky."

"What? You've been eating dinner at The Sledgehammer and The Great Southern Tree? But you're staying at The Kimyuus's Tail, aren't you?"

"Yup. But I can eat western cooking anywhere, not just Genos. So I can't help but want to eat as much of your giba meat dishes as I can while I'm staying here," Kamyua Yoshu answered, grinning once again. "I'd actually say there are more folks out there like me than you may think. The Sledgehammer and The Great Southern Tree are always packed at dinnertime. And there are always a good number of folks from the west, so many that I can't imagine everybody's staying there. Heck, yesterday I even saw a few easterners in The Great

Southern Tree.”

“I’m certainly grateful to hear that, but... I mean, you stay regularly at The Kimyuus’s Tail, don’t you? That’s not offending Milano Mas, is it?”

“Customers are free to eat dinner wherever they please. Milano Mas isn’t a petty enough man to get upset over something that slight. And besides... If you ask me, the quality of the food at The Kimyuus’s Tail isn’t all that great. I mean, Milano Mas lost his wife at a young age, after all. And so, his daughter didn’t really get much of a chance to learn how to cook. So even without your giba cooking and the like, I’d still end up heading to another inn anyway.”

“I really can’t beat you when it comes to badmouthing people, Kamyua Yoshu...” I didn’t quite know what to think of the fact that he could poke fun at Milano Mas’s family circumstances so lightly. Even more so because the Suun clan’s wrongdoings were one of the reasons behind the man’s wife passing so young. “So, what? Are you trying to suggest I should sell my cooking to The Kimyuus’s Tail too, or maybe even teach Milano Mas’s daughter how to cook?”

“I’m not particularly trying to suggest anything. However, I have thought before that if I could eat giba cooking at The Kimyuus’s Tail, it’d spare me the trouble of having to go to some other inn.”

“As long as what sort of relationship I’ve got with the folks from the castle remains unclear, I have no intention of going and thoughtlessly getting Milano Mas involved.”

“Oh? But you don’t mind involving the owners of The Sledgehammer and The Great Southern Tree?”

“They’re in different positions than Milano Mas. Unlike him, they don’t have anything to do with that incident from ten years ago,” I said while trying to cool my head from the boil I had been about to reach. “I’d like to repay my debt to Milano Mas, but the meeting in three days has to come first. Um... I can’t imagine this is the case, but you wouldn’t go putting him in danger in order to corner Cyclaeus, right?”

“Do I really look that cruel and heartless? I set my sights on Cyclaeus and the Suun clan in the first place because I knew about Milano Mas and Leito’s pasts, so I wouldn’t go and put the cart before the totos like that. Listen, this is just

between us, but... I've got three bodyguards staying here at The Kimyuus's Tail. Despite appearances, I've seriously been burning myself out to make sure no wicked plots from Cyclaeus come to fruition on the off chance that he's up to something."

"In that case, please say important stuff like that before you go cracking jokes. So... Milano Mas really is in at least some danger, then? Would it be better if I really did move my contract for the stalls over to The Great Southern Tree?"

"Ah, no, there's no way Cyclaeus has his eyes on Milano Mas now. It's true that he's tied to that incident from ten years back, but even the hunter's necklace his wife's brother was gripping was handed over to the guards as evidence back then. And heck, if his word as a witness held weight, then Melfried would've cast judgment on the Suun clan and Cyclaeus's crimes then and there."

"Then why are you asking bodyguards to keep an eye on him? If there's no danger, then that shouldn't be necessary, right?"

"That was just making absolutely certain. I wouldn't exactly be able to smile like this on the off chance something happened to Milano Mas, after all." His grin had an aloof feel to it, but his purple eyes looked hazy and hid away what he was feeling. "So you don't need to worry about anything, and can just go ahead and do what feels right to you. But I'd be real happy if I could eat giba meat here at The Kimyuus's Tail, y'know?"

"You're just saying that because it would be convenient for you. Plus, I can't imagine Milano Mas would let me give cooking lessons to begin with, anyway."

"I'm not so sure about that. But well, it's true that Milano Mas wouldn't exactly be the sort to go throwing the idea out there on his own."

Now that he said that, Milano Mas's sudden silence from earlier only bugged me more. I mean, he looked like he was holding back his feelings for some reason, didn't he?

I gave a small sigh, then stared straight back in Kamyua Yoshu's murky eyes.

"At any rate, everything will have to wait for the meeting three days from now. And I can't exactly go taking on more work till the blue month is over,

regardless.”

“Yup, got it. I’ll expend all my meager skills to hopefully guide things in a positive direction. Ah... but would you mind keeping that thing about the bodyguards a secret? If Milano Mas heard that, he’d say I was worrying too much or something, and may even go and kick them out,” Kamyua Yoshu said, and I was still unable to firmly make out what he was feeling as he smiled away.

◇

“Ugh, geez! You kept on blathering away so long that we’re totally running late!” Lala Ruu said in a huff as we walked down the path to the forest’s edge.

As I watched her red ponytail sway back and forth, I replied, “It’s not that different a time than usual, is it?”

“If there was nothing going on today, I wouldn’t care! But today’s the festival banquet! The men’ll probably all be gathered up and starting the contest of strength soon!”

“Oh, so they start the banquet when it’s still this bright out?”

“The banquet’ll be after the sun sets! If they didn’t finish the contest of strength before that, then we’d never start eating, right?! Geez, you don’t know anything!”

It was certainly true that I knew nothing of what was going on. Apparently festival banquets were only held by clans of a certain size, so I hadn’t been able to get any information out of Ai Fa.

Well, all I was asked to handle was making dinner for the winner of the contest of strength, so I hadn’t been too concerned. But why was Lala Ruu in such a rush to get back?

“The contest of strength at a festival of the hunt is a time for the men to shine. And that means it’s an important event for unmarried women too, to choose their husband...” Vina Ruu whispered into my ear as she carried a mountain of ingredients.

Still, that wasn’t enough to clear up my questions.

“But Lala Ruu is still only 13, so she can’t get married, right? So shouldn’t it

have nothing to do with her?”

“I don’t know about all that... Maybe she has her eyes on someone in particular...?”

I guess if she liked someone, she’d want to see his big moment.

With that, everything clicked into place. I really could be dense, sometimes.

“Um, just let me confirm... A chef like me isn’t going to get dragged into all that, right?”

“Hmm...? Well, you were invited to the banquet, so you could probably participate if you wanted to...”

“I don’t want to. I definitely, definitely don’t.”

I couldn’t see so much as a single nanogram of a chance of me winning against a man of the forest’s edge. No matter what the competition was, I could probably only put up a decent fight against Reina or Lala Ruu at most. Honestly, I didn’t think I could even manage to do much in a test of strength against Vina Ruu.

“More importantly, Asuta... Did you always get along that badly with that man...?”

“Hmm? By ‘that man,’ do you mean Kamyua? I wouldn’t say we get along especially poorly.”

“Really...? But you looked pretty angry back there...”

I had been trying to wear my poker face, but I was completely transparent, huh?

“Well, I’ll admit that I did get pretty annoyed. But I had decided that at times like that, rather than trying to hide my thoughts and feelings, I’d let Kamyua hear them head on. After all, it’d be pretty tricky to drag out what was really going on in that aloof guy’s head, otherwise.”

“Hmm... That sounds pretty troublesome, somehow...” Vina Ruu said with a shrug of her seductive shoulders, not looking especially interested.

After 40-50 more minutes of walking down the heavily sloping path, we made

it back to the forest's edge. The trail widened a bit as we headed north, and soon enough the Ruu settlement came into view. Before heading inside we said farewell to Li Sudra and took the ingredients she was carrying off of her, then we stepped foot into the unusually crowded plaza.

And as we did so, I felt completely overwhelmed.

There were far more people than I had expected packed into the settlement. There must have been more than half of the hundred folks who fell under them gathered here.

The majority of them looked to be young. The ratio of men to women seemed pretty even too, but I wasn't seeing many older folks or children. At any rate, they formed a crowd in the plaza and were cheering... and in the center, there was an impossibly large man having a fierce battle with Ai Fa.

"W-What are you doing there, Ai Fa?!" I yelled, but it was drowned out by the crowd. Those young folks under the Ruu were all shouting away, excited by the fight.

Both Ai Fa and her opponent were barehanded. Neither had any blades at their hips, nor were they wearing fur cloaks. However, that just made it all the more clear to me how desperate of a pinch Ai Fa found herself in.

The man she was facing was an absolute giant, every bit as tall as Mida. He had to be nearly two meters tall, and I couldn't imagine he weighed less than a hundred kilos. Plus he was long-limbed, barrel-chested, and plenty muscular. And right now, those long arms of that frighteningly huge man were reaching out to grab Ai Fa.

Of course, thanks to Ai Fa's excellent physical abilities, he wasn't finding it too easy to get ahold of her. However, she was just dodging left and right, and it didn't seem like there was any chance for her to launch a counterattack. Even for Ai Fa, taking on such a massive foe barehanded just felt utterly reckless.

"What's going on here?! Why isn't anyone trying to stop this craziness?!"

"Huh...? It would be bad to interrupt a contest of strength between hunters, though..." Vina Ruu replied, shooting me a confused look.

"Contest of strength? That's what this is? It's just a plain old fight, isn't it?!

And why should Ai Fa have to participate in something like that, anyway?!”

“I have no way of knowing that... But at any rate, there’s a strong taboo against wounding your opponent, so there’s no need to worry...”

Wounding your opponent was a taboo?

Even so, that grizzly of a man was frantically chasing Ai Fa around while swinging his arms about. And those thick limbs looked like they could easily snap bones if they hit.

“I can’t watch this! Please, someone put a stop to it!”

“Ah, you mustn’t...” Vina Ruu protested, only for a louder cheer to resound throughout the forest.

I looked that way in a panic, and almost dropped the tray I was holding from shock. Ai Fa had leapt backwards, but her foot must have hit a divot in the ground or something, as she seriously staggered.

Naturally, the mountain of a man took that opportunity to press forwards and close in on my clan head.

It was clearly over.

As I screamed out in despair, I could practically see Ai Fa’s slender body being sent flying as if she had been hit by a dump truck.

However... As Ai Fa’s posture collapsed, rather than trying to force herself up, she half let herself fall while swinging her right leg high in the air. The tips of her toes hit the man’s shoulder as he rushed forwards, then Ai Fa leapt even further back, borrowing the charging man’s momentum as she did so. On top of that, she bent backwards in the air and let her right hand hit the ground for just an instant, resulting in her landing a splendid backward handspring.

With that, the cheering grew even more intense.

In turn, the monster of a man let out an angry roar and charged at Ai Fa again, head first.

The six or seven meters Ai Fa had earned seemed like they were about to be closed in an instant. And this time, the man would surely manage to grab her.

And yet, just before his fingers grabbed hold of her arm, Ai Fa suddenly disappeared.

She had dropped down. And as she did, she stretched her right leg straight out, then swiped it backwards. It was a low sweep, performed like she was in a kung fu action movie.

Ai Fa's right heel caught the man's right ankle from diagonally behind him, and he went tumbling.

With that, my clan head swiftly rose to her feet, while the man sat up in a fluster.

At the same time, a piercing cry of, "Stop!" cut through the excitement in the air. "The winner is Ai Fa of the Fa clan. Ji Maam of the Maam clan must withdraw," the solemn voice stated, and applause and cheers filled the air.

As for the large man, he gave a frustrated yell and pounded his fists into the ground.

"That's amazing! She beat Ji Maam! He's strong enough that he can even put up a good fight against Darmu!" Lala Ruu excitedly exclaimed.

I almost collapsed to the ground while clinging to my iron tray, but I somehow managed to brace myself.

And then, Ai Fa came over our way, being showered with thunderous applause as she went.

"So you're finally back, huh? You're late, Asuta."

"I-I am not! And what in the world have you been up to, anyway?!"

"What are you making such a fuss about? I was just taking part in the contest of strength, as a hunter." Despite that intense battle she had just participated in, I couldn't spy so much as a single bead of sweat on Ai Fa. "I hadn't ever heard of festival banquets before, but I've enjoyed the contests of strength held between hunters since I was young. And that man was nothing compared to my father Gil."

"But still...! That's no reason to go and do something that dangerous just because, right? We're just guests here!"

“I didn’t do it ‘just because.’ It’s because I was challenged,” Ai Fa replied in a displeased tone and started shifting into a pout. But then she noticed everyone else watching, and instead maintained a serious expression.

“Still, it was a real shock seeing you take down Ji Maam. You really are a strong hunter, Ai Fa,” chimed in Sheera Ruu, as if trying to smooth things over. “Asuta, it may be called a contest of strength between hunters, but they are absolutely forbidden from harming their opponents. Instead, they employ their barehanded techniques, and whoever makes the other side’s torso touch the ground first wins. I also have trouble watching the men act so fierce, but you have to understand, it most certainly isn’t dangerous.”

Sheera Ruu’s relaxed voice seemed like it had a sort of calming effect. And so, I scratched my head, feeling a bit bad about letting myself get carried away and critique Ai Fa.

“Er, sorry for suddenly shouting like that... Still, you’re supposed to help me out soon, aren’t you? Or do you want to keep on participating in the competition?”

“I already explained that I wasn’t competing because I wanted to, didn’t I? That Ji Maam man said that a woman couldn’t serve as a hunter, and then he challenged me. I couldn’t back down from such a slight, and so I simply displayed my strength,” Ai Fa replied with a shrug of her shoulders. “I’ll help you with manning the stove today, just as I promised. I hung the giba I brought from the house over there.”

“Huh? You caught another giba today? That’s two days in a row, isn’t it?”

“Whenever the chance presents itself, I’ll catch a giba. It’s not as if I’m using sacrificial hunting, you know,” Ai Fa stated, beating me to the punch.

It seemed she had completely recovered from her wounds, and was in perfect form in terms of mind and body. She just looked so darn dependable that I couldn’t help but give a sigh.

“Got it, thanks. In that case, let’s hurry up and start preparing.”

“Right,” Ai Fa nodded with a serious look, and then she drew her face close to mine. She made the move look casual, but I noticed that only I could see her

expression now. “You truly are a worrier, Asuta. It would take a more skilled man than that to get the better of me.”

“That may be so, but still...”

“Stop right there. I have no intention of scolding you for worrying about me. It’s just that it was my first contest of strength in some time, so I couldn’t help but feel interested. Thanks to that, I felt even less like refusing. My apologies...” Ai Fa stated, then she shot me a grin from so close I could feel her breath.

Seeing that smile, I lost the will to put up a fight, and simply gave another sigh instead.

2

The kitchen allocated to us for the day was the one in Shin Ruu’s house.

Of course, I was only tasked with making the meat dish for the winner of the competition, so that was no trouble at all. As for the other kitchens, they should have been moving ahead with the dinner preparations under Mia Lea Ruu’s command.

Between the men participating in the competition and the women watching while preparing the banquet, there were apparently around 70 people gathered here. Honestly, this festival of the hunt celebration was large enough in scale that I couldn’t help but feel like they should’ve just gone all the way and gathered the whole hundred or so folks under the Ruu.

As the sun hung high in the sky, things were getting seriously heated up at the Ruu settlement. Even after Ai Fa and Ji Maam’s match ended, the hunters kept on competing in the center of the plaza. And so, I couldn’t help but glance at the crowd over that way out of the corner of my eye as we headed for Shin Ruu’s house.

“Ah, Shin Ruu! What are you doing here?” Lala Ruu questioned. Shin Ruu was seated there in front of the house we were coming up on, and Mida was there next to him, panting heavily. As for Shin Ruu, he looked up at Lala Ruu a bit listlessly.

“Nothing in particular. This is my house, so what’s so strange about me being here?”

“That’s not what I meant! Did you lose already...?”

“Yeah. It looks like I still can’t beat Ludo Ruu after all.”

“You dummy! Why do you two always, always have to be the ones to fight each other? Despite how he looks, Ludo’s seen as a full-fledged hunter even in our house! If you chose someone other than him, you could get an easy win, right?”

Was the competition a knockout tournament? I couldn’t help but feel a little concerned that that would mean Ai Fa would be obligated to participate in a second match.

But still, Lala and Shin Ruu came first.

“But if I were to challenge someone else before beating Ludo Ruu, it just wouldn’t feel meaningful to me...”

“If that’s the case, then that’s fine. But don’t go getting so down, alright?”

“I’m not down.”

“Yes you are! In a contest of strength between hunters, even if a victory is something to be proud of, a loss is nothing to feel ashamed about. So hold your head up high and enjoy the banquet!” Lala Ruu argued at Shin Ruu, and then she glanced over at Mida. “So, what about you? From looking at you, I’m guessing you participated too, right?”

“Yeah... I gave it my all...” Then, Mida’s eyes turned my way as he breathed heavily, coated in sweat. “Asuta... If I win all the matches, I’ll get to eat your cooking, right...?”

“Yup, that’s the plan.”

“So I’m fighting real hard... If I beat four more people, I can eat the food you’re making...”

“Huh? You already won two matches? That’s amazing!” Lala Ruu exclaimed, sounding more astounded than impressed.

I didn't really know, so I asked, and apparently in this contest of strength, whoever won three preliminary and three finals matches was declared the winner. The preliminaries were held in a rough round robin style, and the first eight to win three matches got to move on to the finals. In other words, it was a survival tournament in which two losses disqualified you while three wins let you advance. Then, in the finals it shifted to single elimination, with the one to win all three of their matches emerging as the victor. It seemed like a pretty rough set-up for handling the preliminaries, but it was ultimately a means to whittle things down from the 30-40 participating to a more manageable number.

By the way, it seemed that Donda Ruu and Dan Rutim had both already earned their three wins. Fittingly for people of the forest's edge, they had received a great number of challenges off the bat thanks to their overwhelming strength.

Jiza and Ludo Ruu, as well as Gazraan Rutim had already taken down two, and so Lala Ruu had been so surprised since that put Mida on the same level as them.

"Still, in the end you'll need to either beat my dad or Dan Rutim. That'll be pretty tricky, but well, give it your all, I guess."

"Yeah, I will..." Mida replied, his fatty cheeks trembling.

Lala Ruu gave him a nod, and then turned back towards Shin Ruu.

"So, did you give up already? If you beat three more now, you can still make it into the top eight, right?"

"I haven't given up. I'm just building up my strength for now." I couldn't tell if that was true or not, but Shin Ruu then decisively rose to his feet. "Everybody else should have their second win by now. I better get going so that I don't fall too far behind."

"Yup! Good luck!" Lala Ruu responded with a satisfied smile.

However, after Shin Ruu departed, she cast her gaze downward pensively. Figuring I needed to make up for my denseness earlier, I nonchalantly called out, "Well then, how about we go watch Shin Ruu shine, too? We should still

have time to spare."

"Huh?" Lala Ruu questioned, her eyes opening wide with shock. "Is it alright to be taking things that lightly? You've still got to prepare for tomorrow too, right?"

"But you all are helping me out too, aren't you? So it'll be easy."

"You're taking things way too lightly! If you present some weird dish to him, my dad'll probably send you flying, you know," Lala Ruu stated, but despite her words I could see the joy shining in her eyes.

And so, we placed down our luggage and approached the crowd, only to be blocked by a tall figure. It was Darmu Ruu, second son of the main Ruu house. A man about half a head taller than me who reminded me of a wild wolf.

"Ah, Darmu! When did you get back?! Ah, and thanks for the flower from before, too!" Lala Ruu loudly exclaimed, while Vina Ruu silently smiled and nodded his way.

"The Jeen clan are going to be keeping an eye on the Suun settlement from here on out, so I was finally able to come back home," Darmu Ruu replied, and then his sharp gaze turned my way... or more precisely, towards Ai Fa, who was standing beside me. "Clan head of the Fa, Ai Fa... Allow me to challenge you in the contest of strength, as a hunter."

"Hmm? My apologies, but I have to help with manning the stove. And besides, as I don't fall under the Ruu, this is no place for me to be showing off."

"Are you running from my challenge? Manning the stove is more important to you than proving your strength as a hunter? Then you should stop calling yourself one, and devote yourself solely to cooking instead," Darmu Ruu quietly spat out, stepping closer and bringing his face, with a deep scar down the right cheek, in close to Ai Fa's ear. "I swear that if you beat me, I'll acknowledge your strength as a hunter and never make light of you again. However, if I win, you'll join the Ruu clan."

He was speaking so quietly that I was probably the only other one able to hear it, since I was standing right beside Ai Fa.

As Darmu Ruu glared at her from up close and personal, Ai Fa replied in just as

low of a voice, “In that case, what would happen to Asuta?”

“If you want, then I’ll smooth things over with my old man to get that chef accepted into the Ruu, too. You shouldn’t have any complaints about that, right?” As Vina Ruu looked a bit troubled and Lala Ruu was just plain confused, Darmu Ruu stepped back away from Ai Fa. “If you truly have any pride as a hunter, then you’ll accept my challenge. And if you don’t, then I’ll never acknowledge you as one.”

With that, Darmu Ruu walked off towards the center of the plaza.

After giving a small sigh, Ai Fa went to follow after him, and I reached out and grabbed her arm without thinking.

“Hey, you can’t possibly be thinking of accepting that one-sided challenge, right?”

“Now that my pride as a hunter has been questioned, I can’t back down. And that second son must have worked up a fair bit of resolve to make such a statement, too...”

“But still...!”

“The Ruu are also currently one of the leading clans of the forest’s edge. If I don’t form proper bonds with them, I could invite disaster once again for those close to me. And so, I see this as an opportunity to right things between me and that man.” Ai Fa’s gaze remained calm, but I could see some serious determination shining deep in her eyes. “I can’t say we have a very good relationship with the clan head, eldest son, and second son of the main Ruu house. However, Donda Ruu seems to have softened quite a bit because of your efforts, Asuta. That’s why I would like to do what I can to improve things with the second son as well,” Ai Fa said with a gentle yet reassuring grin.

And maybe she did it unconsciously, but she also gripped the blue stone hanging around her neck.

“As long as the conditions are fair, that second son won’t get the better of me. So just stay there and watch, Asuta.”

With that, Ai Fa also left us.

“Hey, you’re all back?” Ludo Ruu asked as he nonchalantly wandered over our way. “Was that Darmu and Ai Fa with you? Are they gonna have a go at it?”

“Seems like it. I can’t imagine Ai Fa managing to beat Darmu, though,” Lala Ruu replied.

“Hmm...” Ludo Ruu muttered while ruffling his yellowish-brown hair. “Guess I should go look for someone else to fight, then. If I just leave those two be they’re bound to advance, anyway.”

“Ludo Ruu! If Ai Fa and Darmu Ruu fight, then which one will win?” I asked, unable to hold back the unease swirling about inside of me.

However, Ludo Ruu just replied, “I’ve got no clue,” with a shrug of his shoulders. “In a contest of strength, any little thing can lead to a weaker opponent beating a stronger one. Well, unless there’s a huge gap between them.”

“So which one’s stronger? Ai Fa or Darmu Ruu...?”

My rather blunt question was met with the youth sticking out his tongue.

“As if I’d tell you that. Ooh, is Shin Ruu up?”

Just as Ludo Ruu had said, Shin Ruu had advanced to the center of the plaza alongside a youth I wasn’t familiar with.

Meanwhile, Ai Fa and Darmu Ruu were standing behind the tall old man who seemed to be acting as judge, the Rutim elder Ra Rutim. They must have been up next.

“Umm, is that the youngest son of the Min? Shin Ruu may be able to beat him, then. Huh...? What’s the matter, Sheera Ruu? It’s Shin Ruu’s time to shine.”

Those words hit me hard, and I turned to face Sheera Ruu.

The girl looked like she hadn’t even noticed Ludo Ruu calling out to her, as she stood there fixated on the center of the plaza. However, her lightly teary eyes may have been staring at the pair in the back rather than at her younger brother.

In the meantime, Shin Ruu showed some splendid close combat skills and

defeated that youngest Min son. And as heated gazes and cheers fell over them, Ai Fa and Darmu Ruu moved into the center of the plaza in their place.

“On the right, Darmu Ruu of the Ruu clan. On the left, Ai Fa of the Fa clan. Display for us your pride as hunters,” Ra Rutim declared, his voice coming through clearly despite the commotion.

Ai Fa and Darmu Ruu stood about five meters apart as they faced one another.

Their difference in terms of height was around half a head. However, he probably had over 10 kilos of weight on her. Darmu Ruu had a pretty slender physique compared to the surrounding men in their prime, but Ai Fa was even thinner than that.

Could my clan head really beat him?

Since the loser was determined by whoever’s torso touched the ground first, the match wouldn’t be decided by physique and strength alone, though. I could at least understand that much. Still, in that case, it felt like a large man like Ji Maam would be a lot easier for her to handle.

For an extreme example, I felt like Ai Fa could definitely win a match against Mida. Even Vina Ruu had managed to trip him up with a grigee pole, after all.

But what about when she was up against an opponent like Darmu Ruu? There was an obvious gap between them because of their genders, but they both seemed to have the same body type. They each had a physique taut as a leather whip, yet honed like steel, as well as long limbs and an equal amount of agility and strength. On paper, Ludo or Shin Ruu may have been closer to Ai Fa, but overall Darmu Ruu gave off a very similar impression.

And though they were extremely similar types, Darmu Ruu was still a size larger. He would be a seriously troublesome opponent, right? For example, it was like boxers fighting with a 10 kilo deficit on one side.

If we were talking a boxer versus a sumo wrestler, I feel like the former could find an effective way to fight despite the disadvantage in terms of physique. The same was true for a boxer versus a pro wrestler or a karate master. What would decide things then would likely be down less to their different builds and more

to the rules of the contest.

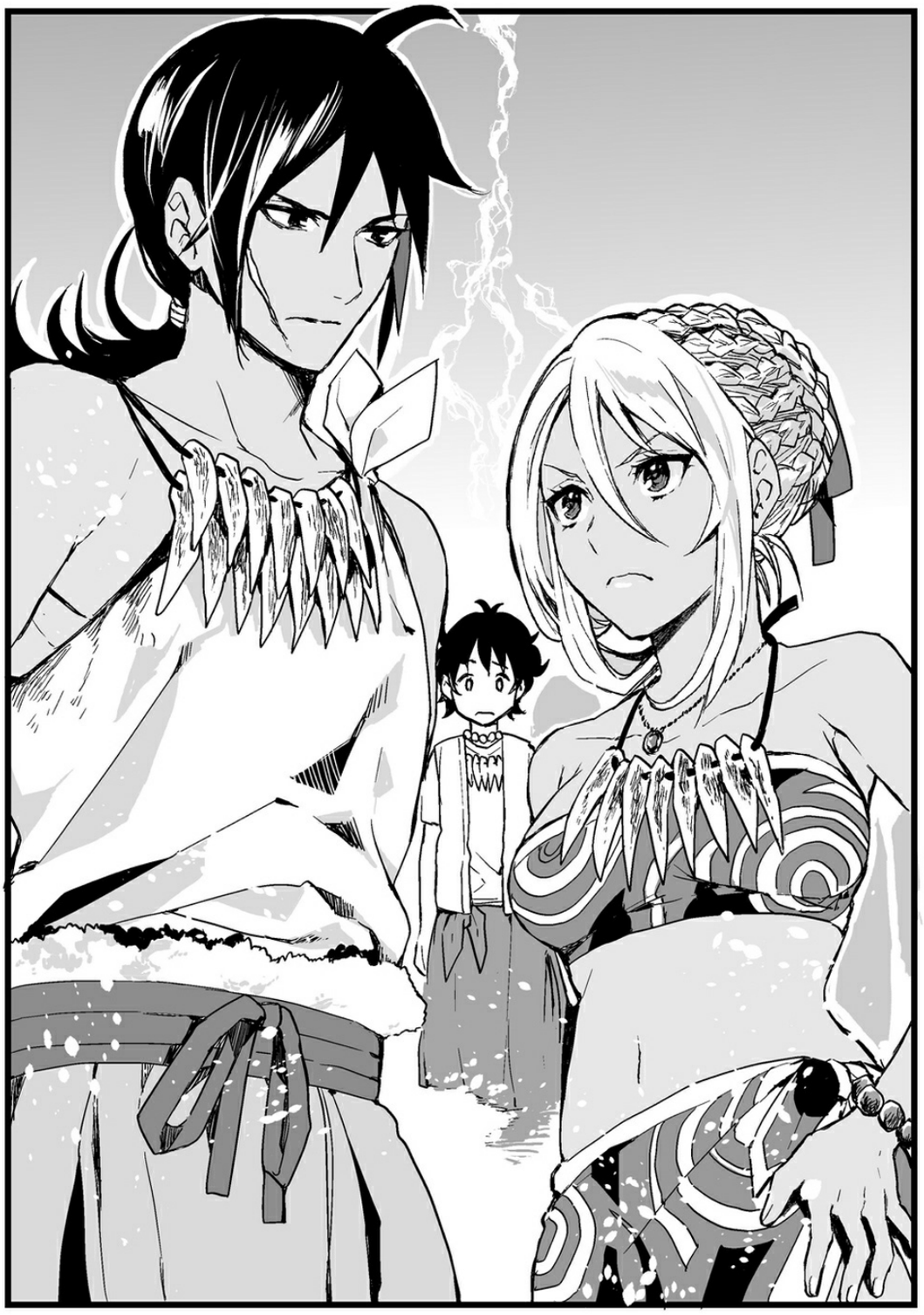
There were no real advantages or disadvantages from the rules here, though. They probably worked against Mida, but I certainly didn't think the same applied to Darmu Ruu.

Just how exactly can Ai Fa grab ahold of victory here...? I worried, just as Ra Rutim gave the starting signal.

"Begin!"

Darmu Ruu lowered his stance, and Ai Fa did the same.

Even watching from 10 meters away, I could clearly sense the animalistic glares in their eyes. It was like a wolf and a wildcat were squaring off, staring one another down.



Darmu Ruu started by reaching out with his right arm, almost like a casual gesture. In turn, Ai Fa made a prompt leap to the outside to dodge it. However, before she could close the distance, Darmu Ruu swiftly moved her way.

There really didn't seem to be all that great of a difference in how agile they were.

If it really were a battle between a wolf and a wildcat, it'd come down to who could land a crippling blow on the eyes or throat or whatever first, but such attacks were off-limits in this match.

Darmu Ruu carefully thrust out his legs and arms over and over again, and Ai Fa somehow managed to dodge each time. As time kept stretching on, it was looking more and more like a one-sided battle.

It was then that I noticed all of the surrounding crowd had gone silent. It was like the tension between the two fighters had infected them, too.

And then, things finally shifted.

Ai Fa had been doing nothing but defend up till now, but suddenly she boldly leapt forward, slipping past Darmu Ruu's guard. Her head was down low, like she was trying to headbutt him in the stomach or something. However, Darmu Ruu nimbly twisted and dropped his right elbow down towards Ai Fa's neck.

As if she had eyes on the back of her head, Ai Fa saw the attack coming and dropped down even lower to dodge it. Then, she slipped past his right side and reached out towards his back. And sure enough, she managed to grab ahold of his clothing.

"Wha?!" the youth angrily proclaimed, swiping his right elbow back towards Ai Fa. However, she moved just as much as he did, remaining right behind him so that the attack completely whiffed.

With that, Ai Fa grabbed hold of Darmu Ruu's clothing with her other hand, too. She was right up on his shoulders, so much so that it was sort of reminding me of a conga line.

"You coward! Fight me face to face, fair and square!" Darmu Ruu wailed, swinging at Ai Fa with his elbows and heels. However, thanks to their positions,

none of his blows landed.

“Attacking an opponent where their guard is down is a perfectly valid fighting technique,” Ai Fa replied, spinning her back to face his but still holding onto his clothing. And as she did so, she kicked out Darmu Ruu’s left heel with her right. With that, Ai Fa bent down, and with his posture already crumbling from her kick, Darmu Ruu’s legs both lifted into the air. His body did a single backwards flip before crashing headfirst into the ground.

It was a mysterious, frightening technique, a backwards shoulder throw or something. If this were judo, it’d probably be judged as one heck of a foul.

However, it was a contest of strength rather than judo, and so Ra Rutim declared, “Stop! The winner is Ai Fa of the Fa clan! Darmu Ruu of the Ruu clan must withdraw.”

It looked like Darmu Ruu managed to guard his head with his arms at the last second, at least. Still, I couldn’t help but wonder if he had a concussion in spite of that. After all, he was laying on the ground holding his head and groaning.

A wave of cheers exploded forth like a dam had burst, and Ai Fa stood there silently for a moment before worriedly leaning over Darmu Ruu.

With that, Darmu Ruu’s right arm shot up like a snake and grabbed hold of Ai Fa’s shoulder. I had been in the middle of breathing a sigh of relief, but with that, I froze in place.

However, Darmu Ruu didn’t make any further moves. He just lay there on the ground, holding onto Ai Fa’s shoulder and glaring up at her face.

“Ooh, she sure got you there! Can you breathe alright, Darmu Ruu?” a loud, cheery voice called out as Dan Rutim stomped on over. It was my first time seeing him in quite a while.

After the clan head meeting Gazraan Rutim had become Donda Ruu’s right-hand man and was sent running all over, while Dan Rutim was apparently tasked with protecting his own clan instead. So for me and Ai Fa, it had been around half a month since we last saw him.

Of course, he didn’t seem to have changed at all in that half month, still wearing a carefree grin on his genie-like face.

“To think there was someone around other than me and Donda Ruu who could send Darmu Ruu flying like that! Man, that was an exciting match! Hey Ai Fa, hurry up and win another one so you can face off against me, alright?” Dan Rutim stated while he slipped his arm under Darmu Ruu’s left armpit and lightly lifted him to his feet. As he leaned heavily on the rotund man’s frame, the youth finally let go of Ai Fa’s shoulder.

“Ah, no, I don’t want to interfere in your banquet any further. And I have to help out with manning the stove, too, so I was planning on withdrawing at this point,” Ai Fa replied while standing up straight.

“That’s no good!” Dan Rutim replied loudly with a big grin. “Darmu Ruu’s strong enough to be considered one of the five best hunters among all the men under the Ruu. And you beat him that flawlessly, so it’d ruin the festivities to not show everyone just how strong you really are!”

“No, but...”

“This is a festival of the hunt, isn’t it? An event for hunters to show off and celebrate the strength that lets them take down giba out in the forest! Chefs have their work, and we hunters have our own job, too! And you’re a splendid hunter, so that’s what you should be doing!”

With that, Dan Rutim left while supporting Darmu Ruu, without Ai Fa offering any further objections. And with thundering praise raining down on her again all the while, my clan head once again triumphantly returned to us.

“Good work out there. At any rate, I feel seriously relieved.”

Ai Fa just sighed rather than giving any sort of response.

And then, a small figure came popping into view, clinging onto her back from behind.

“Ai Fa, that was amazing! You didn’t just beat Ji Maam, but even Darmu! You’re so awesome!”

“You’re heavy... Let go of me, Rimee Ruu.”

“Don’t wanna!” the girl retorted with a satisfied grin, rubbing her cheek up against Ai Fa’s.

It was then that I remembered my concern from earlier and turned to face Sheera Ruu. Her eyes were firmly shut, and she was gripping her hands tightly in front of her chest, as if she was desperately praying away.

3

"Well then, I'd like to get started cooking," I said after we returned once more to the kitchen at Shin Ruu's house.

Along with me were Vina, Sheera, and Lala Ruu, my usual stall group.

In the end, Shin Ruu lost to Ji Maam and had to retire with a record of one win and two losses. And so after that, we came back here to work on dinner.

I was still worried about Ai Fa as she got gradually dragged into continuing further and further in the contest of strength, but she had at least safely won her match with Darmu Ruu, so I just had to keep praying that there weren't any unfortunate accidents for the rest of the event.

"We'll start with the preparations for the heart. After all, freshness is key here."

The innards from the giba Ai Fa had caught today were gathered in a pot by my feet. Since she was preoccupied, I actually ended up removing them all personally for the first time in a while.

It was decided that since Ai Fa had managed to catch it and bloodlet it properly, we would offer them as a side dish.

And so, we carried them along with us and headed for the river flowing in the rear of the settlement. The area used by the main house for washing was located further downstream. Apparently, the river ran along the east side of the Ruu settlement. Actually, now that I thought about it, they probably built the settlement where they did precisely because there was such a fine river right there. After all, the Ruu were a leading clan even 80 years ago, when the people of the forest's edge moved here.

At any rate, once we reached the washing area, I taught the Ruu women the washing techniques I had only learned myself just yesterday. Fortunately, they

were quick learners, so we got the bloody entrails nice and clean in no time at all.

“Please remember the color of these innards carefully. When a giba is ill they’ll be a more sickly shade, and you could get terrible food poisoning by eating them. So if you’re concerned at all about what you see, it would be wise to discard them in the forest instead.”

“Hmm, sounds like a real hassle in a number of ways... Are giba entrails really tasty enough to be worth all the extra trouble...?”

“I think that’ll vary from person to person. In fact, there may be a big split between people who like and hate eating them.”

After that we returned to the house and found Shin and Ryada Ruu waiting in front of the kitchen.

“Asuta, if you still need to skin the pelt, then we’ll help with that.”

“Huh? But what about the contest of strength?”

“Now that the final eight have been decided, they’re taking a short break over there, too. And I’m not a hunter anyway, so that had nothing to do with me to begin with,” Ryada Ruu replied.

With their long blackish-brown hair, eyes like someone from Sym, and calm, composed expressions, this father and son pair really were a lot alike. I could certainly imagine Shin Ruu ending up looking every bit as somber as his father when he grew older.

“Thank you, Ryada Ruu. Ah, Shin Ruu... Did Ai Fa manage to make it to the finals after all?”

“Yeah. One of the Lea men challenged her, and she defeated him. When added to the fact that she already beat Darmu Ruu and Ji Maam, she has certainly brought no shame to her title as a hunter. Ah, right... She asked me to tell you she was sorry for not helping out with manning the stove during this break. It seemed that Rimee Ruu was forcefully dragging her to Jiba Ruu’s bedroom instead.”

Was that why Shin Ruu had chosen to tactfully go ahead and accompany

Ryada Ruu? I really was indebted to their whole family, Sheera Ruu included.

“Hey, so who else is moving on? There’s dad, Dan Rutim, and Ai Fa... And I’m sure Jiza and Gazraan Rutim must still be in it too, right?” Lala Ruu asked, and Shin Ruu nodded.

“The remaining three are Ludo Ruu, Rau Lea, and Mida.”

“Wow! Mida really did manage to keep on winning, huh?! That seems sort of cheeky of him, somehow! Wait... Ji Maam got knocked out?”

“Yes. Mida was the one to ultimately take him down.”

With that, Lala Ruu spread her arms out wide and reiterated, “He really is cheeky!”

Then, Sheera Ruu timidly stepped forwards. She had looked rather listless for a while now, too.

“So, um... Is Darmu Ruu alright?”

“I didn’t see him, but he should be. If he wasn’t, then Ai Fa would have been disqualified for injuring him, and someone else would have been chosen for the final eight. However... even though he only lost once, he apparently returned home rather than challenging anyone else.”

“I see...” Sheera Ruu muttered, then gave a sad sigh.

After watching over that, Shin Ruu’s gaze turned back my way.

“Well then, let’s get to work. The giba is in the shed, isn’t it?”

“Ah, hold on! There’s something else that needs to be done before skinning it.” With that, I returned the pot stuffed with organs to the kitchen, grabbed what I needed, and then followed Shin Ruu to the dissection shed. “Just a moment, please.”

In the middle of the room hung a giba a size bigger than the one from yesterday, looking to be somewhere in the 60-kilo range. I lowered down the beast, its torso already cut open and innards removed, and smeared the right rear leg with lard I had brought along from the Fa house.

“What exactly are you doing there, Asuta?”

“Ah, maybe it’s a bit wasteful, but I wanted to try burning the fur off of just this one rear leg.”

As I saw the father and son pair shooting me questioning looks out of the corner of my eye, I lit a single piece of firewood with lana leaves. When I brought that up close to the leg, the lard I coated it in and the black fur started smoldering. And man, did the bloody smell from the stomach and the stink from the burning fur ever make for one heck of an awful stench.

Of course, if I overdid it then I would burn the skin too, so when it looked about right I dashed water over it and called it done.

“Well then, would it be alright if I cut off just this one leg before you skin the pelt? I was thinking I’d try cooking with it for tonight.”

Though there were undoubtedly question marks swirling around their heads by now, neither Shin nor Ryada Ruu asked why. They were taciturn enough by nature that neither of them were going to say anything about my chef work, for better or worse.

“Is it any issue if we just skin the pelt like always from here on out?”

“No, and thank you. I’ve still got all my prep work for the stalls left, so you’re seriously helping me out here.”

After saying my thanks to the silent father and son pair, I triumphantly returned to the kitchen with my spoils of war in hand.

“Whoa, what’s that?” Lala Ruu asked right away, speaking as a representative for the not-at-all taciturn women.

“As you can see, it’s a giba leg. I burned just the fur off of it, so that should make it easy to handle later.”

However, the prep work for the innards had to be taken care of first. That meant burying the heart, liver, and kidneys in pico leaves, and dicing up the rest, then soaking them in a marinade made with myamuu, fruit wine, and tau oil. The plan with the former for tonight was to use just salt and pico leaves in place of pepper.

“So, with this leg, first up is getting rid of the rest of the hair that the fire

didn’t take care of.”

It was already roughly cleaned off, but to get it the rest of the way, I let it soak for a bit in a water-filled pot, then went at it with a scrubbing brush made with hardened giba fur. It felt a little ridiculous, somehow, cleaning away giba fur with something made from the same stuff.

At any rate, once I was done with all that, the skin of the hind leg was now clearly exposed. It was a pale pink color, reminding me a lot of human skin, or maybe that of a pig.

This was an alternate technique for dealing with a pelt once taught to me in my previous life before coming to the forest’s edge, by a hunter in that camp I once attended. I had already tried it out once back at the Fa house, but Ai Fa hadn’t seemed too pleased with it, as it left you without a pelt to sell.

It was an open secret by now that she had been distributing the pelts from the giba she caught to smaller clans, but officially she just discarded them. And so she wasn’t able to complain about it, which made me feel bad for her and led to me only trying it out once.

“So, why go through all the trouble of doing that rather than just skinning the pelt...? And the pelt can be sold for plenty of coins when you do it the normal way, too, right?”

“Well, the only answer I’ve got to that is ‘because it’s tasty.’ And I figured this sort of extravagance would be allowed during a banquet. Or was I wrong on that point?”

“I don’t know... I guess it’s fine. And besides, Ai Fa was the one to take that giba down to start with, wasn’t she? In that case, the Fa clan is free to do with it as they please.”

I had thought similarly and chose that method as a result, but it was reassuring to hear that agreement, there. After all, the people of the forest’s edge liked to keep things plain and simple to begin with, so I had been rather concerned as to just how extravagant it was alright for me to get.

This time around, I effectively only had a single day to spare between being asked and having to do the job. And so, I had seriously racked my brains to

figure out a tasty combination from the trial and error I had done at the Fa house that would also feel fresh enough for the banquet.

“So, what’re we doing with this leg? The contest of strength will probably wrap up just before the sun sets.”

“It’ll take some time for the seasoning to seep in, so that should be just fine... Sheera Ruu, I could teach you the cooking technique if you’d like. It’s a little different than usual,” I threw out there, as she had seemed like her mind was somewhere else at the moment, which was quite unusual for her.

“Huh? Ah, I’m sorry... We’re working right now, so I shouldn’t let my mind wander like that,” Sheera Ruu replied, then gave her own cheeks a slap. “I’m paying attention, now. But... I don’t think my house will be cooking giba with pelts still on like this.”

“I only left the skin on because I wanted to make things feel a bit more luxurious for the banquet. And if Ai Fa hadn’t gone and caught that giba, I was planning to just cook this dish using regular thigh meat. So, let’s start with the prep work.”

First off was cutting the meat off the bone in blocks as big as could be managed. Considering it was just the one leg, we would probably only get around four kilos. And so, the plan was to set aside one kilo for the champion in the contest of strength, while the other three would be used when needed in other dishes.

Once the meat was cut off we washed it nice and clean and then carefully beat it with wooden sticks. Then when we finished that step, I ground plenty of salt and pico leaves into just one kilo worth of meat. By my rough estimate, it looked to be around twice what I usually used for steaks.

Next, I added some cuts in several places along the block of meat for inserting some slices of the garlic-esque myamuu. With that, the preparations were complete.

“Now, we’ve got to let it sit for a bit. In terms of time, we’re talking about as long as you need to let the meat steep in the marinade for myamuu giba.”

In other words, around an hour. Then it would take roughly an hour to cook,

meaning we were set to finish up just before sunset.

"Let's try to finish up the preparations for work tomorrow in the meantime. Vina and Lala Ruu, you mince the meat for the giba burgers, and Sheera Ruu, please dice up aria."

As for me, I went ahead and started cutting up meat for the other dishes. First up, that meant cutting the loin and rib meat off of the giba Shin and Ryada Ruu had skinned. Since the taste of the meat could change significantly based on how it was cut, this was the most delicate step and the one that I really couldn't leave up to anyone else.

I handled the initial cuts with the knife I had been given by Ai Fa, then went with my kitchen knife for the following slices.

I've been overusing my old man's knife, so I really would like to get a knife specifically for meat, soon.

That was what I thought, but the ones sold in the post town didn't really cut much better than hunting knives, so I still hadn't made up my mind and bought one. And I had been able to buy such a wonderful vegetable knife from Shumiral, so that made me feel even less like compromising.

They probably sell some pretty nice knives in the castle town, but I can't go buying one without seeing it with my own eyes. If only Shumiral was selling a meat knife... I thought to myself, only for a cheer to erupt from the plaza again. The break must have ended and the competition resumed.

Around 15 minutes or so later, Rimee Ruu came flying into the kitchen, out of breath and her face beet red.

"It was so amazing! Ai Fa won again! If she wins just two more times, then she'll be the champion!"

"Huh? Who was she up against?" Lala Ruu asked, voicing the same question I had been thinking.

"Rau Lea! He was really strong too, but Ai Fa threw him like *whoosh*! *Whoosh*!"

So she had fought Rau Lea, huh?

Perhaps it shouldn't have been a surprise that she beat him after having already taken down Darmu Ruu, but I guess that meant she had made it to the final four. However, I couldn't say for certain whether or not I felt earnestly happy about that fact.

"What about everyone else? How did Ludo do?" Lala Ruu asked.

"He lost! He tried to trip up Mida, but he ended up falling first!"

"Hmm, so he lost before he got to face off against dad, huh? He's gotta be real frustrated, then. In that case, the matches left are..."

"Papa Donda and Gazraan Rutim, and Jiza and Dan Rutim! Jiza's up next, so come watch!"

Donda Ruu versus Gazraan Rutim, and Jiza Ruu versus Dan Rutim... So oddly enough, it ended up being matches between the Ruu and Rutim clan heads and heirs. Those sure made for some crazy matchups, so much so that I almost felt intimidated by the idea of watching them.

"Jiza and Gazraan Rutim are strong too, but they'll never beat dad or Dan Rutim. Those two have always faced off against each other at the end these past ten years," Lala Ruu stated, which took me a bit off guard.

"T-Ten years? That's one heck of a record. And these festivals of the hunt are held three times a year, aren't they...?"

"Yeah. There's a big one once a year, and two small ones. And today is one of the smaller ones. For the big one, everybody under the Ruu gathers."

So that meant that over those ten years, it was always either Donda Ruu or Dan Rutim who won, 30 times in total. I had vaguely sensed as much, but it seemed those two really were exceptionally strong even among the people of the forest's edge.

And... it was already set that Ai Fa would have to face off with at least one of them very soon. No matter how much her safety may be assured, I still couldn't help but feel concerned by that thought.

Ai Fa couldn't possibly win that match, right?

That thought somehow worried me, too. If Ai Fa ended up clashing with

Donda Ruu in the final match, my heart might just stop right then and there.

At any rate, time flowed on and the end of the prep work finally came into sight. By my estimate, there was probably around an hour left till sunset, so that meant it was time to get back to working on the meal for the victor.

“Well then, let’s get started. We’ll begin by cooking the meat’s surface with a strong flame, like with the cubed giba meat stew.”

The seasonings had thoroughly been absorbed into the chunks of meat, and so I dropped them in and cooked them till they reached a golden brown. Just like with the steak and burgers, this was to make sure none of the juices escaped.

“Then, we’ll add the vegetables we cut up to this pot which we’ve got on a low flame.”

The vegetables in question were aria, neinon, and chatchi. The aria and neinon had been cut into four even wedges, while the chatchi was split in half. And so we spread those out across the bottom of the pot, and then added the grilled meat on top.

“Now all that’s left is to pour in a fourth of a container of fruit wine, then put on the lid and wait. Let’s place plenty of rocks on top of the lid for weight, too.”

“So, is that it? It certainly does seem to resemble that cubed giba meat stew dish a bit.”

“Right? But that’s cooked in water or sauce, while this just uses fruit wine to add a bit of flavor. Rather than boiling, it uses the evaporating moisture from the fruit wine and vegetables to steam the ingredients,” I said, adding more firewood while taking care not to make the flame too strong. “With hamburgers and steaks, we bake them in a covered pan to heat them all the way through, right? Well, this meat is even thicker, so please keep in mind that it takes longer to steam in turn.”

“I see... So, what sort of dish is it?”

“For now, I’m calling it roast giba.”

Rather than coming from my house or the family’s restaurant, it was based on

the roast pork and roast beef we would sometimes make when I was camping with my old man or Reina.

It would have been better if we had a tight-fitting metal lid to seal the pot properly, but unfortunately those didn't seem to be sold in the post town. Still, I guess it acted as proof of just how much I had practiced that I was able to use this method to steam a ten-centimeter thick block of meat.

At any rate, the theme this time around was just plain using thick meat. That seemed like the right way to go for a dish to be presented to the victor of the contest of strength, but I still didn't actually know how it would go.

"What's important here is managing the flame. You should try to retain it at this level, which is weaker than even a usual low heat. That's because if it's too strong, it'll end up burning the vegetables directly touching the pot."

After somewhere between 40-50 minutes of steaming, we would be done.

Since we had finished the prep work for the stalls, I was thinking it was about time to let the women go, only for Rimee Ruu to show up again.

"Asuta, are you still not done cooking?! Ai Fa's up against Dan Rutim next!"

"Huh?! She's going to be facing off against *him*?!"

"Yeah! Jiza and Gazraan Rutim ended up losing after all! So after Ai Fa's match, it'll be Papa Donda against Mida!"

Ai Fa versus Dan Rutim, and Mida versus Donda Ruu, huh?

I could feel my heart beating way quicker for some reason upon hearing those matchups.

"Asuta, why not go watch? If it's just managing the fire, then I can take care of that," Sheera Ruu chimed in with a gentle smile. "And Vina and Lala Ruu, you two must be interested in Donda Ruu's match, right? Just leave things here to me."

"Huh? Is it really alright?" Lala Ruu asked while squirming a bit and turning my way.

I felt super anxious at the moment, but I still somehow managed to hold back my selfish urges in spite of that.

“We’re mostly done with work here, so sure, you two can go ahead and leave. And Sheera Ruu, you can go too if you’d like.”

“No, nobody from my house will be competing. Are you really okay with not going, Asuta...?”

“Yup. I’m sure Dan Rutim would never go and hurt Ai Fa, and so I’ll focus on my own work here.”

“Well then, we’re off! We’ll come back to tell you how it turned out once the match is over!”

With that, the sisters of the main Ruu house exited the kitchen, leaving just me and Sheera Ruu.

However, we didn’t exactly have anything to do but add a single piece of firewood every couple of minutes. And as I stared at the flickering orange flames, I just kept on praying that Ai Fa would be alright.

“Ai Fa really does possess great strength as a hunter, doesn’t she...? After all, I believe Darmu Ruu and Rau Lea had become strong enough to compete with Jiza Ruu and Gazraan Rutim lately...” Sheera Ruu quietly murmured eventually as we sat there watching the flames.

“Really? Well, it’s true that it usually surprises folks to hear how many giba Ai Fa catches. Still... hopefully Darmu Ruu will be back to his usual self soon, right?”

All I got back to that was a pained sigh.

I still felt on edge, though, so I kept on talking.

“Um, last month, Darmu Ruu got that injury from protecting Shin Ruu, right? I’ve had the least interaction with him out of the main Ruu house, though. What sort of person is he?”

“Darmu Ruu, he... he has a very rough temperament. My father Ryada has said that he most resembles Donda Ruu out of the clan head’s sons.”

“Ah, yeah, his eyes really are just like Donda Ruu’s.”

“Yes... I believe both Donda and Darmu Ruu are splendid hunters, fitting for the main house of one of the leading clans.”

Unfortunately, I still hadn't been able to establish much of a friendly relationship with those two.

Still, it hadn't taken me long to realize Donda Ruu was more than just rough and wild, and even though I had trouble dealing with him, I didn't especially dislike the man. As for Darmu Ruu... there was that quarrel with Ai Fa from the very start, which probably created a pretty serious gap between us. He had gone and said such awful things to her that I couldn't help but find him just about as irritating as Diga.

"Does Ai Fa really intend to live as a hunter until she dies out in the forest...?" Sheera Ruu eventually muttered, sounding as if she was just talking to herself. "She was born as a woman, and yet she will have no children and instead live as a hunter... Ah, I don't mean to criticize her way of living. I just can't understand how she thinks like that."

"I don't get it either, but it really does feel just like her to me."

Ai Fa had once said she'd hate a life of just waiting around for men to return. In all likelihood, she wanted to be a protector rather than one of the protected.

I still hadn't truly come to understand that statement, but I remained firm on the fact that I wanted to respect her feelings. However, I didn't just solely want to let her protect me, and hoped to help her out in ways that didn't require arm strength, too.

"Ai Fa doesn't intend to marry either, right...?"

"Yeah. That's—" I started to answer, only to be taken aback. Sheera Ruu was sitting cradling her knees and staring intently at the fire, her face redder than I had ever seen it before. "W-What's wrong, Sheera Ruu?"

"Huh? What do you mean?"

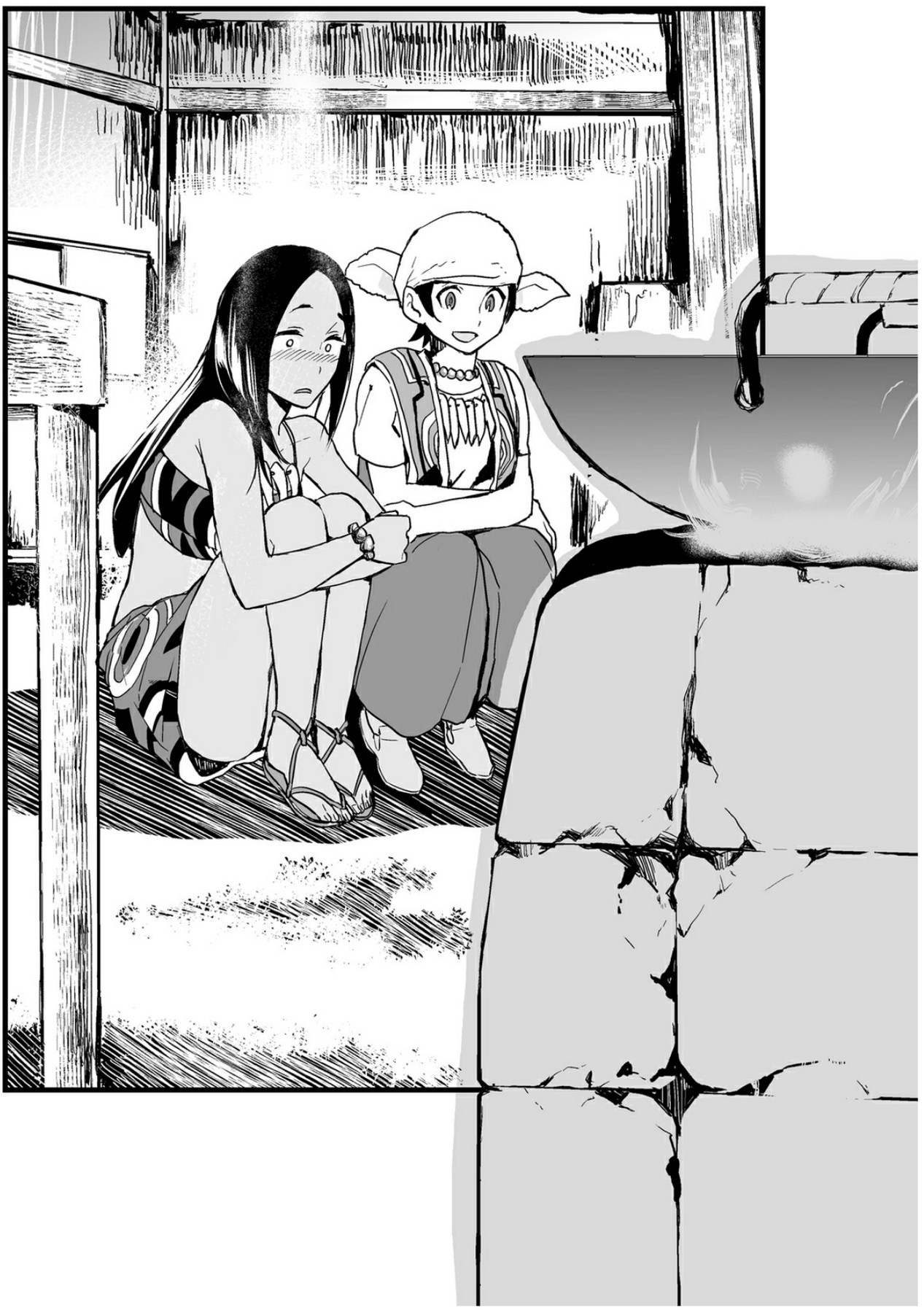
"I mean... You look kind of out of sorts, somehow."

"Really? Maybe that's so..." I couldn't see the bottom of her beet-red face from behind her cradled knees. Her eyes were shooting me a real uncertain look, though. "The thought that you know just what I'm feeling made me feel embarrassed all of a sudden, somehow. I'm so sorry."

“Y-Your feelings? Do you mean about Darmu—”

“P-Please don’t say it!”

That had to be the first time I had ever heard Sheera Ruu that flustered. And she was usually so calm and composed, so I couldn’t remember her openly showing such maidenly feelings before, either.



Now that I think about it, despite how mature she seems, she's only a year older than me.

For some reason, I was starting to feel uneasy. Maybe this overly unfamiliar feeling was a desire to protect her or something.

"Asuta..."

"Yes?"

"Don't tell anyone, alright...?"

"Right! Of course!"

"And I don't need you to worry or feel sympathy for me. A woman like me who can't even properly carry a water jug couldn't possibly be worth marrying."

"That's absolutely not true!" I stopped and thought for a second, then rose decisively to my feet. "Sheera Ruu, could you make a single meal's worth out of the meat with skin on it that we've got left?"

"Huh?"

"I was planning on making a simple steak or something for everyone with that meat. I'd like to leave one meal's worth of that up to you, Sheera Ruu. And please make the sauce yourself, too."

"W-What are you telling me to do...?"

"That's up to you, Sheera Ruu."

With that, Sheera Ruu hung her head, her face still bright red. Then, she looked up and tilted her head suddenly.

"Now that I think of it, Lala and Vina Ruu still haven't returned. Didn't they say they would come back to announce how the match between Ai Fa and Dan Rutim went?"

"Ah, now that you mention it, that's true." At least 15 minutes had to have passed by now. And with that thought, the unease I had buried deep inside came bubbling right back up. "Um, does a single match usually last this long?"

"Not normally. That's why I found it unusual."

I was still hearing the same cheers as always from the plaza, though.

“In that case, maybe Donda Ruu and Mida’s match started so quickly that they weren’t able to slip away.”

“No, after it’s down to the final eight, there’s a small break inserted after each match. Asuta... Don’t you think it would be good to go check on her, at least for a short while?”

“Ah, but—”

“I want to pay you back for worrying about me. Please, go. Besides... I think I’d like to be alone for a bit right now, anyway.”

That may have been nothing but an excuse, because she sensed what I was thinking. But either way, the unease I was feeling was reaching a point where I wouldn’t be able to hold it back any longer.

“Sorry. I’ll go take a quick look, then,” I said, then I went flying out of the kitchen.

Ai Fa was up against Dan Rutim. He had called the Fa clan friends, so there should be pretty much zero chance of him doing anything to harm her. I truly believed that, but I still couldn’t help but feel shaken, too.

What if one of them ended up getting injured in a way that would never fully heal? Or maybe some ill-meaning third party could’ve jumped in...

With such concerns driving me forwards, I stepped into the plaza only for a hearty laugh from Dan Rutim to instantly wipe away my needless fears.

“Ai Fa, you really are a splendid hunter! You’re the first to ever give me this much trouble, aside from Donda Ruu!”

Dan Rutim was standing there in a daunting pose right in the center of the plaza. However, his plump face, shiny bald head, and pronounced potbelly were all pouring forth so much sweat it looked like a waterfall.

The same was true for Ai Fa, who was standing a few meters away. She had remained cool and composed when up against Ji Maam, but now her face was coated in sweat and her shoulders were heavily heaving up and down.

Did that mean they really had been having an even match for 15 whole

minutes, then?

“Still, hurry up and let me finish this already! I’m starving over here!” Dan Rutim yelled out, spreading both arms wide and attempting to grab Ai Fa.

It really did surprise me just how nimble he was. He couldn’t have weighed less than a hundred kilos, yet he could move as quickly as Ai Fa and Darmu Ruu.

Ai Fa barely managed to dodge by leaping to the side, but Dan Rutim didn’t stop moving. As he groaned, one of his spread arms lashed out again for my clan head.

In response, Ai Fa kicked him in the side and jumped even further back. However, Dan Rutim pivoted and followed her just as quickly.

Seeing that, Ai Fa bent over and tried to use the same low sweep that took down Ji Maam. And yet, Dan Rutim swiftly leapt into the air and easily evaded her attack.

Without a moment’s delay, Ai Fa touched both palms to the ground and leapt like a wildcat. Dan Rutim’s hand then crashed into the space where her head had been just a second earlier.

The cheers that erupted were almost overwhelming, louder than any I had heard up till now. I was honestly at a loss for words at the fact that such superhuman fighting had been going on for 15 whole minutes now.

Dan Rutim really was something else. Despite that huge belly of his, he was able to move just as quickly as Ai Fa. It was pretty ridiculous, considering he had to have over double the body mass of my clan head.

On top of that, he’d let out a hearty, “Gyahaha,” whenever he could spare a moment. When you added the grin on his face, it was abundantly clear just how much he was enjoying himself.

Ai Fa, meanwhile, looked downright desperate. It was like I was watching a wildcat under attack by a massive brown bear or lowland gorilla or something.

“A—” I muttered without thinking. “Ai Fa! Don’t give up! Give it everything you’ve got!”

I had no idea if my voice reached her or not, but my clan head then leapt

inside Dan Rutim's guard with some serious resolve. Unlike Darmu Ruu, though, the Rutim clan head didn't move to dodge in the least, instead firmly planting his feet and swinging his arms down towards Ai Fa.

My beloved benefactor dodged that attack, then moved to circle around Dan Rutim's right side. At that point, the man had already grabbed hold of her arm. However, in the same instant, she stooped down and went to sweep his legs.

If Dan Rutim had kept holding onto Ai Fa's arm then, another impressive throw may have decided things then and there. However, he instead just let go and lifted his one leg in order to avoid her attack.

With her assault missing its mark, Ai Fa stumbled forward and almost fell, only for Dan Rutim to once again grab at her from behind.

"Ai Fa!"

My clan head pivoted on one leg, swiftly turning back towards the mountain of a man. And with that, Dan Rutim's thick fingers grabbed hold of one of her shoulders.

It was all over.

Ai Fa collapsed backwards, seemingly unable to stop Dan Rutim's charge. But as she fell, her right arm grabbed hold of his collar, then she kicked at his right foot with her left before it could hit the ground.

For the first time, Dan Rutim's stance seriously crumbled. But at this rate, Ai Fa would fall along with him and end up underneath his massive frame. And so, she sunk her right knee into Dan Rutim's potbelly, then let her weight pull downwards.

Grabbing his collar, kicking his leg, and dropping her weight... All of those factors combined together, causing Dan Rutim's body to lift into the air as he fell forwards.

In all likelihood, this was the sort of overhead throw you saw in judo. However, Ai Fa was trying to reach out backwards with her left hand as she did so. No wait, maybe I was just misunderstanding, since instead of doing so, she lifted his stomach with her left knee and followed through with her truly impressive throw.

Dan Rutim's huge body did a half flip in the air, then came down with a loud crash.

With that, the crowd erupted in cheers, overcome with excitement.

However, that was once again cut off by Ra Rutim's stern voice.

"The winner is Dan Rutim of the Rutim clan! Ai Fa of the Fa clan must withdraw!"

What followed was, unsurprisingly, a storm of complaints.

The bald-headed, white-bearded Rutim elder glared out over the crowd with eyes like a hawk.

"Ai Fa's waist touched the ground before Dan Rutim fell. Therefore, the winner is Dan Rutim!"

So that was why she reached out with her left hand partway through, huh?

Right now, though, Ai Fa was sprawled out on the ground and panting heavily. And the man she had thrown, Dan Rutim, was doing much the same just two meters away.

Once I saw Gazraan Rutim push through the crowd towards his father, I also stepped into the plaza. As rough cheers mixed with complaints filled the air, I ran over to my clan head.

"Ai Fa! Are you alright?!"

"This is... nothing..." Ai Fa replied in a hoarse voice, her mouth open wide and her eyes closed. I had never seen her this utterly exhausted before. "Lend me... your shoulder... I don't think I can... walk properly on my own..."

"Right."

I took hold of Ai Fa's right arm, then gently helped her up while supporting her back. As she listlessly leaned against me, her body was so hot that it felt like she was on fire.

"I'm getting you... all sweaty..."

"Don't worry about that. You're in no state to be concerned about stuff like that, anyway."

It was then that Dan Rutim's strong son helped him sit up, and the man, who had appeared to be dead tired, broke out in a grin.

"I thought for sure that I had lost! Ai Fa, why didn't you support your body with your left hand? If you had, you would've won!"

"My left arm only just recently healed, so I wasn't confident I could use it to support your weight. If the bone popped loose again as a result, then I would no longer be able to carry out my work as a hunter."

"So that was it! I can certainly understand that!" Dan Rutim then approached us, though it was honestly more like Gazraan Rutim was dragging him. And then, he brought his sweaty smiling face in close towards Ai Fa. "You really are a splendid hunter! Not only in terms of that amazing strength, but also in how you firmly understand what's most important in our way of life! I feel glad from the very depths of my heart to have someone like you as a friend, Ai Fa!"

"I'm greatly obliged for that excessive praise. Now then, excuse us..." she replied, kicking me in the leg as she did so.

That must have meant, "get moving." And so, as Dan Rutim shot an overjoyed grin and Gazraan Rutim joined in with a bashful smile, I bowed back at them and then retreated along with my clan head.

And as we went, Ai Fa was showered in unending applause and cheers. I couldn't help but break out in an awkward grin myself, realizing just how exceptional my clan head truly was.

"What...? Are you laughing at my unsightly loss, Asuta?"

"Huh?" I questioned, looking at her in surprise, only to find her frowning as she leaned heavily on my shoulder. "What part of that was 'unsightly'? I can't imagine many hunters under the Ruu could put up that much of a fight against Dan Rutim."

"But a loss is still a loss..."

"Umm, didn't Lala Ruu say victory is something to feel pride over, but a loss is nothing to be ashamed of? And I don't think that was the sort of match to feel frustrated over..."

“What are you saying? Of course I’m frustrated, coming that close only to lose,” my clan head retorted, still wearing that adorable pout as her sweet-smelling blonde hair rubbed up against my cheek.

4

“Thanks for waiting. This is what I prepared for today.”

Around when the sun was setting out over the forest to the west, I presented the dinner I had made to the winner of the competition, illuminated by the torches set up around the plaza.

And naturally, that winner was Donda Ruu.

In the end I never saw even one of his matches, but from what I heard, in the semi-finals against Mida he took the physically larger youth’s charge straight on and tossed him, and even during the finals with Dan Rutim, he met the man head-on rather than trying to drag things out against his exhausted opponent.

And now, he was seated with one knee up as always, atop a small wooden stage. A grass crown presented by the elder Granny Jiba sat atop his unkempt blackish-brown hair.

Despite the fact that he had only just finished three matches in a row against such strong opponents as Gazraan Rutim, Mida, and Dan Rutim, he was still wearing his usual sour expression and giving off as much of an overwhelming presence as always. The only real difference I could spy as he looked down at the plate I presented was that his stern face was sweaty and I could see his chest and shoulders moving up and down a bit heavily.

My dish for the night was presented atop the largest wooden plate in the Ruu settlement. Plenty of piping hot aria and chatchi blanketed the plate, and enshrined in the center was a kilo chunk of roast giba.

“I was wondering how odd of a thing you’d present, but this looks surprisingly normal. On the outside, at least.”

“Right. I hope that it’s to your tastes, Donda Ruu.”

Roast giba was made by cutting the meat thicker than what I’d call “slices,”

then pouring a special sauce over top. For that sauce, I took a tau oil and fruit wine base, added diced aria and myamuu, rock salt and pico leaves, and the amber-colored juices that came from the roast meat, creating the best sauce I could make at the moment.

"Please try it while it's hot, if you don't mind. It should still be plenty tasty even after it cools off, but the people of the forest's edge prefer to eat food while it's warm, right?"

"Hmph," Donda Ruu snorted, and then he rose to his feet.

The 70 men and women under him surrounding the stage were all waiting for the banquet to begin.

"Well then, let's get this banquet started! All of you under the Ruu, grant your thanks to the forest while making its blessings into your own flesh and blood!"

A hearty cheer sounded out in response, and folks started picking up their skewers and containers of fruit wine.

Seeing that, Donda Ruu thumped back down, then casually reached for the plate. He thrust a skewer into a chunk of roast giba and bit into it with his white teeth, which looked tough enough to crush stone.

The dish wasn't as tough as steak. However, that didn't mean it was overly soft, either. That was why I ultimately chose the thigh meat over the loin.

Unlike with roast beef, it was essential to heat the giba meat all the way through, but I was able to pull it out just before it became too dry, resulting in a juicy pink steamed meat bursting with delicious flavor. Then, the jiggly bit of fatty meat and golden-brown skin I had cooked just a bit extra added even further to the texture and taste of the dish.

And I went light on that sauce that I was so proud of, intending to really let the flavor of the main ingredients shine. Normally, just the undercurrents of flavor from burying it in salt and pico leaves and then adding myamuu here and there would have been plenty. Once it cooled down, the delicious flavors would seep in even further, but it shouldn't taste any less wonderful fresh.

By now, it had been roughly 60 days since I had come to the forest's edge. And this dish was made using techniques from all the way back when I first got

here up to ones I only just learned recently. But how did it taste, though? Well, I couldn't exactly expect Donda Ruu to go say something like "delicious," but—

"Delicious..."

"Huh?" I questioned, looking up in utter amazement.

However, Donda Ruu was just roughly chewing away at his second bite of roast giba with the same look on his face, not so much as glancing my way. Instead, his eyes fell down by his feet. That was where giba soup filled with plenty of vegetables made by the Ruu women, the baked poitan, and the dish made with innards were lined up.

"Hey, what's this meat here? There's some stuff in a shape I've never seen before mixed in there. You didn't use meat from something other than a giba, did you?"

"Ah, that's made with giba innards. I only just learned to make it yesterday, but I'd say it has a pretty interesting taste to it." I had grilled up the giba heart, liver, and kidneys, and chopped up the rest to make into fried offal. "Ai Fa seemed to be especially fond of the heart. It's the least quirky in terms of taste, and has a texture that's pretty much the same as regular meat."

"A giba's heart, huh...?"

Donda Ruu casually pierced the grilled heart with a skewer and tossed it into his mouth. His brightly burning blue eyes were hidden behind his eyelids as he slowly and steadily chewed away.

After swallowing it down, Donda Ruu removed one of the necklaces he was wearing and held it out towards me.

"Good work. Here's your payment."

"Huh? Payment?"

Now that he mentioned it, we hadn't discussed payment at all. But the Ruu clan had helped us out a ton with the clan head meeting and all the stuff that happened after, so I was just thinking of this as a way to repay that debt a bit.

"Thank you. But isn't this a bit too much?"

There had to be around 20 horns and tusks dangling from the necklace in

total. That was enough to equal five giba, or 60 red coins.

“You rate your skills as being worth that little...?” Donda Ruu questioned, thrusting the necklace at me and then returning to eating away at the roast giba.

However, it wasn’t long before he shot me an annoyed glare.

“How long do you intend to keep on staring at me as I eat, anyway? Your work’s done, so hurry up and fill your own stomach, already.”

“R-Right. Well then, excuse me...”

As I stepped down from the stage, I could sense a faint tinge of uplifting satisfaction welling up inside.

And near instantly, a figure came leaping out at me like a faithful hound and grabbed firmly ahold of my collar.

“Hey, Asuta, what in the world is this stuff?!”

“Y-You scared me there. What’s with that look on your face?”

The golden hair made me think it was Ai Fa for a split second, but I was actually talking to the young Lea clan head, Rau Lea. And his light blue eyes were fiercely ablaze as he stared at me from up super close.

“Do you even have to ask?! I just ate this food you made!”

“Ah, really? Then what are you looking so angry about? Did you not like it?”

“Of course I did! It was so delicious I was left feeling shocked! Were you holding back at the clan head meeting?!”

I had no idea what was going on.

But well, I’d seen people lose control of themselves due to how delicious something was plenty of times, which seemed like a reasonable enough explanation.

“That was bugging me, too. Asuta, were you still hiding away your true skill with the dinner for the clan head meeting? Or have you instead really come this far in a mere half a month?”

A large figure approached from the darkness, which would soon only be

illuminated by the torches. He had a gentle face with square contours, and was clearly young but had a large, well-tempered build. Yes, this was my first time in a while seeing this member of the three leaders of the forest's edge.

"Ah, Dari Sauti. I see your injuries seem to have all healed up."

"Yep," he replied with a firm nod.

Ai Fa had run into him during the incident with the totos, but for me, it had been since the day before Zattsu and Tei Suun caused all that commotion. And just as Ai Fa had said, he seemed to have completely recovered.

On top of that, back when I last saw him he had just finished meeting and talking to Kamyua Yoshu in the post town, leaving him rather irritated. But tonight he was back to his usual composed self, and was wearing a gentle grin.

"Ah, yes, I'm sorry for worrying you back then. And I'm glad to see you well, too. So... do you intend to answer the question the Lea clan head and I have raised? We have no reason to be angry with you for hiding your skills, but it will leave things feeling rather awkward if we don't at least hear why."

"Um, you're saying I hid my skills...?"

Just the other day, the members of the main Ruu house had been saying my cooking ability had improved. However, from the flustered look on Rau Lea's face, the nuance seemed to be a bit different this time around.

"What are you raising such a fuss about? Asuta only prepared so much food this time, so if you don't hurry up, it'll all get eaten," Ludo Ruu chimed in, snacking on the thigh meat steak atop the plate he was holding all the while. It was made with the meat that still had skin attached, and was about three kilos worth in total. There looked to be only around a fourth of the steamed aria and chatchi left, too.

"Leave enough for me! I'm still really hungry! So, what's going on here, Asuta...? You manned the stove at the clan head meeting in order to show everyone your cooking skills, didn't you? Did you hold back in spite of that, though?"

"Hey, that hurts. I never hold back when it comes to cooking."

“Then you really improved that much in just half a month? But I had your cooking back at Gazraan Rutim’s wedding, too! There were 20 days or so between that and the clan head meeting, but it didn’t seem like you had improved *this* much.”

Rau Lea seemed more confused than resentful, to be honest. And I was left even more befuddled than he was.

However, Ludo Ruu then swiftly butted in to clear away that confusion.

“What, you’re surprised because Asuta’s cooking is *too* delicious? That’s not exactly anything to feel shocked over, though, is it, Rau Lea?”

“Why do you say that? Do you know what’s going on here, Ludo Ruu?”

“Of course I do. After all, Asuta wasn’t the one to make the food presented at the clan head meeting, right? Though I was stuck chewing jerky with Shin Ruu, so I didn’t even get to eat any...”

At first I hadn’t understood what he was getting at, but with that, everything clicked into place.

“Ah, so that’s it, huh?”

“That’s right. The goal back then was teaching the Suun women how to cook, so you said you and our women intended to do as little as possible yourselves. And even if the method used was the same, there’s no way they’d ever be able to make anything as good as you can, Asuta.”

It still should have been an incredibly overwhelming flavor to folks who had only ever eaten grilled and boiled giba meat that hadn’t even been bloodlet. The same was true for the baked poitan, too.

Plus, I had gone with myamuu giba, which shouldn’t have changed that much based on who made it. Well, how the heat was handled and how much sauce was added would have an impact on the toughness and taste of the final dish. And as instructors, we had just been giving the Suun women simple instructions like “Don’t burn it,” and “Don’t undercook it.”

Still, the fact that rustic guys like Rau Lea and Dari Sauti were noticing differences on that level and feeling surprised by them seemed like something I

should feel proud of.

“But I’ve had the cooking Asuta makes for his stalls in the post town, too. That didn’t seem as tasty as this, either,” Rau Lea added, still not satisfied.

“Back then, I couldn’t prepare enough patties, so I had everyone eat myamuu giba instead. And I’ve been making that dish with the seasoning a bit on the heavy side to match the tastes of the townsfolk. But I don’t think that’s how to best prepare it for the people of the forest’s edge,” I replied.

“That’s right. Plus, back at the Rutim banquet, the Ruu women helped out. It’s just that this is your first time eating something made solely by Asuta for us people of the forest’s edge,” Ludo Ruu added, tossing some chatchi into his mouth. “Ah, that’s so good! The meat’s tasty too, but this chatchi is the best! I seriously love it!”

With that, Ludo Ruu broke out in an adorable, almost girlish smile that seriously caught me off guard.

I figured that had brought things to a close and breathed a sigh of relief, but then someone suddenly grabbed Rau Lea’s arm from the side.

“Hey, are you acting rudely towards Asuta? If you don’t have a damn good reason, you’ll have to answer to me, clan head of the Lea.”

This time around, it really was Ai Fa.

Rau Lea’s expression said that he had a lot of thoughts about her intervention, but sure enough, he finally let go of my T-shirt.

“I wasn’t picking a fight or anything, so don’t go glaring at me like that. Or could it be that you want to have another go in a contest of strength against me, Ai Fa...?”

“No matter how many matches we have, the results won’t change,” Ai Fa replied in a chilly, angry tone as she pushed the man’s arm away.

With that, Rau Lea childishly rubbed the end of his nose.

“Something’s just not fair about you guys, Asuta and Ai Fa! You’re a clan of just two, but one’s a master at manning the stove, while the other’s a skilled enough hunter to push Dan Rutim that far! I just can’t accept it!”

“Your feelings have nothing to do with me,” Ai Fa stated while haughtily crossing her arms and glaring back at Rau Lea. And seeing that, Dari Sauti gave a light chuckle after remaining silent for so long.

“I hadn’t thought Donda Ruu was a relaxed enough man to go and hold a festival of the hunt during such a turbulent period, but this has proven a meaningful day for me, at least. Perhaps we should have had Gulaf Zaza attend as well, since we have those convenient totos around now.”

“Huh? What’s this about Gulaf Zaza?”

“The Ruu clan truly does excel in terms of strength. The power of the hunters is certainly amazing, but even more than that, I could sense great strength from all those who fall under the Ruu,” Dari Sauti stated, glancing around.

The folks all around wore bright smiles, illuminated by the flames of the torches and simple stoves. It really was a cheerful event, reminding me of the Rutim wedding banquet.

They were with their beloved family, chowing down on delicious food and drinking fruit wine. And they were overflowing with enough strength that it made someone from another world like me feel dizzy. But this wasn’t totally normal here at the forest’s edge...?

“The Zaza up in the north are the next strongest after the Ruu. Then after that comes us down in the south. However, we never have such joyous smiles all around at a meager festival of the hunt like this, that isn’t even the main one for the year. For us, giba meat and the vegetables we buy from town are just tools to keep on living, like air and water, not something to grant us happiness.”

“Right...”

“Eating brings forth the joy of living. And as that joy grows, so does the strength to keep on going. You said something like that before, didn’t you, Asuta? At least, that’s what Donda Ruu told me.”

“D-Donda Ruu told you that?”

“Yes. This day alone has been enough to teach me of the strength of the Ruu clan. And it also taught me the power of the Fa as well,” Dari Sauti stated, his square face breaking out in a wild grin. “The meeting with the folks from the

castle is three days from now. Going up against them, the people of the forest's edge need to gain even more power, and join our strengths together. I firmly hope that both of you will keep giving your all for our comrades, Asuta and Ai Fa."

"R-Right."

"That's only natural, as people of the forest's edge."

Dari Sauti answered our responses with a nod, then turned around.

"I'll go accept the women of the Ruu clan's kindness and fill my stomach, too. Take care."

With that, Dari Sauti left, only for someone else to approach in his place. Multiple someones, in fact: Lala and Shin Ruu, as well as Mida.

"We finally found you! Don't just go walking off with Asuta's cooking like that, Ludo! We've been running all around looking for you!" Lala Ruu complained as she approached her brother and gave his left ear a serious twist. And despite being a skilled warrior, Ludo Ruu was utterly unable to avoid her assault while carrying that large plate of food.

"Ow, that hurts, dummy! And if I just left it there, that big belly would've eaten it all in no time flat!"

"You're every bit as gluttonous as Mida, though! Anyway, just hand it over already!"

As the two siblings argued away, Mida just watched on with his little piglet-esque eyes.



“I won’t eat all of it, but I’d like to have some of Asuta’s cooking too...”

Not only did Mida not run wild like usual, he even looked almost a bit dejected as he said that.

“Alright. But this is all that’s left, so savor it, alright?”

“Yeah, I will...”

“Tch. Hey Mida, next time we fight, I’m definitely gonna win! So you better not lose to anyone but me, alright?”

“Hmm...?”

There was such a gentle feel in the air.

Back during the Rutim wedding banquet, I had stuck thoroughly to working behind the scenes, so I didn’t really get much of a chance to just enjoy the party with everybody like this. That one plate contained all the food I made this time around, but folks were happily eating away at the stuff cooked by Mia Lea and Reina Ruu and everybody. Normally the people of the forest’s edge acted so reserved, but these banquets that occurred every few months were chances for them to finally cut loose.

A little bit further away, Granny Jiba sat atop a fur rug, surrounded by a big crowd. Meanwhile, the large figure holding ribs in both hands while laughing away like a fool had to be Dan Rutim. And was that Rimee Ruu by his feet in the same pose? Then even further away were two tall folks talking away about something while holding containers of fruit wine. My guess was they were Jiza Ruu and Gazraan Rutim.

Every last one of them seemed to be seriously enjoying the banquet. The men, women, and though there were fewer of them, the old folks and kids too... 70 clan members under the Ruu were gathering around with their faces illuminated by the flames, eating meat, getting drunk on wine, and just generally rejoicing in their lives here at the forest’s edge.

Just as Dari Sauti had said, the discussion with the folks from the castle was just three days from now. I felt it was precisely *because* of those circumstances that Donda Ruu had decided to go through with this festival banquet, in order

to reaffirm the lives and happiness they sought to protect.

“Asuta, have you eaten anything yet?” Ai Fa asked, shooting me a glare with half-opened eyes.

“No. Though I did take a few bites here and there while cooking.”

“I knew it! I see you still haven’t grown any on that point. I mean, you—” Ai Fa complained, only for Ludo Ruu to cheerfully butt in and cut her off.

“Ah, you’re finally up, Darmu! Look, here’s Asuta’s cooking.”

Ai Fa and I shared a quick glance, then we both turned around back towards Ludo Ruu. And sure enough, we saw Darmu Ruu lightly brushing aside his younger brother and advancing our way.

“I’ve got something I want to discuss with you, chef of the Fa clan.”

The strongly blazing eyes he got from his father were practically piercing right through me.

It didn’t take long for Ai Fa to move to say something, but Darmu Ruu then spoke up again instead, as if trying to beat her to the punch.

“I’ve settled things with the clan head of the Fa. So that just leaves you, chef... No, Asuta of the Fa clan. There’s something I wish to discuss with you alone, without anyone else around.”

“Will you swear that you won’t do Asuta any harm, second son of the Ruu?” Ai Fa sharply interjected.

“I so swear,” Darmu Ruu quietly replied. “If I break that oath, you can take my arm or leg or whatever you please. I swear on my position as second son of the main Ruu house and my pride as a hunter of the forest’s edge that I won’t do any harm to Asuta of the Fa clan. Everyone here can serve as a witness to those words.”

“Hold on! What are you saying all of the sudden, Darmu?!” Lala Ruu questioned in a clearly angry tone.

Meanwhile, Ludo Ruu was furrowing his brows in confusion, while Shin Ruu remained expressionless. Mida looked just the same as always, and Rau Lea... Rau Lea was shooting Darmu Ruu a gaze like a hunting dog.

“Is there some discord between you two or something? Well, whatever. At any rate, I did indeed hear that oath with my own two ears. And if you happen to break it, then I’ll chop off both your arms, Darmu Ruu.”

“Whatever,” Darmu Ruu muttered back.

Ai Fa looked my way, firmly biting her lip as she did so. And so, I nodded back at her, then looked up at Darmu Ruu.

“Alright. Where do you want to talk?”

“Anywhere is fine, as long as nobody’ll go butting in.”

As we left the plaza together, Darmu Ruu remained utterly expressionless. And before too long, we arrived at a dimly lit area between two houses.

The hustle and bustle of the crowd and the light of the torches now seemed rather distant. Darmu Ruu glanced out into the darkness to make sure nobody was hiding there, and then turned back to face me.

“Asuta of the Fa clan... You heard the promise I exchanged with Ai Fa before the contest of strength, didn’t you?”

“Yes, I did.”

“After saying all that, I lost. I’m no longer qualified to stop her. From here on out... you’re the only one capable of doing that.”

“Stop Ai Fa...?”

Darmu Ruu remained expressionless, but there was a fire burning bright in his blue eyes. If Rau Lea’s eyes were those of a hunting dog, then these were the eyes of a wild wolf.

“I’m not capable of dressing up my words, so I’ll just say exactly what I’m thinking. Don’t you have any interest in stopping Ai Fa...? Or would you be just fine going on as is even if she dies out in the forest, Asuta?”

“That’s... You’re asking me to make her stop being a hunter?”

“Of course. What else could I mean?”

I honestly hadn’t been expecting this in the least.

“H-Hold on! You put yourself in danger as a hunter too, don’t you, Darmu

Ruu? So you shouldn’t have any problem with the job itself, right?”

“She’s a woman. It’s not like with us men, who are born to be hunters. Don’t make me go saying such obvious things.”

“But Ai Fa takes pride in living as a hunter. She may have happened to be born as a woman, but she has the same hunter’s soul as—”

“Never mind all that. What I’m asking about are your feelings on the matter, Asuta.”

Darmu Ruu took a step forward, the dirt under his foot crunching as he went.

There wouldn’t be any point to trying to back away. After all, if he meant me harm, I never would have been able to escape to begin with.

“Could you really accept such a fate? She could die out in the forest at any time, even tomorrow. But you can still accept that because she says she’s a hunter?”

“That’s... But... It’s not as if all hunters die young, right? And even though she’s a woman, Ai Fa is incredibly strong and—”

“You sound more like you’re trying to convince yourself. No matter how much a hunter may excel, that alone is not enough to keep on living. And in actuality, she was heavily injured not too long ago, wasn’t she? If she had run into a giba on her way back at that time, she would have died.” The intense glare in his eyes was seriously pressing down on me. And from what I could sense, the flames burning brightly there were fueled by anger and regret. “She’s used dangerous sacrificial hunting techniques, too. Do you really think she’s going to keep on doing just fine like that? Answer me, Asuta. Do you truly not care if Ai Fa dies out in the forest tomorrow? Is that all she means to you in the end?”

“Ai Fa’s more precious to me than anyone else in this world! But... I don’t want to deny her way of life!”

“So you’re fine with losing her as a result? I... I couldn’t stand that!” Darmu Ruu yelled, finally losing control of his voice. The scar on his right cheek seemed to turn an angry red. “I don’t want to lose Ai Fa! I couldn’t bear such a fate! That was why I wanted her to live as a woman! But I... I know that I can’t do anything to stop her anymore.”

“That’s...”

“I wasn’t able to protect her on the night of the clan head meeting, either. And today, I lost to her. I’m not qualified to say anything to her anymore... I lack the strength to protect her. I can’t do a thing!” Darmu Ruu shouted, grabbing me by the collar. His grasp was even firmer than Rau Lea’s... but his fingers were trembling with regret. “You don’t intend to do anything to stop Ai Fa? You’re the only member of her clan... the only one she has accepted as family, but you won’t protect her?”

“I do want to protect her! But—”

How could I go about putting what I felt into words?

I certainly didn’t want Ai Fa to die. That was so obvious that it went without saying.

But even so, despite all that, I didn’t want to deny her way of life.

“But I want to protect her in a way that respects her thoughts and feelings. If she wishes to live as a hunter, then I want to help her while still letting her do so.”

That wasn’t quite it. I was losing something important in putting it into words. And as a result, that statement wasn’t even enough to convince me.

Naturally, that meant it certainly wasn’t enough for Darmu Ruu, and so he gripped my collar even tighter.

“And if that resulted in losing Ai Fa, could you really bear that?”

“Maybe I couldn’t. That could even lead to me regretting it for my whole life. But I believe that if I want to prioritize Ai Fa’s feelings, I have to have enough resolve to accept the risk.”

Was that way of thinking a mistake?

It seemed to me that the Ruu women had far more resolve then I did as they saw the men off when they headed into the forest. Even believing their family is stronger than anyone, they accept the cruel fate that they could perish at any time, and so they just had to keep trusting in them and praying for their safety... Or at least, that’s how it looked to me.

It felt like what I was lacking was that level of resolve. And so, I concluded that I just had to keep on believing in my family like they did... Believing in Ai Fa. Was I mistaken, though?

“You possess definite strength... In such a short period of time, you’ve made that fact abundantly clear. Wouldn’t it be possible for Ai Fa to stop hunting with all the coins you’re earning in town?” Darmu Ruu questioned through firmly gritted teeth.

I was honestly overwhelmed at finding out that Darmu Ruu had been this fiercely worried about Ai Fa.

Was that why I was feeling so shaken? Maybe what she really needed was someone like this, to save her from her cruel fate...

I...

I just silently stared back at Darmu Ruu’s distorted expression.

Then, after who knows how long, he finally let go of my collar, gave an exasperated look, and then turned his back to me.

“If Ai Fa dies out in the forest, I’ll cut you down. No matter what happens to me as a result, I’ll do so without fail.”

With those final words, Darmu Ruu walked away.

However, I didn’t take a single step from the spot.

As Darmu Ruu left into the darkness, I felt like I saw someone slender come running over to him with a plate, but I may have been mistaken. After all, my senses felt numb at the moment.

There was a warm world overflowing with light just a few meters away from me. The orange flames, hustle and bustle of people moving about, and excitement at the banquet could all be strongly felt.

But was I qualified to return to that place...? I no longer could say.

Was I... just letting myself rely on Ai Fa’s strength?

Ai Fa was exceedingly skilled as a hunter. And on top of that, she was always insisting that she wouldn’t go dying in vain. That the proper path forward for a

hunter was to live a long life and hunt as many giba as possible. Had my thinking been soft as a result of believing in those words?

Did I believe that Ai Fa couldn't possibly die? That she would never meet with such an unreasonable fate?

I didn't know. I really didn't, but I— "How long do you intend to keep standing there, Asuta?"

Still in shock, I turned around to look.

There was no way I would mistake who that voice belonged to, though. And sure enough I found that it was Ai Fa standing there resolutely, the orange-lit scenery of the banquet behind her.

"W-What's wrong, Ai Fa?"

"Do you really even need to ask? The second Ruu son returned, but you weren't following, so I came to check," Ai Fa replied, a sulky look on her face as she stomped on over towards me.

I faltered backwards on reflex, only for her to grab hold of my arm.

"Why are you fleeing? And what's with that pathetic look in your eyes? You should be perfectly capable of handling that second son complaining at you, right?"

As she said that, she angrily looked me up and down. In all likelihood, she was making sure that he hadn't roughed me up.

"You didn't eavesdrop on our conversation, did you...?"

"I would never do anything so shameless. I'm not Kamyua Yoshu, you know. I'd recommend you stop making such rude statements if you don't want to pay for them."

"Yeah, you're right... Sorry."

"Really though, what happened? Are you harboring ill feelings not just toward that second son, but also toward me?" Ai Fa asked, looking down just a bit and giving her usual pout.

She must have been willing to so openly show her emotions because nobody

else was watching at the moment. I found that incredibly adorable, but it also seriously caused my heart to ache.

“If that’s the case, then I’ll also earnestly apologize. Just please stop making such a sad face, Asuta.”

“Huh? You didn’t do anything you need to apologize for, though...”

“Really? But I took my anger out on you after losing to Dan Rutim, didn’t I?”

I hadn’t paid any attention to that in the least. I mean, that had been totally normal, right?

“Back then, I failed to restrain my frustration. But once I cooled my head, I realized... Dan Rutim is a match for even Donda Ruu, and even though it was a contest of strength with all sorts of restrictions, I was able to put up a good fight against him. That’s something I should be proud of.” Then, she broke out in a bit of a bashful smile. “My father Gil guided me properly. I’m now more confident than ever that I really am a proper, competent hunter. I know I caused you to worry needlessly as a result, but I truly do feel glad to have participated in that contest of strength.”

“I see...”

“What, do you not feel happy for me, Asuta?” Ai Fa asked, furrowing her brow again and bringing her face in close. “Something really is off with you. I’ve rarely seen such a pained look in your eyes before. You said before that you wouldn’t hide things from me any longer, didn’t you?”

“I did, but this isn’t exactly something that’s easy to talk about...” I replied, only for Ai Fa to shoot me an incredibly displeased look.

And then, she said, “No fair.” Not something like, “That’s not fair,” just, “No fair.” It was that sort of stuff that she did once in a blue moon that really showed her childish side. “I earned honor as a hunter. And as for you, your cooking skills were once more acknowledged by Dari Sauti, Rau Lea, and likely even Donda Ruu. So it’s no fair that you’re looking so sad on such a joyful day.”

“I mean, you say that, but...”

“I’m telling you, it’s just no fair.” With that, Ai Fa grabbed hold of my hand

tightly. “You feel distant somehow, Asuta. No, it’s more like... you feel as if you’re going to go and disappear on me,” she stated with a sense of urgency on her face, drawing in even closer to me. “I believe I told you already, but I simply can’t accept the idea of you vanishing, Asuta.”

I was at a loss for words.

“You’re a precious member of my house. I... I couldn’t go on without you.”

I could feel Ai Fa’s breath on my cheek.

There was a sweet smell tickling my nose.

And I could feel her warmth on my fingers, too.

“If I made you feel unpleasant, then I’m sorry...” she muttered quietly, then let go of my hand and hugged me tight from head on. “Stay by my side forever. And I swear that I’ll do the same for you, too.”

Ai Fa’s arms were wrapped around me so tight that it felt like they could crush me.

And though I couldn’t ever possibly match her strength, I responded by gently hugging her back.

“I want to stay with you, too. If you’ll forgive me, that is.”

“What are you saying? I’m the one who said I wanted to stay together to start with.”

There was just one thing that I knew for certain: I really did love Ai Fa, exactly as she was here and now.

She prided herself on being a hunter and was willful, but also had a hidden stubborn, childish side, too... And I loved her for each and every one of those things.

I didn’t want to lose Ai Fa.

If it was possible, I wouldn’t want her to ever do anything dangerous in the least.

But even more than that... I didn’t want to see her change.

If she found some other work she could take pride in and would match with

her convictions, then she would of course have my blessing, wholeheartedly. But if that wasn't the case... If Ai Fa found her greatest joy in life as a hunter, then I wanted to support and protect that way of life for her, rather than trying to deny it.

As I was now, that was about all I could think to say on the matter. But those thoughts alone were enough for me to hug Ai Fa strongly back.

"That's too tight," Ai Fa finally complained around 15 seconds or so later.

And so, the night of the 27th day of the blue month, my 64th day since coming to this world, peacefully passed by in that manner, filled with all sorts of emotions from all sorts of people.

Intermezzo: The Eldest Ruu Daughter's Melancholy

As she sat and watched her clan members get drunk and party away, Vina Ruu sat on her own, feeling gloomy.

Today was a wedding banquet, for the Ririn clan head taking a Lea woman as his bride. It was being held in the Ruu settlement's plaza, and all 100 members of the related clans were gathered. There were bonfires set up here and there, and stone stoves grilling up large slabs of meat and heating up stew. And by this point, everyone seemed wildly excited.

Normally, unless it was someone of great importance getting married, the Ruu settlement wouldn't be used, nor would everybody be invited. But today was a special banquet. It was meant to be a congratulatory event, welcoming the Ririn clan under the Ruu.

I never thought the Ruu would end up taking in a small clan like the Ririn...

As she sat in the darkness clad in her gorgeous banquet outfit, Vina Ruu gave a little sigh.

The young girl had only turned 15 mere days before. For the people of the forest's edge, that was old enough to marry, and such banquets were seen as places for young folks to meet potential spouses. That was why Vina Ruu was now hiding out of sight on the edge of the plaza, watching everyone else enjoy themselves from a distance.

I only just turned 15, so why does everyone keep talking to me about marriage...? she thought to herself, glancing over at the bride and groom cuddling close together atop the stage.

The Ririn clan head was a man on the verge of turning 40, while his wife from the Lea was just a 16-year-old girl.

Well, it wasn't like that age gap mattered here and now, though. Apparently the Ririn clan head was a rather strong hunter, and that would probably be passed down through his blood. And since he lost his first wife young, it made

sense for him to remarry. After all, that was one of the noble duties of powerful hunters.

What was surprising, though, was the fact that the Ririn clan was so incredibly small, just consisting of four members including the clan head, and two young children. Ordinarily, such a tiny clan would never be able to join up with the Ruu. It would be one thing if they were discarding their clan name to oblivion and becoming members of the Ruu, as that would fit with the traditions of the forest's edge.

But in spite of all that, the Ririn were permitted to become one of the clans that followed the Ruu. The six clan heads under the Ruu, led by Donda Ruu, accepted this marriage with a woman of the Lea, who were second in strength only to the Ruu and Rutim, giving the Ririn bonds of blood and making them the seventh subordinate clan to the Ruu.

Of course, there was apparently a good bit of objection to the idea at the start. However, the Ririn clan head showed great passion in his appeals to Donda Ruu, and also possessed great strength as a hunter, allowing his wish to come to fruition.

On top of that, the girl was seemingly quite intent on the idea as well, too. The two had just happened to meet one day on the side of the road, but they felt strongly about one another, and were able to see their desires through. Vina Ruu honestly found it hard to imagine having powerful enough emotions about someone to cause such a crazy event to actually be held.

To feel so passionately about another person... In a way I'm jealous, but I also find the thought almost frightening...

Vina Ruu had already had countless marriage offers so far, despite her young age, and the fact that as the eldest daughter of the main Ruu house, she couldn't go and marry just anybody. But even with only powerful men from the Lea, the Rutim, and the Ruu branch families approaching her, it still ended up being a serious commotion. Frankly, she was utterly exhausted from having to turn them all down.

Why do they all want to spend their whole lives with me, when we've hardly ever even talked to one another...?

Vina Ruu didn’t understand it in the least.

And that caused her to have another thought, too: That all of them were just after her appearance, or perhaps her position as the eldest daughter of the main Ruu house.

Nobody seems to care at all what sort of person I actually am... And so, of course I don’t want to marry any of them...



However, Vina Ruu hadn't opened up to anyone else about those feelings.

People of the forest's edge seldom had concerns about such matters. Even at the age of 15, that much was perfectly clear to Vina Ruu.

Loving somebody else wasn't about logic. You would spend your life with that person, share both good times and bad, have children and raise them together. The desire to do that was supposed to come naturally, not be something that required words or explanation... That was what Vina Ruu had been told growing up.

And in actuality, even her parents had only met at big banquets like this one, but that was enough for them to decide they wanted to get married. Even so, they truly loved each other, and ended up having seven children together. Around 20 years had passed now since they were wed, but they still seemed to feel the same as back then. And that was how things should be for people of the forest's edge.

How are they able to do such a thing, though...?

Vina Ruu loved her family. Her parents, grandmother, great-grandmother, and siblings were all precious, irreplaceable people to her. She would gladly offer up her own life to save any of them. The thought of any of her family, with their proper spirits, returning to the forest while someone so out of place like her lived on... it just felt wrong. That was just how much she equally loved the ten members of her family.

And so, she thought that if she didn't love someone else that strongly, there would be no point to marrying them.

Why is it that everyone else feels like they're supposed to, while my thoughts are so twisted...? Vina Ruu pondered with yet another sigh.

It was then that there was a rustling from the nearby thicket.

Vina Ruu leapt to her feet in a hurry, thinking it would be a giiz or something.

However, it was no wild animal. In fact, it was a man of the forest's edge, clad in a hunter's attire and with blades hanging from his hip.

Seeing that, Vina Ruu went to breathe a sigh of relief, but the man clearly

looked troubled. He was glancing left and right in even more of a panic than she had felt, and then placed one knee on the ground as if begging her.

“I’m so very sorry for startling you. I most certainly didn’t come here with any wicked thoughts in mind.”

At first, she had no idea what he was saying. But then, the meaning of those words slowly sunk in, and she instinctively backed away.

“You’re... not under the Ruu clan, are you...?”

“That’s right. I’m from the Dai clan, and my name is Deel Dai. I’m the second son of the main Dai house.”

Vina Ruu had never heard of that clan before. But at any rate, it definitely wasn’t one of the ones under the Ruu.

“What is a member of the Dai doing here in the Ruu settlement...? As you can see, today we’re holding a wedding banquet.”

“Yes, and I offer my sincerest apologies. I had heard tell of the Ruu banquets enough that I couldn’t help but wonder what they were really like, and ultimately my curiosity won out, so I came to have a peek.”

The youth who said that didn’t look especially villainous or intimidating. In fact, he looked a bit weak overall for a man of the forest’s edge.

He was fairly tall but didn’t exactly have a robust physique, and he had a gentle look about his face, and timidity in his eyes. His long, dark brown hair came all the way down to his shoulders. Since Vina Ruu was accustomed to seeing the manly hunters under her clan, he honestly looked a bit unreliable to her overall.

“Curiosity, huh...? But spying on a banquet held by a clan you have no blood ties to goes against our traditions, doesn’t it...?”

“I certainly can’t defend myself on that point. I’ve been bottling up such feelings a lot lately, but it looks like they finally slipped out.”

Even his words lacked strength. He felt so out of place that Vina Ruu couldn’t help but have the ridiculous thought that maybe he was someone from town dressed up as a person of the forest’s edge.

“What do you mean, you’ve been bottling up your feelings...?” she ended up asking on a whim.

The youth certainly seemed to lack both the will and the strength he would need to do her harm, and besides... After sitting there watching her comrades all enjoying themselves, someone with Deel Dai’s gloomy nature appealed to her a bit. He was a much better match for her right now, with the mood she was in today. It was irresponsible, but that was how she truly felt at the moment.

As he kneeled there in front of her, Deel Dai blinked in surprise.

“What...? Ah, it’s not something I should be telling to a stranger...”

“If you don’t want to discuss it I won’t force you, but... Well, would you mind telling me to make amends for scaring me like that?”

“Er, it’s just... Well, I’ve been worrying over the fact that I’ve fallen for someone whose position is far greater than my own...”

“What...?” Vina Ruu questioned, feeling disappointed. “Love troubles, huh? I was expecting something more interesting...”

“I-Isn’t it kind of mean to say that to someone? For me, it’s a huge deal that’ll have a serious impact on the rest of my life.”

“That may be the case for you, but I figure most men worry about stuff like that...”

“Of course we do. Who to marry is the most important decision in anyone’s life, whether they’re a man or a woman, right?”

“Hmm?” Vina Ruu responded indifferently, then sat back down by the same tree as before. “Still, this is my first time meeting a man who would bring up such a topic in front of a woman. You certainly are an odd one...”

“You’re the one who told me to say it, though,” Deel Dai replied with a pout. “Besides, you’re rather unusual yourself, aren’t you? Are all the Ruu women as tough and difficult as you are?”

“The Ruu clan has nothing to do with it. I’m just me,” Vina Ruu retorted, her mood taking a turn for the worse.

Deel Dai retained his smile but looked a bit sad as he replied, “That’s true. If the people of the forest’s edge didn’t place such emphasis on clans, then I probably wouldn’t have to suffer so. I’ve always felt proud to have been born as one of our people, but... Well, in this case alone, I really disagree with the customs of the forest’s edge.”

“That’s quite an exaggerated statement there,” Vina Ruu said with a shrug of her shoulders. “So, who in the world did you fall for, anyway? Could it be someone under the Ruu...?”

“Ah, no, that’s—” Deel Dai started to object, only for a firm voice to shout out from the plaza.

“What are you doing?!”

In no time at all, Vina Ruu’s brothers Jiza and Darmu Ruu approached.

“Who in the world are you? You’re not under the Ruu, right? You’re not from the Suun, are you?” Darmu Ruu demanded, reaching for the blade dangling from his hip. He was still just 14 years old, but he was pretty tall and was already an excellent hunter.

Faced with Darmu Ruu’s intense blue eyes that were just like his father’s, Deel Dai hurriedly bowed his head.

“No, I’m from the Dai clan. I most certainly didn’t have any intention of ruining this banquet, so—”

“The Dai are a small clan with a settlement a bit north from here, aren’t they?” Jiza Ruu called out in a relaxed tone.

Both his voice and face seemed calm, but his physique was far more intimidating than that of his younger brother. He had just turned 18 this year, but he was already powerful enough to make it into the final eight in contests of strength.

“At any rate, people from clans with no blood ties to the Ruu have no right to step foot in this banquet. Leave this place right away.”

“Ah, no, but...”

“If you don’t intend to leave, then I’ll judge you as guilty of the crime of

having entered another's home without permission and take one of your toes."

With that, Deel Dai stood up and bowed again, his face looking downright heartbroken.

"I'll leave. And you have my deepest apologies for my rudeness here. Well then, excuse me..."

"Ah, hold on..." Vina Ruu called out, her face pained as she watched the youth disappear into the darkness.

"What a suspicious man. We should inform our clan head about this, too," Jiza Ruu stated, and then his narrowed eyes looked down upon Vina Ruu. "You should call for us immediately when you see someone like that. What were you thinking, just casually talking with him?"

"Nothing, really... I was just chatting with him a bit to stave off the boredom..."

"You're probably the only one around who would say they're bored at an event like this, Vina," Jiza Ruu said with a tilt of his head. "It should be about time for the women to dance. You should get ready, too."

"I don't want to... There's no way I'm dancing..."

"You're 15 now, aren't you? That dance is an opportunity for you to show off and find a good husband," Jiza Ruu insisted.

However, Darmu Ruu chimed in from beside him and said, "It's fine, don't you think? Even if she doesn't do a thing, plenty of men will come to her, so I don't think there's any need for Vina to fan the flames. It doesn't sound like such a bad thing, letting the other women have this chance to themselves."

"Thanks, Darmu... You really are a good boy..."

"Don't go treating me like a kid. I'm a hunter now, you know," Darmu Ruu snapped back with a hostile look on his face, but Vina Ruu found that expression adorable too. He was taller than her now, and used harsher words with her too, but he was still her cute little brother.

"Shouldn't you be returning to the plaza though, Jiza...? Events like this are your only real chances to talk to Sati Lea, aren't they?"

Jiza Ruu stared firmly at his sister's face, then gave a single shrug of his thick shoulders before returning to the plaza.

As he watched their older brother leave, Darmu Ruu leaned up against the trunk of the tree Vina Ruu was sitting under.

"Are you not heading back, Darmu...?"

"I'm still only 14, after all. I can't choose a bride, so there's no point to watching women dance," he bluntly replied.

However, the real reason he was staying with Vina Ruu was out of concern that Deel Dai may return. That was just the sort of person Darmu Ruu was.

Still, what was with that Deel Dai...? Vina Ruu thought to herself while appreciating having her precious younger brother close by.

It wouldn't be long before she got an answer to that question.

◇

The following morning, everyone was busy cleaning up after the banquet.

It had been a big party with 100 people in attendance, after all. Even just taking down the stone stoves and stage took plenty of time, and they couldn't just leave the remains of the bonfires and the like sitting around. Then by the time pots and plates were washed clean and the giba bones discarded out in the woods, bringing the big cleanup to a close, the sun was already high in the sky.

"Well then, let's get back to our usual work. We'll hurry up and gather firewood and herbs, while you all should tan the pelts and take care of things around the house."

With those words, Vina Ruu's mother and her group headed out into the forest. It was important to gather firewood, pico leaves, lilo, and the like from the forest before the sun hit its peak and the giba awoke. And so, that left Vina Ruu and her younger sisters to handle the rest of the work.

"Hey, wasn't the Lea bride from yesterday just wonderful?" Reina Ruu asked as they were tanning the pelt in a sunny spot.

The girl was 12 years old, making her the eldest of Vina Ruu's younger sisters.

Her black hair, rare for the Ruu clan, was tied off in two braids, and she wore an innocent smile.

“Will Jiza and Sati Lea be the next ones to get married? If they do, that’ll be held here too, right?”

“Yes, that’s true...”

“I’m looking forward to it. Hey, Vina, when are you going to get married?”

Vina Ruu met her sister’s sparkling eyes full of anticipation with a gloomy gaze.

“I only just turned 15... I don’t want to go and rush to marry someone...”

“Huh? But everyone keeps saying they want you as a bride! You’re going to turn them *all* down?”

“As the eldest daughter of the main Ruu house, I can’t go choosing my husband lightly...” Vina Ruu answered, and Reina Ruu nodded back.

“I see. But still, I’m really looking forward to seeing your wedding! You’re always so pretty anyway, so you’ll definitely make a prettier bride than anyone!”

“That would certainly be nice...”

Reina Ruu was only 12, so it would be a bit harsh to expect her to understand how Vina Ruu felt. And so, the older girl stifled a sigh and used a rope attached to a nearby tree to hang a giba pelt.

It was then that a commotion erupted from the pantry behind them. And those voices belonged to their younger siblings, Ludo and Lala Ruu.

“What are you making a fuss about...? You need to be taking care of your work, too.”

“But Ludo threw pico leaves at me, and they even got in my nose!”

“Hmph! You started it by calling me little, when you’re just a runt yourself.”

Ludo Ruu was 10, while Lala Ruu was 8. That put them both at a rather mischievous age, but once a child was over five, they were expected to help out with work.

“If you go around wasting pico leaves, then mother will scold you, you know.”

“Yeah, yeah, Vina. Where did Rimee get to...?”

“I believe she left on a walk with Granny Jiba... Lala, are you alright?”

“Yeah,” the young girl replied, rubbing her nose with tears in her eyes. The sight alone was enough to make you feel bad for her, but Ludo Ruu also wasn’t the sort to pick on his little sister over nothing. And so, Lala Ruu must have started things, then Ludo Ruu struck back.

“Man, I want to hurry up and become a hunter, too. I can’t stand having to wait three more years!”

“If you feel that way, then you should work hard and build up strength, right...? You can’t serve as a hunter with a body as small as that, after all.”

“You’re calling me little too, Vina?! You think you’re all that just because you’ve got a big butt?!” Ludo Ruu yelled back at her, slapping her rear with his little hand.

“Hey!” Vina Ruu retorted, her face turning red, only for the boy to swiftly flee. “I really just don’t know how to handle Ludo... I’ll have to have father chew him out again...”

“Right,” Reina Ruu replied, smiling for some reason. “Still, you really will be a wonderful bride someday, Vina.”

“Huh...? What are you talking about...?”

“Maybe it’s because you have so many little brothers and sisters... Anyway, you’re still just 15, but you already know how to act like a mother!”

“But you’re already way better at grilling meat and cooking stew, Reina...”

Apparently Reina Ruu couldn’t get brides and weddings off her brain since the banquet last night. Vina Ruu’s thoughts were driven in a similar yet completely opposite way, which led to her feeling gloomier and gloomier.

“Well then, that should be the pelts handled... I’ll go chop firewood, so could you dry out the pico leaves, Reina? And if it looks like it’s going to rain, then make sure to get them in under a roof, alright?”

“Yup, got it!”

With that, Vina Ruu was able to successfully distance herself from her beloved sisters. And so, she grabbed a hatchet and a bundle of firewood from the storage, then moved around to the side of the house.

Jiza is 18, while Sati Lea is 16... I’ll probably start getting pestered more and more to hurry up and get married as I get older...

Fortunately, her mother and the leader of the house’s women, Mia Lea Ruu, wasn’t that fixated on her getting married young. In fact, her way of thinking was that you can be patient and wait until you meet the right person.

But eventually, she won’t keep quiet about it either... Will I really end up meeting someone I want to marry eventually...? Vina Ruu thought to herself as she swung down the hatchet.

The firewood split in two and tumbled to the ground.

She kept on silently working away, and around when she was halfway through the pile of firewood, she sensed someone approaching from behind.

And after nonchalantly turning around, she gasped, as she found Deel Dai standing there again.

“I’m sorry for interrupting in the middle of your work, but could we have a short talk?”

“What are you doing in a place like this...?”

“I’m not here again without permission, if that’s what you’re thinking. I said that I was looking for you, and was allowed to step foot into the settlement,” Deel Dai replied with a smile.

Seeing him again under the light of day, he really was rather gentle looking for a man of the forest’s edge, and had a bit of an unreliable feeling about him.

“You were looking for me...? But you shouldn’t even know my name...”

“That’s true. But when I explained that I was searching for a beautiful woman around age 15 with pale hair and eyes, I was told I likely meant Vina Ruu of the main house. That’s your name, isn’t it?”

Deel Dai stopped at an appropriate distance, and didn't try to come any closer.

It was hard to imagine he would try something inappropriate right in the middle of the Ruu settlement. After all, the brawny men of the clan were right there inside their houses, resting before heading out for their hunt. And Deel Dai would surely be no match at all for even the youngest of the Ruu hunters.

"Do you have some sort of business with me...?"

"I wanted to apologize for my rudeness yesterday. I explained as much to a woman from one of the branch houses, and was allowed into the settlement."

"I think you'd likely better leave before Jiza or my father wake..."

"Yes. I have no intention of staying for long. I still have to work as a hunter too, after all," Deel Dai replied, remaining fixed in place as he said so.

Vina Ruu gave a sigh, and loosened her tight grip on the hatchet.

"I believe you've already apologized, now. Do you still have some sort of business with me...?"

"No... I wouldn't call it business exactly, but..." Deel Dai mumbled, his eyes narrowing as he broke out in a pained smile. "You're absolutely beautiful, Vina Ruu."

"Huh...?"

"I haven't been able to get that thought out of my head since last night. I've never seen anyone as pretty as you before in my whole life."

"Didn't you say you had fallen for some other woman who had nothing to do with the Ruu clan...?"

"I did. But that just goes to show how greatly I've been charmed by your beauty. Still, how ironic, that you would turn out to be the eldest daughter of the main Ruu house..." Deel Dai stated, shaking his head as he spoke. "I thought it best that I do away with that love that will never be fulfilled and come to you instead. And yet, I found out that you're of such a high status... It really, truly feels ironic. Am I fated to keep on falling for women I can never be with?"

"I don't know anything about all that," Vina Ruu replied, brushing aside her

long bangs and glaring at the man. “To think that you would tell me you were in love with another woman just yesterday, and then say such things after only meeting me once... Your feelings certainly come across as rather cheap and trifling, don’t they?”

“That’s not true at all. It’s just that it felt too hard to keep holding onto passions that would never be fulfilled, and so your presence felt like salvation to me. Perhaps it’s the guidance of the forest that has led me once again to such suffering...”

“It’s rather disrespectful to the forest to blame it for your own shallow nature...” Vina Ruu stated, in something of a strange mood. “Deel Dai... You really are odd. How should I put it...? You’re like someone from town playing at being a man of the forest’s edge.”

“Ah, I get that a lot from my family, too. I really love heading to town, so maybe that’s how I ended up this way.”

“You like the town of Genos...?”

That had certainly been a surprising statement.

However, Deel Dai replied, “That’s right,” with a light smile and a nod. “I’d have trouble explaining why if you asked, though. But I mean, the townsfolk are all so free, right? Especially those travelers from Sym and Jagar. They can visit Genos whenever they want, and head back home when they please, too. Ever since I was a child, I’ve often wondered what it would be like to live such a life.”

Vina Ruu didn’t know what to say to that.

“All of us people of the forest’s edge spend our whole lives here. Occasionally we’ll head to town to purchase aria and poitan, but we don’t have anything to do with outsiders. I can’t speak for anyone else, but... Well, don’t you think that’s far too limited of a life?”

“That’s true... I’ve thought the same...”

Vina Ruu could feel her heart pounding faster, bit by bit.

That was a secret that she hadn’t even ever told her family.

“At the forest’s edge, everyone just sees me as the eldest daughter of the

main Ruu house... In the post town, I'm only seen as a savage woman of the forest's edge... But would people from somewhere far from Genos be able to see me as just a girl, I wonder...?"

"Yes, I'm sure that they would," Deel Dai answered, his eyes narrowing a bit as he stared at her with rapt attention.

Vina Ruu felt her chest pounding even more intensely.

"In that case... why not leave the forest's edge...? If you did, then you wouldn't have to go against your feelings anymore..."

"Huh?" Deel Dai questioned, his eyes opening wide.

Half-subconsciously, Vina Ruu came up close to him.

"I don't know who it is that you had feelings for, but if you left the forest's edge, then the sizes of clans and the like wouldn't matter at all... Even if it means leaving home, if it meant living how you dreamed, couldn't that make for a happy enough life...?"

Deel Dai's face went pale and he stumbled several steps back.

Then, he placed his right fist up against his forehead and hung his head in disappointment.

"Oh forest, please grant your forgiveness to this stray member of your people... Vina Ruu, you should never mention abandoning the forest, even as a joke."

Vina Ruu just stood there, speechless.

"We were granted our souls by the forest, and that is where they must someday return. No matter what doubts you may have, that is a law you must never, ever turn your back on."

"Oh, really?" Vina Ruu retorted, her burning hot emotions quickly freezing over. "I simply said that out of concern for you. So, you don't feel strongly enough to discard the forest for the one you love, then...?"

"That very thought itself is blasphemy. I can't accept such statements, even from a woman."

“In that case, you should behave yourself and find a more fitting bride.”

By this point, Vina Ruu had lost any and all interest in the youth.

And so, she turned her back on the still pale Deel Dai and placed a new chunk of firewood atop the stand.

“Well then, I have work to do, so could you leave already? You have to go hunt too, don’t you...?”

“Right... Can I ask one last thing, though?” Deel Dai asked, circling around Vina Ruu’s side and smiling again. “I heard that with yesterday’s wedding, the Ririn were taken in under the Ruu clan. The Dai aren’t all that big of a clan, but we possess more members and strength than the Ririn. So would it also be possible for the Dai clan to—”

“Apparently, the Ririn clan head defeated the Lea clan head in a contest of strength between hunters. Of course, he wasn’t able to overcome my father or the Rutim clan head, but he still did more than enough to prove his skill. Are you saying you’d be capable of doing the same...?” Vina Ruu asked, glaring at Deel Dai out of the corner of her eye. “Well, you’re free to hope for whatever you please. However, please keep in mind that I have absolutely no intention of ever marrying someone as pathetic as you.”

With that, Deel Dai broke out in another sad, pained smile.

It was hard to decide if the fact that he could smile under such circumstances made him seem stronger or weaker as a person. Vina Ruu honestly couldn’t say, but she also no longer cared in the least.

“I’m sorry for interrupting your work... Well then, please excuse me.”

Vina Ruu just swung her hatchet down into the firewood, not even bothering to reply.

Then, Deel Dai left, leaving Vina Ruu all on her own once again.

Well, I suppose that just makes him a normal man of the forest’s edge...

There wasn’t anything strange about that.

Vina Ruu really was the only one who had such thoughts after all...

Was it really the right way to live, spending your whole life at the forest's edge? No one else living here worried about that, surely.

I really did something stupid, there...

Why had she opened up about something she had never even told her family to a stranger she had only just met last night? Realizing how careless she had been only caused Vina Ruu to feel even gloomier.

Of course, she hadn't ever seriously considered abandoning her home. The very thought of leaving her beloved family behind pained her greatly.

However, she also couldn't simply cast aside her dreams, either.

Was there somewhere else out there where she could live how she wanted, without hesitation? Where she wouldn't have to worry if she alone was a good-for-nothing heretic, and could feel free?

Such a thing would never be permitted, though...

Vina Ruu swung down the hatchet with all her might.

Perhaps the firewood had been rotten on the inside or something, as it was blown to pieces before falling to the ground.

◇

Several days had rolled by since then.

By the time those visitors appeared, Vina Ruu had just about finally wiped Deel Dai from her mind entirely.

When the sun had nearly hit its peak, the men headed off into the forest. The women were taking a short break before starting on their next task, and during that time, Vina Ruu went off on her own to take a walk outside of the settlement. It was then that they suddenly appeared, standing arrogantly in her path.

"Oh...? Are you perhaps the eldest daughter of the main Ruu house?"

The one to speak was a woman with a strange, ominous aura hanging about her. She looked to be around the same age as Vina Ruu. Her finely-braided blackish-brown hair hung down over her shoulder, and her black eyes had a

chilly shine to them. She was beautiful, but she also possessed the eerie aura of a poisonous snake.

The other member of the pair was an older man with hair that was starting to grey. He had the burly physique of a hunter, but his gaze was muddied and looked like that of a corpse. And so, he too had an ominous air about him in an entirely different way than the woman.

“Who are you two, exactly? I don’t believe I’ve ever seen you around here before...”

“I am the eldest daughter of the main Suun house, Yamiru Suun, and this is Tei Suun of the branch houses.”

Upon hearing that, Vina Ruu froze up from pure astonishment.

The Suun were the leading clan of the forest’s edge. And on top of that, they had long since had a feud with the Ruu clan. In all likelihood, the two clans would someday end up in a battle that would wipe one of them out. People had been saying as much since forever now.

“What are members of the Suun clan doing wandering around a place like this? Your settlement is far to the north, isn’t it...?”

“That’s right. It really was troublesome, having to come all this way,” Yamiru Suun said, the corners of her mouth rising upwards as she did so. “Still, it was certainly lucky to run into you like this. Perhaps that’s thanks to the forest’s guidance.”

“What business could you possibly have with me...?”

Vina Ruu was feigning calm, but inside, she was feeling seriously shaken.

All of the Ruu men were out in the forest. Even if she ran back to the settlement, there were only women there. And even though that man looked completely listless, there was no way women could possibly fight back against him.

Harming someone else without reason absolutely wasn’t allowed at the forest’s edge. However, just around when Vina Ruu had been born, the Suun clan had kidnapped and murdered a Muufa woman who was set to marry into

the Ruu. There had been no firm proof left they had done it, but ever since then, the Ruu and Suun reached a point where neither could stand the other even existing. And so, if these two were to harm Vina Ruu here and now, it would surely lead the forest's edge into bloody war.

"It's nothing all that complicated. You're familiar with the name Deel Dai, aren't you?"

"Deel Dai...?"

"Yes, that's right. That man has caused quite a bit of trouble for me. He's from such a small little clan, and yet he said he fell for me of all people."

So this snake of a woman was the one Deel Dai had fallen in love with? The thought caused Vina Ruu to give another mental sigh.

"That man attended the clan head meeting, accompanying the head of his clan. And from what he said, it was love at first sight when he saw me at the Suun settlement. Really, what was he thinking, falling for me, the eldest daughter of the main house of our people's leading clan?"

"Is that really so odd...? It would be possible if he were to marry into the Suun clan, wouldn't it...?"

"What, and then the Suun would welcome that pathetic Dai clan under it? They have so few members and live so far away that such a thing would never be accepted. And besides, their settlement is very close to the Ruu, so it would be no surprise for them to betray the Suun at any moment," Yamiru Suun said, letting out a venomous chuckle. "No, that would never be allowed at all. And even if someone else let it pass, the previous Suun clan head would absolutely put a stop to it."

"The previous clan head...?"

"At any rate, it's nothing but a hassle, so I've come to warn Deel Dai to never come anywhere near the Suun settlement ever again. And that's when I happened to hear your name, Vina Ruu, eldest daughter of the main Ruu house."

So that man had told her Vina Ruu's name. That fact made her feel even more fed up with him than before.

“Well, I was perfectly glad to hear that his affections had turned toward another woman, but still... Will you be taking Deel Dai as a husband? I certainly couldn’t imagine the eldest daughter of the main Ruu house would marry into a tiny clan like the Dai.”

“I’m not getting married to him at all. I have no interest in him whatsoever...”

“Really?” Yamiru Suun questioned, her gaze narrowing. She really did look just like a poisonous snake that had found its prey. “There’s no need to hold back on my account, you know. After all, I came all this way to firmly cut all ties with the man.”

“I’m not holding back in the least.”

Could that be why this woman held such spite toward Vina Ruu? That man was following her around, and just when she went to tell him to leave her alone as he was being a nuisance, she found out he now had feelings for another woman. Vina Ruu found it a bit hard to imagine, but it was easy to see how that could prove quite vexing to a highly prideful woman.

“I see... If you’re telling the truth, then that’s a wise decision. That man was nothing but a smooth talker, so if you were to marry him, you’d surely end up unhappy.”

Vina Ruu didn’t say anything to that.

“That man shouldn’t be bothering you any further, either. After all, he’s now going to be marrying a woman from a Dai branch house.”

“Huh...? That sounds rather sudden...”

“It certainly is. In fact, it was only just decided,” Yamiru Suun replied with a snicker. “I was the one who ordered him to do so. With that frivolous personality of his, it would be easy to see him appearing before you or me again on a whim, wouldn’t you say? And so, I made him exchange vows with that woman so such a thing wouldn’t happen.”

As Vina Ruu stood there frozen in astonishment, Yamiru Suun gradually stepped closer. And then, her slick-shining red lips opened, and she whispered more sickening words accompanied by her warm breath.

“Just think about it. That man dared to ask for marriage with both the Suun and Ruu clans. Regardless of his true feelings on the matter, if we simply allowed such fickle actions, it could easily result in our two clans crossing blades. And so, I cut that trouble off at the source.”

“You forced two people to be wed for a reason like that...?”

“Oh? The Suun and Ruu crossing blades would be quite a serious matter, though. If that were to happen, the people of the forest’s edge would likely fall to ruin, after all.” Now so close that their cheeks were almost touching, Yamiru Suun broke out in a wicked grin like a serpent. “Despite what you may think, I did it with the intent of saving our people. I mean, it would be quite foolish to let the forest’s edge fall apart over the actions of one flighty man.”

“You’re a truly frightening woman...”

With that Yamiru Suun finally pulled back, but the grin remained on her face.

“At any rate, that should have settled the matter. If you still had lingering feelings for the man, though, then you have my condolences. And I’ll pray that you find yourself a lovely husband, too.”

Finally, Yamiru Suun left along with her eerie attendant, Tei Suun.

As she walked back toward the Ruu settlement, Vina Ruu gave a heavy sigh.

Maybe... that Yamiru Suun woman has also wanted to run away from the forest’s edge too...

Did she put her trust in Deel Dai because of that desire, and also end up feeling betrayed for the same reason? Vina Ruu couldn’t help but feel that was the case. After all, how she dealt with Deel Dai would be far too cruel, otherwise.

Still, no matter what sort of woman he ended up with, he’ll probably have a far happier life ahead of him than if he married me or Yamiru Suun... Vina Ruu thought, though she wasn’t exactly feeling self-deprecating about it.

At the very least, she possessed feelings that went against the laws of the forest’s edge. She certainly didn’t think she would work up enough foolhardy will to actually act on them, but the thoughts alone were enough to make her a

traitor and a heretic.

It was good for Deel Dai to marry a woman free of such thoughts and live a happy, peaceful life. From what Vina Ruu had seen, he was a weak enough person that he could never serve as a husband to her or Yamiru Suun. That wasn't down to his status, though, but rather his lacking capabilities in general. And that was why Yamiru Suun had rejected his request right from the very start.

Right... The strange ones are me and Yamiru Suun... Deel Dai certainly had an awful fate, to only fall for women like us...

Deel Dai would surely live a proper, sound life as a man of the forest's edge from here on out. It was a bit sad that he would have to remain married for life to someone he hadn't even chosen, but that fact was what freed him from a cruel destiny. And so, he had most definitely gained more than he had lost.

What will be my fate, though...? Can I keep on living properly alongside my precious family, as a woman of the forest's edge...?

Vina Ruu was still young, and she just couldn't imagine it.

It would be five more years before she finally met Asuta and Shumiral. And it would be even longer than that before she sorted out her own feelings.

Having no idea of the destiny that awaited her, Vina Ruu hurried on back to her beloved family.

Afterword

You have my deepest thanks for picking up this book, the eighth volume of *Cooking with Wild Game*.

I mentioned as much in the afterword last time, but this volume ended up being a collection of short stories. In terms of the contents, it's like a prequel to the direct confrontation with the nobles. However, it's made up of main chapters rather than bonus ones, so I hope you'll enjoy it the same as always.

Looking back on how I felt while writing it, I thought that as the stories about confronting the Suun clan and nobles advanced, the important matter of cooking took a back seat, which is why I think I went ahead with this sort of content. And since last time felt strongly like an ending to one part of the story, I believe I wanted to dig into all sorts of odds and ends before diving into the next chapter.

Perhaps all that sounds like a bit of a shaky analysis, but I originally wrote the content for this volume back around the end of 2014 and the start of 2015, so it's already been more than a year and a half now.

It always is shocking how quickly time flies.

Well, normally when I go to novelize my work I don't pay too much attention to when it was originally written, but this time it left a strong impression on me. As for why, that was because for my update on New Year's Day, I squeezed in Asuta giving a toast. I guess you could say I was playing around in a way that was only possible because the web version was published in real time. That was ultimately cut in this novel version, but I hope you enjoy imagining where it originally fit in.

As for the bonus chapter, I went with a story told from Vina Ruu's point of view. And it's a tale I have rather strong feelings about, too. In fact, I had been thinking for quite some time that I really needed to write it someday.

To explain in a way that won't spoil it, it's a story from five years before Vina Ruu first met a certain someone. On top of that, it answers a question from the main story of, "Why does Vina Ruu know that person when they live so far

apart?”

The women of the forest’s edge don’t have any custom of traveling several hours to visit another house, so people who live a distance from one another may never meet in their whole lives. And even if they do, it could just be as a chance encounter in the post town while out shopping.

Thanks to such thoughts, I made sure to come up with a reason she would be acquainted with Vina Ruu when introducing her in the main story, but I didn’t have a chance to reveal the details up until now.

Looking back, I wrote the part where that character was first introduced back in October of 2014, or volume five of the novels. It took nearly two years, but I’m truly glad to finally be able to reveal her past with Vina Ruu.

And so, I managed to fill up the pages this time around rather quickly. It was all behind the scenes stuff, but hopefully that’s the part of the afterword that you really enjoy.

Now then... 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.

I hope to see you all again with the next volume!

August 2016,

EDA

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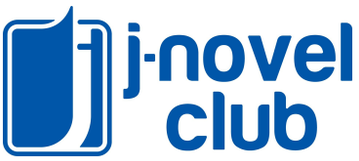
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Cooking with Wild Game: Volume 8

by EDA

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Edited by Adam Fogle

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