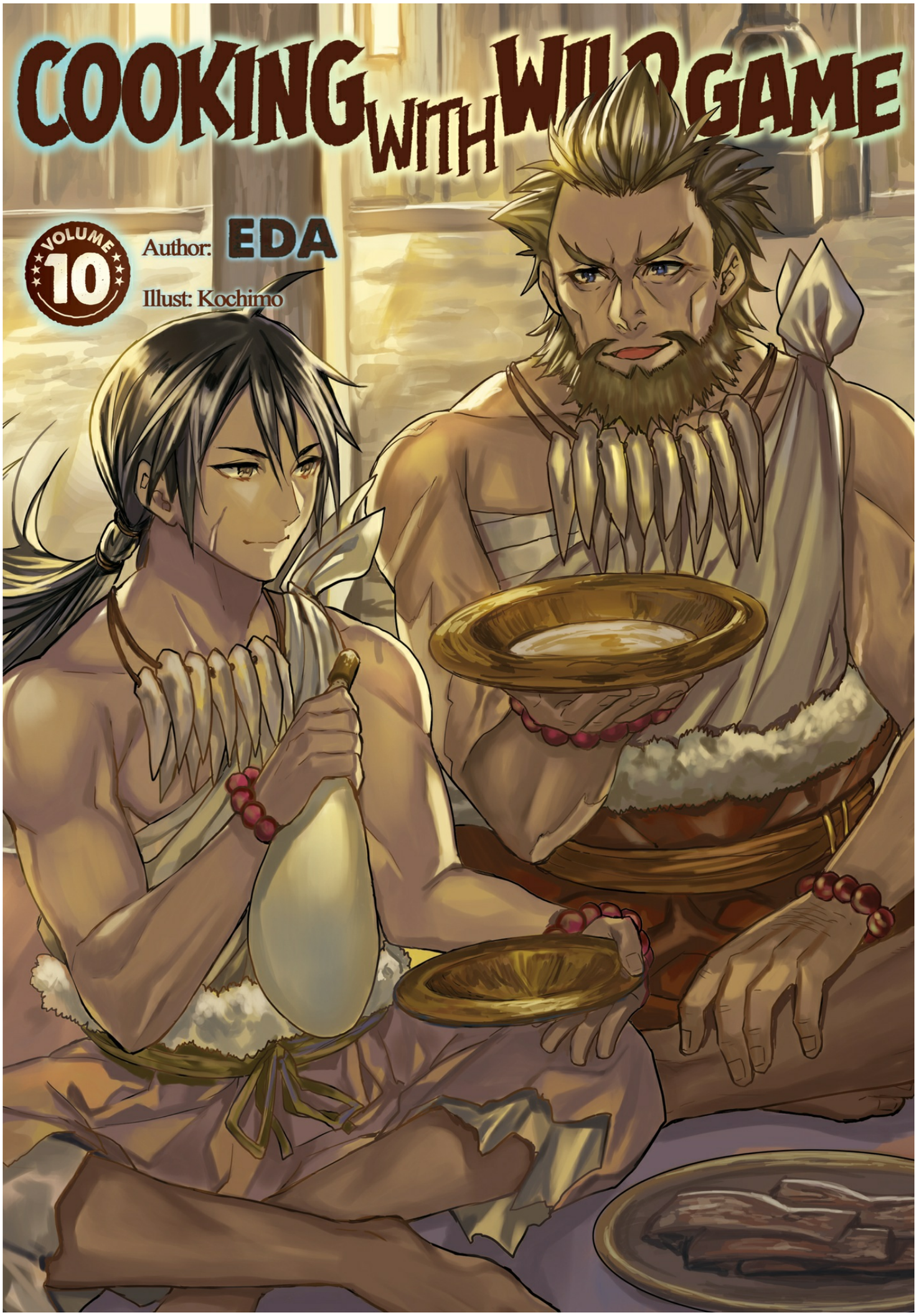
COOKING WITH WILD GAME

VOLUME 10

Author: EDA

Illust: Kochimo




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"Still, if this is a trap to bring down the people of the forest's edge, then who exactly is behind it...?"
"Ugh, what an irritating story! This is clearly the work of someone from town or the castle, no matter how you look at it," Ludo Ruu grumbled.
"Huh? It's gotta be that Cyclaeus noble, right? Who else is there?"
COOKING WITH WILD GAME
VOLUME 10


I sighed while leaning against the rugged rocky surface.
The light shone down through the trees as a bird cried out from overhead. A cool, refreshing breeze blew through the morning forest, bringing with it the aroma of vegetation and flowers. And from the other side of the rock, I could hear Ai Fa splashing gently in the water as she bathed.
In the midst of my busy days, times like this were truly precious to me.


There was now some sort of mysterious light in Yamiru Lea's eyes, behind her long bangs.
"Huh? You know what that's about, Yamiru Lea?"
"Hmm, so that's it... Is that why Zuuro Suun is so afraid of being handed over to the castle, perhaps...?"
"I can't say I do. But you can naturally imagine when you think about it, can you not?"

MENU

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Prologue: The Past Blue Month

With my farewells to Shumiral's and Pops's groups, the blue month had come to a close.

I didn't learn about this world's calendar until after this month started. I didn't even know months were denoted with colors here until I heard that the clan head meeting was on the tenth of the blue month. And apparently it had already been 70 days since I came to this world. That meant the month had already changed over twice before I learned how the calendar worked.

My chance meeting with Ai Fa seems to have occurred at the end of the yellow month. That soon ended, and then we entered into the green month. That was when I was tasked with manning the stove for the Rutim wedding, met Kamyua Yoshu, and started doing business in the post town.

Those days were already plenty hectic, but things got even more busy once the blue month rolled around. Even after the clan head meeting was over, there was still the whole incident with Zattsu and Tei Suun, and then we became aware of the mysterious noble Cyclaeus, too.

I had thought all the strife centered around the Suun clan would come to a close with Tei Suun's death, but that sadly wasn't the case, because next the question had been raised as to whether or not Cyclaeus was the one who had been manipulating the Suun clan from the shadows.

Cyclaeus was one of the nobles who ruled over Genos. And since their settlement fell on Genos land, the lord of the people of the forest's edge was naturally Duke Marstein Genos. Cyclaeus, in turn, acted as a mediator between the lord and the forest's edge. And so, he stood in a position to serve as Duke Marstein's proxy when talking to them.

The ones to first cast suspicion on Cyclaeus's role in the Suun clan's actions were Duke Marstein's oldest son and the next lord of this land, Melfried, and his sworn friend, the bodyguard Kamyua Yoshu. Apparently, Kamyua Yoshu was the first one to suspect the noble, and he passed those suspicions along to

Melfried.

Honestly, Kamyua Yoshu's position felt rather complicated to figure out. To start with, young Leito served as his apprentice. And that boy's father had been the leader of the merchant group that was attacked and massacred by Zattsu and Tei Suun ten years ago.

On top of that, the brother-in-law of The Kimyuus's Tail's owner Milano Mas had also been a member of the group. The man had died clutching a hunter's necklace, which was the starting point of everything.

Based on that evidence, it was whispered throughout the post town that the people of the forest's edge were the ones behind the attack. And it didn't help that the Suun clan kept breaking laws left and right, bringing mistrust and fear down on all of their people.

However, the nobles of Genos took no action to properly judge the people of the forest's edge. And that didn't just go for the incident with the merchant caravan. On top of that, the envoys from the nearby town of Banarm and the leader of Genos's militia had been killed by people thought to belong to the forest's edge, but in the end those actions were all blamed on the Red Beard bandits instead.

The Red Beards had a rule to never kill and only ever targeted nobles and wealthy merchants, and then distributed the riches they gained to the poor. Thanks to that, they were known as heroic outlaws. And yet, they were charged with those crimes without evidence, and every last one of their members were executed.

It had been the new leader of the militia who had sentenced them, a man by the name of Ciluel... and he was also Cyclaeus's younger brother.

That had been enough to make Kamyua Yoshu confident this was a plot put together by Cyclaeus. He had instigated the Suun clan's attacks in order to get rid of anyone who stood in his way, and then thrust the blame on the Red Beards, killing two birds with one stone. Then the truth was all buried away, leaving Cyclaeus with his current power and authority... That was what Kamyua Yoshu deduced, and what he brought before Melfried. Since the son of the lord of Genos had a firm belief that crimes must be met with punishment, he quickly

set in motion an in-depth investigation into Cyclaeus's activities.

However, they were unable to find any proof that Cyclaeus was the mastermind behind everything, so they made up a fake merchant caravan heading to Sym to use as bait to lure out the criminals. The end result of their plan? The Suun's crimes were brought to light. Thanks to the events at the clan head meeting, the Suun were removed from power, and then their previous head Zattsu Suun and his one follower Tei Suun attacked the caravan, leading to the former being captured.

Zattsu Suun confessed to committing the same crime ten years in the past while spitting out his curses, and then he died while imprisoned. As for Tei Suun, he also died while martyring himself to Zattsu Suun's disastrous cause. At the very least, that made it quite clear who was responsible for attacking that old caravan, and it wasn't the Red Beards.

Kamyua Yoshu and Melfried then grasped at that one single thread and started putting together a plan to expose Cyclaeus's old crimes. The first step there was searching out the one survivor of the Red Beards, the wife of the bandits' leader.

For that, they borrowed the aid of three hunters of the Ruu branch houses. Bringing them and Leito along with him, Kamyua Yoshu departed from Genos on the morning of the last day of the blue month.

However, something surprising happened to us in the early afternoon of the same day: A boy calling himself the son of the bandits' leader appeared in front of us.

He had given his name as Jeeda, son of Goram Redbeard. His hair was a blazing red and his yellow eyes were like those of a beast, but he was still just a young boy. And apparently, he had come to Genos for revenge against the people of the forest's edge, since his father was executed in their place.

Kamyua Yoshu had been trying to find his mother, but they had completely passed one another by. Fate was playing a little joke on them. And on top of that, Jeeda ended up disappearing again rather than listening to anything we had to say.

Cyclaeus, meanwhile, had ordered that the people of the forest's edge hand

over all members of the Suun clan to the castle as criminals. And he wasn't just aiming at the clan head Zuuro Suun, but every last person in the main house. Diga, Doddo, Mida, Yamiru Lea, Tsuvai, Oura... Their blood ties had been severed and their crimes forgiven by the forest's edge, but Cyclaeus kept on persistently coming after them.

There was only half a month left till the next meeting, whether we chose to obey or resist. And so, the people of the forest's edge needed to decide on a path forward by the 15th of the white month.

Would it be possible to expose Cyclaeus's old crimes and turn everything around before then? As we were in the midst of pondering that question, Jeeda had suddenly appeared. It was like he was the living conclusion the hectic blue month had been leading up to.

Would Kamyua Yoshu be successful in locating Jeeda's mother?

Why was Cyclaeus so insistent that we hand over the members of the main Suun house? And just what was he planning, stretching the meeting date out till halfway through the month?

Would the people of the forest's edge be able to reconcile with Jeeda?

As the blue month came to a close, that multitude of questions lay before us unanswered.

Chapter 1: The First Day of the White Month, Asuta's Day (First Half)

1

Despite all the problems at hand, my day started off quite peacefully.

Each day, we kept on striving to carry out our grand objective of bringing prosperity to the forest's edge. And no matter what sort of plots we might find ourselves wrapped up in, I had no intention of ever putting that goal second.

Meanwhile, my business had stabilized quite a bit as of late, so the same was true of my general lifestyle. Perhaps my life balancing out was helped by the fact that the climate around Genos, the forest's edge included, seemed to be nice and consistent.

It had already been 70 days now since I had come to live at this settlement, but I hadn't sensed any significant changes in the temperature or the length of each day. It was similar to Japan in early summer, and as for when the sun rose and set... Well, I still hadn't seen a clock yet in this world, so I had to guess at it, but I'd say we were talking around 6am for sunrise and 7pm for sunset.

In the Fa house we started dinner around when the sun went down, and about two hours after that we lay down for bed. Before falling asleep I would generally talk with Ai Fa, only having the faint light of the animal fat candle to illuminate us, and in no time at all, I would drift off.

If my intuition was on point then we went to bed around 9pm, which sounded healthy enough to me. However, there wasn't exactly any guarantee that a day was 24 hours here in this world. There weren't any clocks around, and so it wasn't clear how many hours I was sleeping for.

However, even if I didn't have any precise numbers to work with, it was abundantly clear that we were living healthily. We worked hard during the day, stuffed our bellies full of giba cooking, slept soundly, and then woke up completely rested and full of energy for another day's work. Living such well-

regulated and fulfilling days came easier than you'd think.

And so, we headed into the first day of the white month.

As always, we started it sprawled out in the middle of the room, and the first to awaken was of course Ai Fa.

"Ah... Good morning, Ai Fa," I said while rubbing my sleepy eyes and sitting up.

"Right," Ai Fa nodded back. She was sitting cross-legged right in the middle of the room, skillfully doing up her blonde hair. I really loved this time of day, when the pale morning light came streaming in through the latticed windows. Just seeing Ai Fa seated there like always filled me with enough motivation to last me through the whole day.

"You should hurry up and get dressed already, too. We need to fill up the water jug today."

"Ah, that's right."

After giving a hearty stretch, I started off by heading into the storage room to change my clothing. Generally, while we were staying at home I would wash my clothes at the same time that I cleaned up after the previous night's dinner.

The storage room was packed with all kinds of assorted goods like a cracked sliding door, firewood that was drying out, and a saw leaning up against the wall. And it was there that I stripped down naked and put on fresh pants, a waistcloth, and a vest. However, I only had the one t-shirt, so I had to carefully wash it each morning and keep on using it.

My white chef's uniform was hanging there on the far wall. It went without saying of course, but that was what I had on when I had been sent here to this world. And as far as I knew, my cleanly washed socks and underwear were still jammed into the pockets.

Ever since Ai Fa gifted me with clothing from the forest's edge, I hadn't slipped my arms through those sleeves even once. This climate just wasn't well suited to a long-sleeved chef's uniform, plus the custom here at the forest's edge was that wearing an outfit with these swirling patterns was proof that you were brethren.

But this fabric came from Sym to start with. Shumiral wore clothing with similar patterns on it under his cloak too, so I guess it wouldn't make for all that big of a difference even if he really does marry into the forest's edge, I thought, reminiscing about the leader of the merchant group from the east known as the Silver Vase, who I had said farewell to just yesterday. Regardless of how things ended up between him and Vina Ruu, it would be half a year from now till he returned to Genos.

I guess around now, he had to be getting dressed to return to his travels. Was the same true of Pops's construction group from the south, too?

As those thoughts ran through my mind, there was a knock from outside the door.

"Hey, did you fall asleep in there? If you keep on dawdling, I'm leaving you behind."

"Ah, I'm coming out now!"

I used my waistcloth to wrap up the t-shirt and pants I had removed, then dangled that from my hips and exited the storage room.

First up was transporting the water jug and the pot stuffed with tableware. I tilted the empty water jug over and rolled it towards the door, while Ai Fa carried over the pot.

"Good morning, Gilulu," I said, spying our totos friend already tied up to a tree.

Lately Ai Fa had been letting Gilulu out after waking up and then getting dressed. I suspected that she was secretly getting her fill of his fluffy plumage as she did so, but unfortunately, I was slower to rise so I hadn't been able to take in such a sight as of yet.

At any rate, I placed the water jug and pot atop the large pulling board, grabbed hold of the attached vines, and took off for the washing place.

Borrowing Gilulu's assistance would certainly make the task a lot easier, but it would be bad for appearances to have the Fa clan be the only ones taking such a lazy route. And besides, it also served as strength training to try to do something about how weak I was. The route to and from the post town had

already gotten much less intense, so if I didn't at least keep doing this much, I'd end up right back where I started, weakened by modern conveniences.

At any rate, I just kept on dragging the pulling board, with Ai Fa supporting the stuff atop so it didn't fall, as always.

The washing place was located less than ten minutes away from the Fa house, and it was one of the branches that came off of the Lanto River. A cold, clear stream steadily running through the rugged, rocky ground, leaving a little pool carved out by the power of water.

There were already four women there at the washing place, from the nearby Fou and Ran. Those were the only two clans who lived close enough to share this washing place. Apparently the Gaaz, Ratsu, and Beim lived further south, while the Sudra and Deen were more to the north.

As we approached, one of the women stood and said "Ah..." She was young, and I didn't really recognize her.

Lately women from the nearby clans had been frequently visiting the Fa house to request cooking lessons, but not all of them did so.

Hmm... But I get the feeling I've seen her somewhere once before... I thought, cocking my head.

Meanwhile, Ai Fa gave her a silent nod from beside me.

However, the woman just sort of wrung her hands and weakly cast her gaze downwards. Meanwhile, the other three women all smiled our way.

"Ah, it's Asuta and Ai Fa! We're wrapping up here, so you can have this spot."

"Thank you," I replied as I dragged up my load.

With that, that uneasy-looking woman moved aside so fast it was like she was about to flee from the scene.

Ai Fa, however, remained completely silent and expressionless.

Somehow, I got the feeling that there was something between the two of them.

"Hey Asuta, we'd like to come by for cooking lessons today. Would that be

alright?” an older Ran woman asked.

I replied “Yeah,” with a nod. “Li Sudra’s set to come by today too, so that works out just fine.”

“Glad to hear it. Um, you see, we were actually thinking about trying out that hamburger steak thing in our clan, too. Do you think we’re not ready for it yet, though...?”

“Of course you are. What matters most is to just keep practicing every day. Even I burned patties back when I was first learning how to make them, and it was just a complete mess.”

“Really? I can’t even imagine it,” the Ran woman said with a grin.

I couldn’t help but feel that I was seeing these women smile a whole lot more lately. Of course being released from the Suun clan’s control likely had a big effect there, but I felt like the new prosperity that had been brought to their lives was having an even bigger impact in terms of brightening them up. And I suspected that applied to both the physical fortune they earned by selling meat to the Fa clan, as well as the joy brought to them by eating delicious food. Though I’m sure I was letting my own desires influence my thinking there. Still, it was a fact that they looked happier, and they also seemed to have a strong desire to strengthen their cooking skills further.

“Yesterday the bloodletting didn’t go all that well. Apparently the giba was really running wild, so they had to bring it down by stabbing it over and over.”

“Well, the men all made it back safely, so that’s what’s most important. Anyway, we did like you told us to, Asuta, and washed the meat in water with salt dissolved in it.”

“Ah, did that help with the stench?”

“Yeah. And the men still tried to drain out as much of the blood as they could manage. Then we pickled it in fruit wine and myamuu and gave it a try, and the taste really wasn’t all that bad.”

“Even if we couldn’t sell it, it was still more than good enough for us to eat,” one of the women chimed in with a smile.

“Anyway, we’ll be counting on you later for the cooking lessons. I’ll go ahead and invite that Deen girl, too.”

“Ah, do you mean Toor Deen?”

“Yup. She’s been seeming rather down because she hasn’t been able to see you lately. Give it enough time, and she seems like she’d make a pretty nice bride...”

I gave a little laugh in response, stealing a glance at my clan head as I did so.

Ai Fa was just silently washing a wooden plate. From what I could tell, she didn’t seem to be paying any attention to our conversation.

As for that woman who acted so strangely when we arrived, she was filling a water jug with a gloomy look on her face.

Staring at her sad expression from the side, I suddenly remembered who she was. She was that Fou woman who had visited the Fa house a while back... Her name was Saris Ran Fou, and she had brought pico leaves as thanks for Ai Fa giving them pelts, back before the Suun clan fell.

It was no surprise that I had such a hard time recalling. That had happened around when I had just started doing business in the post town, which meant it had been a month or so since we met.

And back then, she had been holding an infant even smaller than Kota Ruu. Had she not come to us to learn cooking or here to wash stuff because she was busy taking care of that child? In that case, the fact that she was here now had to mean that tiny little baby was now healthy enough that she could step away for a bit. If the prosperity brought by the Fa clan was even a little bit of a help there, then I would certainly feel glad to hear it.

“Well then, we’ll see you after you’re done with your midday work.”

“Right. I’ll be waiting.”

With that, the Fou and Ran women departed.

Saris Ran Fou didn’t say a single word the whole time, and Ai Fa never looked up at all.

Once we finished with the washing, next up was work around the house and

preparing everything for business in the post town.

After hanging our freshly washed clothing by the window to dry, we each set about handling our own work. For me that meant baking poitan, caring for my cooking knives, and checking over the pantry.

In terms of her daily routine, Ai Fa naturally maintained her blades, too. Aside from that, she used this time to take care of whatever was needed, whether that meant chopping firewood, making jerky, or drying out pico leaves. As for today, she chose the pico leaves.

After baking the poitan just enough that they wouldn't burn, I laid them out in a sunny spot beside Ai Fa's pico leaves, wrapped up my other tasks, and then headed straight into the forest with Ai Fa. Until the poitan and pico leaves were ready, we would gather firewood, herbs, and grigee fruit.

Of course, bathing was naturally part of the daily routine too. The Fou and Ran women apparently had business to take care of further downstream, so there wasn't any real chance of running into them at the riverside.

After entering the forest and walking for around 20 minutes, the Lanto River came into view. An area around a large cluster of rocks about the size of a human was our usual bathing spot.

Yielding the first go to my clan head, I took a seat and leaned up against the biggest rock. After entrusting me with her hunter's cloak and necklace, Ai Fa circled around towards the river.

It would be more efficient for me to use this time to gather stuff, but Ai Fa didn't like me leaving her side when we were in the forest. Even though giba generally weren't active until the sun hit its peak, you'd still occasionally see them now and again before that. And as someone who had actually been attacked by one of those early risers, I couldn't exactly write off Ai Fa's concerns as her being overprotective.

Still, it sure seems peaceful again today, I thought with a sigh while leaning against the rugged rocky surface.

The light shone down through the trees as a bird cried out from overhead. A cool, refreshing breeze blew through the morning forest, bringing with it the

aroma of vegetation and flowers. And from the other side of the rock, I could hear Ai Fa splashing gently in the water as she bathed. In the midst of my busy days, times like this were truly precious to me.

“The weather sure seems nice again today, Ai Fa,” I called out with a raised voice.

“Yes,” Ai Fa replied.

As long as I was with her, it didn’t feel awkward even if we were completely silent. But today, I felt like trying to talk with her.

As I pondered just what topic to go with, though, I recalled the incident from this morning.

“Hey Ai Fa, do you have some sort of ties with that Saris Ran Fou woman?”

No reply came for a bit, which was a little unusual for someone as prompt as my clan head.

Eventually, though, a voice emotionlessly answered, “I wouldn’t go so far as to say that. I was just close to her when we were younger...”

“Ah, a childhood friend! You had someone like that?!”

I was pretty taken off-guard. But thinking more on it, it was not all that surprising. After all, before all that bad blood with the Suun, the Fa must have had relations with the nearby clans.

“So why were things so awkward between you two? There shouldn’t be any more need to worry about the Suun clan anymore, so why not reform your other bonds like with Rimee Ruu and Granny Jiba?”

“Do you really think that’s so easy to do...?” Ai Fa replied, her voice still emotionless but also lacking its usual strength. That was certainly enough to make me regret my thoughtless remark, there.

It wasn’t like Rimee Ruu or Granny Jiba had cut their ties with Ai Fa of their own volition. Ai Fa was the one who distanced herself so as to not bring disaster their way.

However, it was different with the members of the Fou and Ran. They had severed their bonds with the Fa out of fear of the Suun clan.

In spite of all that, Ai Fa had been secretly delivering giba pelts to their houses. She stealthily helped them out without the Suun clan noticing. Perhaps thanks to that, the leaders of the Fou and Ran had come out in support of the Fa clan's actions back at the clan head meeting. In other words, they had clearly and openly revolted against the tyrannical leading clan.

And then, the Suun clan fell and those clan heads bowed before Ai Fa and expressed their regret for their actions, requesting to reforge their bonds with the Fa.

I thought that had settled everything, but I apparently hadn't considered such personal matters. Honestly, I never even imagined Ai Fa would have had a childhood friend.

Just how had Saris Ran Fou felt when she cut ties with Ai Fa? And what was she feeling now?

Did she feel so bad about it that she didn't want to go and approach Ai Fa out of nowhere...?

"That's nothing for you to worry about, Asuta," Ai Fa stated. "The Suun clan was only one of the causes. The ties between myself and Saris Ran Fou were destined to be cut regardless. And that is why they haven't been reformed even after the fall of the Suun."

"Right... I don't think there's any need to force things, either," I replied.

Ai Fa was a truly wondrous person. I really believed that was why the Fou, Ran, and Sudra had all gathered around the Fa clan.

Even if the desire to gain more prosperous lives was at the root of their actions, I believed that Ai Fa's charm was even more important there. That her strength as a hunter, dedication to the way of life of the people of the forest's edge, and overwhelming spirit charmed those clan heads.

And so even without forcing it, I was sure that Saris Ran Fou would eventually return to Ai Fa's side. That was what I truly believed.

"You're a stubborn one, so I can't imagine you being the one to take action, anyway," I added in a whisper, so that Ai Fa wouldn't get angry at me.

In the next instant, though, freezing cold water was dumped over my head and I yelped, “Gyah!”

When I turned around, I found Ai Fa staring down at me from atop the rock, her hair down and dripping. I could only see from her shoulders up, but both her hands were stretched out my way. There was no doubt at all that that was her doing just now.

“What was that for?! That was just plain mean, doing something like that out of nowhere!”

“Oh, I was mean? Who was the one who called his clan head stubborn, exactly?”

“Ah, you heard that...? Huh? But that was way too quick of a retaliation, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, well that’s because I sensed you were going to say something rude and had prepared in advance to strike back.”

“That’s way too prepared, there! What would you have done if I hadn’t said anything?”

“I cannot say. All is in accordance with the forest’s guidance,” Ai Fa replied with a composed look and a shrug of her shoulders. And those shoulders of hers were soaked, too. She must have been hurriedly preparing to retaliate rather than taking the time to put on clothes.

“Are you clinging to the back of that rock in the nude? It’d sure be something if there was someone on the opposite shore...” I threw out there to at least get a little revenge, and Ai Fa’s head swiftly disappeared from sight.

“Hold on for a moment. I’ll pay you back for that comment shortly.”

“Just hurry up and get dressed already! If I’m going to take a bath, I’d really prefer it to be after I’ve got my clothes off!”

I heard a quiet little chuckle from beyond the rock.

So had her mood improved from a nice bath and chastising her rude clan member? I had no way of knowing the truth, but if Ai Fa was feeling better now, then that was all that mattered.

After we finished up with bathing, next came gathering out in the forest. First up were the pico leaves needed to preserve meat, followed by the lilo leaves used for jerky and cubed giba meat stew, and then lastly the grigee fruit used for warding off venomous insects.

As an aside, I never found the body odor of the people of the forest's edge unpleasant. Despite the warm climate they lived in, just eating lots of meat and bathing once a day was enough that it wasn't a problem even for my fine sense of smell.

I felt like these grigee fruits were definitely one of the reasons for that. The people of the forest's edge always wore bracelets made with them in order to keep away bugs, so that scent like a flower just starting to blossom always hit me first.

And when it came to women, they were in frequent contact with pico and lilo leaves. The latter added a nice refreshing aroma, while dried pico leaves were very reminiscent of black pepper.

Plus, I didn't know if it was the fact that they took those herbs into themselves, or just my own subjective impression, but... The people of the forest's edge seemed to smell more of the forest than of human beings, like they were always clad in the scents of the vegetation, earth, and flowers I smelled here in this place.

On top of that, Ai Fa used giba summoning fruit in her hunting. It had been a while now since she had rubbed it on herself for the dangerous act of sacrificial hunting, but it had a more intense smell than grigee and she still used it in traps and the like, so it still clung about her hair, clothing, and body.

Thanks to that, Ai Fa always had a sweeter smell about her than anyone else. When she gathered supplies on the outskirts of the forest like this and worked her freshly bathed body up to a sweat, it only seemed to make that sweet aroma stand out all the more.

At some point I suddenly got the impulse to jokingly say, "It makes me want to charge like a giba!" Naturally, that earned me plenty of kicks to the leg.

At any rate, though, we spent around an hour or so each day gathering herbs and firewood. Then once that was done, I finally started with the prep work for

the food I would be selling in the post town.

However, I had ceded the baking of the poitan for the myamuu giba and the preparation of the patties for the giba burgers to Reina and Sheera Ruu. And so, that just left me with the poitan for the giba burgers and the marinade for the myamuu giba to prepare.

The poitan I left out to dry before heading into the forest was looking good and parched by now, and so I added water to it and then placed it on the iron tray to bake. I was only preparing enough for 60 giba burgers though, so it was no real hassle once I got used to it.

Thanks to that, I actually ended up with between 40-50 minutes to spare today. That was thanks to both splitting the prep work with the Ruu clan, and also because the introduction of the wagon had shortened our travel time.

“Still, there’s not really anything I can take care of by being free around this time of day. I guess I’ll chop some firewood or something?” I said.

However, as she bit into some jerky, Ai Fa retorted, “That’s my work. If you take it from me, then I’ll be the one left with time to spare.”

The Ruu clan would be taking care of the guard work for today, while Ai Fa would be staying home.

And apparently since she was generally free until the sun hit its peak, she would use the time after I left the house to take care of miscellaneous tasks.

“Then how about you take a nap, Ai Fa? Don’t a lot of the men from other houses snore away till around when the sun hits its peak?”

“I’m not sleepy, so do you really think I could nap? I’ve both slept and woke at the same time for many years now. And so, I certainly can’t go changing that now.”

Ever since Ai Fa lost her mother back when she was 13, she had always worked from the morning all the way till night. Until she turned 15 it was just her and her father, and after that she was all on her own. And so, she had kept on working more diligently than anyone else at the forest’s edge.

“Hmm, then what should I do? There’s not enough time to do any proper

cooking experimentation, and there's not really any work I can get a headstart on either."

All I had to take care of in the afternoon was cutting up the meat for the myamuu giba and the dishes for the inns. Without having to prepare the giba burgers anymore, my workload had seriously decreased.

With 40-50 minutes I could probably take care of that in advance. But I would need to submerge the cuts of meat in pico leaves, and since the moisture would drain even faster than when it was in a block, it would have a significant impact on the texture, and would also put a strain on the pico leaves themselves.

That shift in texture wouldn't ruin the taste and could even lead to the meat curing, plus I could cut it with the knowledge that it would contract. But I couldn't say the lifespan of the pico leaves being cut down would be all that welcome. The Fa house was already using a ton of pico leaves to preserve the meat we used in our business, so I really would like to avoid having to gather more than the current norm each day.

"Alright, then... I guess rather than trying to push stuff forwards, I can bring my evening work into the following morning instead," I decided.

In other words, that would mean moving the work I did last night to the morning. If I did that, then I could devote the evening entirely to experimenting with cooking. I couldn't help but chuckle at how great the idea was, causing Ai Fa to shoot me a suspicious glare.

"But in the end, that still leaves me with nothing to do this morning. Hey, isn't there any work left at all for me to take care of?"

"No. If you're free though, then shouldn't you be the one allowing yourself to rest? After this, you'll have no time to properly relax until after dinner is done this evening, correct?" Ai Fa questioned while leaning up against the wall and sounding a bit astounded. "When I have time on my hands, I rest like this even if I can't go to sleep. Not wasting your strength needlessly is also an important task to keep in mind."

"Hmm... But thanks to Gilulu I have to carry heavy loads a lot less often lately. I'm scared of losing the stamina and strength that I've built up."

“Stamina and strength...?”

“Yeah, yeah. I know that it’s hardly anything at all compared to you purebred people of the forest’s edge.”

According to Ai Fa, my stamina was around the same level as a ten-year-old child here.

I certainly took a bit of offense, only for Ai Fa to silently approach while brushing up her bangs. Then, without saying a word, she grabbed hold of my upper arms with both hands.

“Wh-What...? Are you angry about something?”

“I don’t get angry without reason,” she muttered back as she started seriously rubbing my arms.

As my t-shirt was still drying, I just had on the vest. And it really was an odd feeling, having her touch my bare skin all the way from my shoulders down to my forearms.

“Hmm... looking closely, it seems you really have gained a bit of strength.”

“Really? You said before I was at the same level as a ten-year-old.”

“Yes. Now, you may be closer to a child of 12.”

“Oh, I see...”

Well, 12 was just on the verge of earning the right to be a hunter. Thinking of it like that, perhaps this was a good bit of growth... so maybe it was something to feel happy about?

“So I guess that means I’d be able to put up a good match against Shin Ruu’s little brother, huh? What an honor.”

“Hmm... I suppose you may have at least some chance of victory in that case.”

So that really was the level I was at, huh?

As I disappointedly slumped my shoulders, Ai Fa shot me a slightly worried look, her hands still on my arms.

“What is it? Is it unpleasant having me feel you so thoroughly after all?”

“No. It was like a massage and actually felt sort of nice.”

“Massage?”

“Ah, right... I guess you’d describe that as sort of rubbing muscles so the blood flows better, and it feels good?”

“I see,” Ai Fa replied as her fingers slid inside my vest and started feeling around my sides.

Instantly, I screamed out, “Gyah!” and leapt backwards.

“Why are you fleeing? Didn’t you say that it felt good?” Ai Fa questioned with a tilt of her head, her hands still hanging where my sides had been.

I let out a meaningless laugh. “Ahahaha! Sorry. It just tickled there. Maybe it wasn’t too bad, but I’d prefer not to do that.”

“Tickled? I can’t imagine that’s true...” Ai Fa replied, her head still tilted as she now squeezed her own taut sides.

It was only natural that it wouldn’t tickle when she was the one touching herself there.

“You know, I think I remember getting hit once for just poking your arm a while back...”

“Hmm...? Is that so?”

“And I got punched after stroking your hair, too.”

“That was surely because I found it unpleasant to be treated like a child. But I don’t feel that way now,” Ai Fa stated with a serious look on her face, then she drew closer to me. “I’m not lying, you know.”

“Huh? I didn’t particularly think that you were...”

“Then you can go ahead and confirm it.”

“What?”

“Go on.”

What did she mean, go on?

And what the heck? She had an incredibly serious look on her face. Some part

of her that was unfathomable to me must have been seriously driving her actions right now.

I didn't want to go and wreck Ai Fa's mood over something like this right at the start of the day, and so I suppressed the embarrassment I was feeling and did as she said, patting my palm down atop her head. Her hair had dried completely after having been washed, and felt nice to the touch. And I could definitely feel her warmth, too.

As I stroked it just enough so as not to pull anything out of place, Ai Fa broke out in a smile.



“Yes, it certainly isn’t unpleasant.”

That’s all?! I thought incredulously, almost tumbling over.

I felt like a real idiot for worrying in the least.

Still, getting to see such a wonderful smile this early in the day made this feel like a real big win. But wait, what was I winning at, exactly?

With that, my thoughts wandered into an entirely unproductive labyrinth. What saved me from that maze, though, was Ai Fa’s incredibly kind-sounding voice.

“Asuta, I cannot accompany you to town today,” Ai Fa stated, firmly grabbing hold of my dangling left hand. Her tone was gentle and her eyes looked completely serious.

As I lowered my hand from Ai Fa’s head, I nodded and replied, “Right.”

“I’m the one who decided I would only go to town every other day. Normally, it would make sense to leave all of the guard work up to the Ruu clan since they’re currently on break. However, I just couldn’t bring myself to leave that task entirely up to others... I wished to do it at least once every other day.”

“Yeah. I think I understand how you feel.”

Ai Fa had her work as a hunter, too. We weren’t hurting for money and could always buy meat from other clans now, so there was no need for her to force herself to do so. However, her pride as a hunter wouldn’t allow her to shirk that duty. It would be one thing if there was no one around for the job, but since the Ruu were available, insisting on always acting as my bodyguard would mean Ai Fa was putting her hunting work second.

And so, she made a rule for herself to only go to town every other day. And she added to her decision that she wouldn’t let the amount she caught fall even if she only spent half the amount of time in the forest.

We had already had a conversation about it just the other day.

However, an element of uncertainty that had her ill at ease had appeared since then: the boy Jeeda who had attacked us in the post town.

The people of the forest's edge had decided to provide bodyguards on the off chance that Cyclaeus made a move. However, they ended up being crucial for an entirely different reason than that.

"The incident from yesterday has been fully explained to Donda Ruu, too. The Ruu have plenty of men, so he promised you would have enough guards."

"Ah, right."

"That Jeeda boy from yesterday wasn't all that skilled. Shin Ruu from the branch houses didn't fall that far short of him, after all. I'd say that Ludo Ruu would be able to easily defeat him."

"Right. Plus he got seriously wounded by Sanjura, too."

"If this enemy is even close to that man's skill, even Ludo Ruu may find himself in danger. That is why I asked Donda Ruu to provide a sufficient number of guards. So Asuta... Don't do anything reckless, alright?" Ai Fa stated, her innocent smile suddenly shifting into a serious look. That tense expression made it painfully clear just how worried about me she was.

Even so, she had firmed up her resolve to carry out her work as a hunter, and also let me do my own job in the post town. And so, with her still holding onto my left hand, I gave her a firm nod back.

"I won't. I promise you that. Let's each carry out our own work and return home safely."

"Right," Ai Fa replied, her eyes happily narrowing as she brought my hand up to her chest. I almost panicked for a split second, but then she gently let go. "I believe in you, Asuta."

"Y-Yeah! Just leave it to me!"

I really was getting thrown for a loop this morning.

However, I was also able to reconfirm what it was I needed to do: carry out my work in the post town, then return here to the Fa house.

And that wasn't just for today. It was for every day from here on out.

Just like how Ai Fa carried out her dangerous hunts and returned home each day, I needed to make sure I made it back too. No matter what sort of wicked

plots Cyclaeus may be hatching...

If at all possible, I'd like to get a hold of Goram Redbeard's son Jeeda and introduce him to the leading clan heads. And I'd have to get to know that Mikel of Turan person Shumiral found, too. Plus, if the Ruu clan was going to handle the rough stuff, then I needed to make sure I carried out my tasks.

As those thoughts ran through my head I sat alongside Ai Fa by the wall, and we spent our remaining time idly chatting away as we rested up.

2

The sun was currently midway between dawn and when it would hit its peak... By my estimation, around nine in the morning. Clad in my now fully-dried t-shirt under my vest, I was heading to the Ruu settlement with time to spare.

There were several routes from the settlement at the forest's edge to the post town. The only ones I had actually walked personally, though, were the one closest to the Fa house over that terrifying rope bridge, and the one closest to the Ruu settlement.

By taking the route near the Fa house, we could get to the post town in less than an hour even on foot. However, thanks to the rope bridge in the middle, we couldn't exactly take a totos-drawn wagon that way.

As for the route closer to the Ruu, that would take nearly two hours on foot. It would be one hour to reach the Ruu settlement, and then another 40-50 minutes from there into town. However, that commute time could be shortened drastically by using a totos. As the days passed by I was getting better and better at driving the wagon, and at present I could make it all the way to the post town in just 40 minutes.

Of course, considering the direct route only took around an hour on foot, I had only managed to shave off 20 minutes. However, the wagon also made it possible to carry far more supplies and personnel than before, so it still was saving us an awful lot of trouble.

On top of all that, I used to have Vina Ruu walk to the Fa house each day in

order to help carry everything. Having her use those two hours or so normally spent on the round trip on other work made for a massive increase in efficiency.

Naturally, the other work in question was the prep for the giba burgers. Sheera Ruu had already taken on the task of baking the poitan, and the plan was to have them cooperate on this.

To get more into the details, the two who came directly to the post town from the Ruu settlement also got at least a little more time to work out of the deal. Using a totos, it took 40 minutes to get to the post town from the Fa house, and just 20 from the Ruu settlement. Walking, it would be around 40-50 minutes for them, so they got an extra 20-30 minutes. In other words, with the round trip in mind, they were generally getting a bit under an hour extra to work on other tasks each day.

At any rate, since their work hours had been the only thing we carefully locked down in my contract with the Ruu, Mia Lea Ruu insisted that the extra time needed to be used to assist the Fa clan. And so, we decided it would be used to help with the prep work, and anything left could be spent chopping firewood.

With that new agreement in place, I met up with everyone again today at the Ruu settlement, after which we headed out for the post town.

Today's group was made up of Reina, Sheera, and Lala Ruu, as well as Ludo and Shin Ruu and two additional youths from the branch houses whose names I didn't know on guard duty. The two branch family boys rode in the wagon with the rest of us, while Ludo and Shin Ruu rode alongside us on the Ruu clan's totos, Ruuruu.

"When the sun hits its peak and you head off towards the inns, two men each from the Lea and Rutim will come to guard the stalls, apparently," Reina Ruu informed me on our way to the post town.

So four guards for each, making for eight in total... That was the same number that they sent when guarding against an attack by Zattsu and Tei Suun.

It certainly did feel imposing. However, while we didn't know what Cyclaeus was thinking, Jeeda had gone and openly declared his desire for revenge against the people of the forest's edge, so it was definitely necessary.

Still, when we actually arrived in the post town and stepped foot on the stone highway, we really did seem to be faced with looks of much greater unease and caution than ever before.

Naturally, the four hunters solemnly took the lead in front of us chefs. Compared to the day before yesterday, when it was just Ai Fa and Ludo Ruu guarding us, we were clearly disturbing everyone a lot more. But I just had to accept all that, at least until we could fix things with Jeeda.

“Ah, good morning, Milano Mas.”

We had happened to arrive at The Kimyuus’s Tail just as its owner was stepping outside.

Milano Mas nodded back, “Yeah,” then cut in front of us and circled around to the back of the inn. Reina, Ludo, Shin Ruu, and I all followed after him in order to pick up the two stalls.

“We had an inn meeting yesterday...” Milano Mas muttered as he rolled one of the carts out from inside the fence. “You’re selling your cooking to The Westerly Wind, too?”

“Huh? That hasn’t been settled just yet...” I responded in surprise.

“I see,” Milano Mas replied, turning away. “The owner’s daughter was saying that she was planning to head to The Great Southern Tree to confirm your cooking skills.”

“Really? But I’ve heard the owner there has a strong dislike for the people of the forest’s edge and giba, so I still have no clue how all that will play out,” I said, and felt like I couldn’t let this opportunity to mention my other ideas pass on by. “Also... If we’re talking about selling my cooking, I would like to do that with The Kimyuus’s Tail first.”

“What?” Milano Mas questioned, his eyes opening wide in shock. “Is that some sort of joke? Or are you seriously saying you want to sell your food to my place?”

“I am. If I’m going to sell my cooking to inns that serve westerners, then I want The Kimyuus’s Tail to be first. Of course, The Great Southern Tree and The Sledgehammer have customers from the west too, but still... The core of their

clientele comes from the south and east.”

“I don’t get it. I can’t see any reason for you to be so fixated on my place.”

“It’s just, I owe you a whole lot, and how should I put it...? It doesn’t feel right to work with a business rival of yours like The Westerly Wind first...”

Milano Mas went silent, a sour look on his face.

As I stared back at him, I continued on, “But... right now I’m planning to hold back on expanding my business. After all, I’d really hate it if expanding our relationship brought trouble your way.”

“What? Even if your talks with the folks from the castle have soured, that shouldn’t be any reason for messing with your business, right?”

I had opened up to my business partners like Milano Mas, Dora, Nail, and Naudis from the start about why I was bringing along bodyguards again. But with that said, it seemed too dangerous to mention Cyclaeus’s name, so instead I just explained that we were having a disagreement with the folks from the castle on how to deal with the criminals who pillaged the fruits of the forest.

“I thought the same up till yesterday, but something else cropped up.”

“What, you got yourself into even more trouble?”

“Yeah. I was waiting for a good time to mention it, but...”

With that, I told him about Goram Redbeard’s son Jeeda. That he was the child of the bandit leader who had been executed for crimes committed by people of the forest’s edge, and had shown up here in Genos burning with thoughts of revenge.

I couldn’t go spreading that information around lightly, as doing so would mean risking it reaching Cyclaeus’s ears. However, Milano Mas was the one person I felt I absolutely needed to tell. After all, he was closely tied to that incident too.

“The Red Beards, huh? Haven’t heard that name in quite some time,” Milano Mas grumbled, crossing his short, thick arms in front of his chest. “Still, that’s no reason for you to stop yourself from moving forward with your plans. As long as you lot don’t have any skeletons in your closet, then you should just keep on

going with your heads held high, right?”

“No, no skeletons, but it’s still a fact that some of the Suun committed those crimes.”

“But the criminals were dealt with. You’re saying someone’s still looking to punish you even more on top of that?” Milano Mas questioned, looking around not just at me but also the rest of our group. “I mean, ten years ago you guys must’ve been nothing but snot-nosed brats, right? What sense does it make to blame you for something from way back then? But you say that Jeeda kid attacked you out of the blue regardless...?”

“Y-Yeah.”

“No matter how much he may hate the people of the forest’s edge, stuff like that just isn’t right. Even if people used to love his old man as a heroic outlaw or whatever, I’m sure he’s gotta be up there in the afterlife moaning about his son’s actions.”

It seemed that Milano Mas was getting rather worked up.

However, I felt like he was perfectly within his rights to be angry about what Jeeda had done. After all, he had also lost family and had to bear that grief.

“At any rate, you should just leave that kid to the guards. Besides, I can’t imagine anyone would be stupid enough to attack an inn right in the middle of the post town. If he did, they’d skewer him for sure.”

“Right... So, what do you think, Milano Mas?”

“Hmm?”

“Would it be possible to have my cooking served here at The Kimyuus’s Tail? Putting aside our issues with Jeeda, I really would like to make that happen before I do so with The Westerly Wind, or at least at the same time.”

Milano Mas gave a clear frown and muttered, “Can’t be done.”

“It can’t, huh...?”

“Of course not. If I start offering your cooking, I won’t be able to sell a single one of my other dishes, right? I can’t go taking on such lopsided business dealings.”

“Huh? But your clientele is mostly westerners, so it’s not like all of them would choose my giba cooking, right?”

“Yeah, but if they eat your food even once, they won’t pay any more attention to the stuff me and my daughter make. It’s not like we were an inn known for our meals to start with, after all.”

From what I could recall, Kamyua Yoshu had said that Milano Mas’s wife had passed away young, and as a result The Kimyuus’s Tail’s cooking started falling short of other inns.

With that, I clenched my fists and resolutely replied, “In that case... What if I offered cooking lessons?”

Now, Milano Mas looked completely taken aback as his eyes opened wide.

“Sorry. I know that may be a real rude proposal... And I’ve never handled kimyuus or karon meat before, so I don’t know how much I’ll be able to do with it, but maybe I can at least be of a little help to you.”

“T-There’s no reason for you to go that far! Or are you planning on swindling me out of money for the lessons...?”

“I certainly wouldn’t want any payment in exchange. I just see it as a chance to pay back some of what I owe you for all the help you’ve given me up till now.”

“Hey, I don’t recall doing anything special to help you out at all!”

“Really? Then that means you’ve been helping us out without even realizing it, huh?” I replied, naturally breaking out in a smile.

Milano Mas frowned even deeper.

“If everything goes smoothly, I think I should be able to start finishing up my work at The Great Southern Tree earlier from tomorrow on. If that happens then I’ll be able to spend that newly freed-up time at The Kimyuus’s Tail, so could you let me borrow your kitchen to give it a try?”

After chewing over the idea for a good long while, Milano Mas finally replied, “I won’t know until I talk to my daughter.”

By that point, according to my internal clock it was around 10am.

We left The Kimyuus's Tail along with our two rented stalls, and then headed towards Dora's place to purchase some fresh vegetables.

"Hey there, Asuta. Will you be wanting your usual amount again today?"

"Ah, I won't need pula for a while from now on. I'm switching out the dishes I offer at The Sledgehammer."

"Oh, is that so? In that case, I'll subtract out the pula..."

Before, we would stop by while working, and often on our way back too, but since getting the wagon I had been buying everything I needed at this point in the morning.

For the stalls, I needed 48 aria and 8 tino. And then the inns added an extra 100 aria.

On top of that, I needed an additional 30 aria, 150 poitan, and 5 tarapa for prepping the food for the stalls for tomorrow.

That was just how large my orders from Dora's place had gotten.

Even after taking out the pula, it still added up to 82 red coins in total.

"It certainly is something, having a customer buy this much aria and poitan each and every day. To be honest, our wallets have been getting pretty fat as a result, too," Dora said with a big grin on his face. And Tara was smiling away at his side, too.

Dora was pleasantly plump while Tara was even skinnier than Rimee Ruu, but their eyes looked just alike when they smiled.

"Normally, selling out of aria and poitan would be unthinkable. Once enough time passes after harvesting them and they start spoiling, you've got to sell them to the butchers in Dabagg to use as karon feed. But in that case you have to sell them for around half price, so I've really been raking in the profits for these past two months."

"Well it's been a big help for me too, being able to buy all my vegetables from you without having to worry about you running out. Speaking of which... If I were to add on an additional 100 aria, would that still be alright?"

"Huh?! You want to buy even more?"

“Ah, it hasn’t been all hammered out just yet, but if I’m able to expand my business with the inns, then I think that’s around the number I’d need.”

With that, Dora nodded his head up and down, looking thoroughly astounded.

“If you really mean that, then I may be left without a single aria left over to sell to Dabagg! It would be a huge help on our end, of course!”

“I’m glad to hear it. Oh, but that won’t result in the cost of karon feed going up and the price of the meat rising, right?”

“Of course not. I’m certainly not the only one growing aria. There are enough out there that even the butchers can’t buy them all and some just get thrown away, so I can hardly imagine it would be an issue in the least.”

“That’s a relief,” I replied while counting out the aria. As Dora similarly counted the coins I had handed him, he tilted his head.

“It seems like you’re always worrying about other shops, Asuta. You sell giba meat, so wouldn’t the price of karon going up just be to your benefit?”

“Ah, no. You see, I’d be scared of provoking the other stalls and butchers and the like. I just want to keep on peacefully doing my business as is.”

“Hmm. But it’s only natural for business rivals to compete, so I really don’t think you need to worry about all that.”

“Yes, I agree that’s a fair way of looking at it too... But as a person of the forest’s edge, I want to avoid antagonizing others as much as I can.”

Those words made Dora look troubled, which was rare for him.

“You’re just trying to do your business fair and square. You’ve got nothing to worry about. All the criminals are gone now, so everything should start moving in a good direction, right?”

It would certainly be nice if that were true. But at the very least, we still needed to settle things with Cyclaeus and Jeeda.

As I had a bit of trouble figuring out how to respond, Tara chimed in, “Hey,” after silently listening to our whole exchange, tugging at her father’s clothing. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, but you shouldn’t cause Asuta trouble, Dad.”

“Ah, no, it’s fine, Tara. Thank you, Dora.”

“I didn’t say anything for you to thank me for,” the vegetable seller replied with an embarrassed wave of his hand, and then finally brought that hand to rest atop Tara’s head. Even though she hadn’t really grasped what we were discussing, Tara gave a satisfied smile.

While feeling warmed by the sight of the father-daughter pair, I opened up about the details of yesterday’s attack, just leaving out all the proper nouns. In other words, I said that we were attacked at midday by someone with a deep grudge against the people of the forest’s edge, and that the two of them should take care too.

“Well, I suppose there is still no shortage of folks like that out there. We’ll be fine, but you all are the ones who really need to be taking care.”

After giving one more, “Thank you,” we departed from Dora’s place.

And so, our business with the stalls for the day began.

Once we arrived at our usual space all the way to the north, we found 30 or so customers waiting there again today. Though we had lost 18 regulars in total between the 10 from the Silver Vase and the eight from the construction group, there didn’t seem to be any change to how busy we were first thing in the morning.

Lala Ruu and I took the myamuu giba stall, while Reina and Sheera Ruu were in charge of the giba burgers. That had been our basic arrangement since yesterday, in preparation for the Ruu clan eventually taking over the giba burger stall.

“Now that I think about it, Li Sudra’s already been helping out for half a month now, huh? She’s only at the stalls for around half as long as us, so she really has improved remarkably fast,” Lala Ruu stated once the morning rush ended and we had a chance to catch our breath. “To be honest, I’d say she’s more or less caught up to me and Vina. Wouldn’t it be a good idea to rethink how much you’re paying her?”

“Ah, right. I always trade places with her, so I’ve hardly ever gotten a chance to see her work and had completely forgotten about all that.”

I had raised everyone else's initial salary by 50% and brought them up to nine coins total. Li Sudra was currently working for three red coins, so if I did the same for her then that would equal 4.5, or a full five after rounding up the fraction.

"Actually, didn't you say that you wanted to spread the chance to earn coins around to the smaller clans fairly, so you were going to switch around the lineup often?"

"Yeah, that's true. The plan was to make the switch every 20 days or so, so I guess it's about time to start making a move there. Thanks, Lala Ruu. It feels like my head's been full just thinking about developing new dishes lately."

"No problem," Lala Ruu said with a shrug of her shoulders, and then she added, "Oh, and while I'm at it let me just add, Rimee was throwing a fit again last night. She was yelling how it was no fair that Reina gets to help with the stalls but she still doesn't."

Ah, that made sense. Because of Vina Ruu getting injured, Reina Ruu had taken a turn helping out too, meaning that now out of the four daughters of the main Ruu house, Rimee Ruu was the only one who hadn't worked at the stalls.

"Hmm, but still... I had originally been planning on having both Reina and Rimee Ruu hold off till after things settled down between us and the castle. Wouldn't it be too dangerous to have her help out now, when we even have bodyguards watching over us?"

"I don't know. You'd have to ask our mom that question. And well, I guess it makes a bit more work for her and Granny Tito Min when we just leave Rimee and an injured Vina back home with them."

I'll have to consult with Mia Lea Ruu, then.

"Ah, but in that case it may end up being you alternating with Rimee Ruu. Would you still be okay with it, then?"

"I wouldn't especially mind, as long as I still got to come along every other day. Working at the stalls is fun, so I'd like to continue with it as long as I can," Lala Ruu replied, flashing the whites of her teeth. That smile of hers really did remind her of her brother, Ludo Ruu.

It was then that a well-built westerner approached the stall.

“Welcome!” I called out, only to suddenly hold my tongue. This was no customer.

“Hey there. Looks like you’re making a killing again today. Good to see you’re still doing well.”

His hair and moustache were dark brown, his eyes light brown, and his skin a tanned gold. There was a sand-colored turban-looking cloth wrapped around his head, and he had on a sleeveless vest and cylindrical pants. Overall, the middle-aged man had the bold yet jovial look of the leader of some band of thieves. This was the one who had once played the role of merchant caravan leader in Kamyua Yoshu and Melfried’s plot to entrap the Suun clan, the bodyguard Zasshuma.

“I’ve been waiting for you, Zasshuma. I actually have something I need to report to you.”

Now that Kamyua Yoshu and Leito had left Genos, this man had been tasked with stopping by the stalls each morning to check whether or not anything had happened.

I had heard that three bodyguards had been staying at The Kimyuus’s Tail just to be on the safe side, but apparently this guy couldn’t be one of them because Milano Mas was familiar with him.

“Hmm? Then how about we head behind that wagon and talk? Ah, wait, it’d look suspicious if we move too soon... You should keep working for a bit longer first.”

After saying that, Zasshuma promptly departed. Was he planning to circle around through the thicket to the rear after getting enough distance from the stalls? At any rate, Kamyua Yoshu’s group had been considering the possibility that these stalls were being watched by someone even before we had a chance to tell them about Jeeda.

“That guy seems real shady, somehow. Well, I guess that’s only natural when he’s friends with that suspicious blond guy.”

It seemed that Lala Ruu wasn’t all that fond of Zasshuma.

Well, he was enough of a faker to gladly take on the role of pretending to be a caravan leader, so I guess it was no surprise that people of the forest's edge wouldn't really care for him.

Still, I didn't actually see him as all that similar to Kamyua Yoshu. Zasshuma just didn't seem quite as unfathomable, but in exchange, he also didn't possess the same mysterious charisma of that aloof bodyguard. I guess in the end, what I was saying was that oddballs on Kamyua Yoshu's level didn't come around too often.

"Well then, I'll be stepping out for a bit. Take care of things while I'm gone, alright?"

"Yeah. Take care," Lala Ruu replied with a relaxed wave of her hand as I went and circled around to the rear of the wagon.

Shin Ruu had been waiting there carrying out his guard duty, and he was now shooting me a look of confusion.

"One of Kamyua Yoshu's allies showed up, and I'm going to report the events from yesterday to him."

"I see," Shin Ruu replied with a single nod. Since Jeeda's attack had occurred just yesterday, there was naturally still a clear, blue bruise on his face.

Then, after a minute or so of me playing with Gilulu and Ruuruu, Zasshuma appeared from the trees escorted by a boy from the branch houses.

"Asuta of the Fa clan, this man says he is a comrade of someone named Kamyua Yoshu and that he has an agreement to speak with you. Is that all true?"

"Yeah, that's right. Thanks for bringing him."

"Right," the boy nodded, and then he left.

"Good grief," Zasshuma muttered with a strained grin as he watched the youth leave. "You've sure got some pretty imposing guards. The hunters of the forest's edge really are something else, even when we're talking about a kid like that. And it seems like all the women are real beauties, too," Zasshuma quipped, which was something else I was sure the people of the forest's edge

wouldn’t appreciate.

Still, despite how rough and crude he was, he didn’t seem all that bad of a guy deep down.

“So, what is it anyway? Things look pretty peaceful around here from what I can see.”

For the third time now, I gave the details of yesterday’s events.

As he rubbed his tanned cheek, Zasshuma let out an impressed, “Ooh, Goram Redbeard’s son! You sure ran into a key player, there. But still, the Northern Whirlwind is after the mother. That son of his wouldn’t quite fully serve our needs.”

“Right. And he seems to have quite a bit of hatred towards the people of the forest’s edge.”

“Hmm... Guess he grew up hearing his mother tell him how his old man was taken down by a cowardly plot. From what I’ve heard, that kid would’ve been just three or four, ten years back.”

In that case, he really was younger than me or Shin Ruu.

That made sense considering his height, but well... It pained me to think that he could be so driven by hatred at such a young age.

Through his wild red hair, I had spied the yellow eyes of a carnivorous beast. They really did look every bit as fierce as those of the hunters of the forest’s edge.

“Zasshuma, if this means that his mother is hiding out here in Genos too, then Kamyua’s group are just completely wasting their time. Isn’t there some way we could let them know?”

“Hmm, maybe you could make it if you pushed a totos past its breaking point to catch up, but I figure that’d be pointless. As long as we don’t actually know where the mother is, we shouldn’t just pull the Northern Whirlwind back here. We have to let them keep on searching on their end, and do the same over here too.”

Right, that made sense.

“Still, a hunter of Masara, huh...? If that’s true, then he could end up proving pretty troublesome.”

Upon hearing those words, Shin Ruu turned towards Zasshuma. There was now a hunter’s light flickering in his usually calm eyes.

“Allow me to interject. Westerner, are you saying you’re aware of what a hunter of Masara refers to?”

“Hmm? Well, yeah. Not that I’ve ever seen one myself, mind you... Masara’s a mountain about three days from Genos by totos. The barobaro birds caught there are famed for being real exquisite.”

“Barobaro birds...”

“However, extremely vicious gaaje leopards also live there, so it’s not like any halfhearted hunter can go hunt those birds. They say that the hunters of Masara are only considered proper adults when they can take down a gaaje leopard.”

So that yellowish-brown pelt cloak the boy wore was his hunter’s attire, huh?

As he stared at the bruise on Shin Ruu’s face, Zasshuma added, “From what I’ve heard, gaaje leopards are vicious carnivores about as big as a human being. If he’s skilled enough to take one down at just 13 or 14, then I could certainly see him managing to catch one of you hunters of the forest’s edge off guard.”

“I see... You have my thanks for that valuable information,” Shin Ruu replied with a bow, and then he held his tongue.

Zasshuma gave another, “Hmm...” and turned my way while rubbing his cheek. “This means Goram Redbeard’s wife and son have probably been hiding out near Masara for the past ten years. If we guess that the wife may have remained around there, then... Well, it’s around three days one way to Masara, so I can’t say we’ve got all that much time to spare.”

There was half a month left until the next meeting.

If the round trip was going to take six days, then that left less than ten to move freely... And it wasn’t like it was certain that Kamyua Yoshu and his team were heading right for that Mount Masara place.

“What should we do, then? Of course, if Jeeda appears before us again I’d like to try to at least explain the situation to him properly without fighting. But isn’t there anything else we can do?”

“Not much in particular, no. If you go and piss off the mother then the Northern Whirlwind’s plan will go up in smoke too, so you’ve just got to handle him as gently as possible. Still, that kid got injured, right...? It’d be a pain if the guards caught him like that.”

“Ah, so it’d be a problem if the guards got a hold of him after all?”

“Yeah, that’d be real bad. If that count’s the sort of man we think he is and he finds out about that kid, then he’ll either shut him up permanently or use him as a tool to keep his mom from talking,” Zasshuma ominously stated with a shrug of his shoulders. “Well, if the kid’s using an inn, then I’ll hear about it eventually. A hunter of Masara can’t help but stand out here in Genos, after all.”

“Really...?”

“Yup. My job is to go around to the various inns each night while guzzling down booze and gathering information. So I might get a hold of something in the process,” Zasshuma said, breaking out in a twisted grin. “By the way, it seems you’ve gotten pretty darn close to that one vegetable seller, huh? Ever since those criminals from the Suun clan were dealt with, I’ve been running into him in a lot of random inns.”

“Huh? Do you mean Dora?”

“I don’t know the guy’s name. But he’s the vegetable seller you visit every morning.”

That couldn’t be anyone but Dora.

I could feel my heart starting to pound a bit faster.

“What’s going on with him? I don’t want him to get mixed up in anything.”

“You’ll have to talk to him, then. You see, he’s been going around to various inns each night like I do, and going on and on about you people of the forest’s edge. That you’re really pleasant folks, and that now that the criminals have

been dealt with the rest of you lot are innocent, and that we should be more grateful to you. Stuff like that.”

I didn’t know what to say to that.

“A couple times, things have gotten real heated with folks who especially hate you people of the forest’s edge, but at least for now they’ve stayed peaceful enough that the guards haven’t gotten called yet. Still, he works a farm to the south of the post town, doesn’t he? I can’t see any need for him to be eating at inns to begin with.”

“I see...” was about all I could force out.

Just how greatly had I been helped by folks like Dora, Milano Mas, and Yumi...?

I desperately held back the warmth welling up inside of me so that Zasshuma wouldn’t notice as he grinned away.

3

After finishing my report to Zasshuma, I returned to the stall, where I found two familiar girls holding giba burgers while shooting each other threatening glares.

Lala Ruu, meanwhile, turned and shot me a fed up look.

“Ah, you’re finally back. Do something about these two, Asuta.”

Perhaps it went without saying, but “these two” referred to Diel and Yumi.

Diel was the daughter of a metalwork seller who had come to Genos recently, while Yumi’s father was the owner of the inn known as The Westerly Wind. The former was a short-haired girl with a boyish look, while the latter showed about as much skin as the women of the forest’s edge.

I was at a loss wondering why there was such a dangerous feel in the air, since I had thought they had reconciled.

“Um, what exactly is going on here...?” I called out, only for the two of them to turn my way in sync.

“Hey there, Asuta. It’s not a big deal... I didn’t raise my voice or anything, so I didn’t cause you any trouble, right?”

“Hmm? Then why don’t you hurry on back to the castle town already? You’ve got a nasty enough look in your eyes that I’m sure having you loitering around must be causing Asuta problems.”

“Hey, you’ve got a real nasty look too. So why don’t you run on back to your daddy?”

“I’ve got business matters to discuss with Asuta.”

“And so do I.”

It was certainly true that nobody was shouting.

However, their suppressed rage was flowing through the air like electricity, and I could hear it crackling away even now.

Oh, and Diel’s usual companion Labis was standing there next to her shooting Ludo Ruu a harsh glare, only spurring on the dangerous feel in the air further, while the young hunter of the forest’s edge was just feigning ignorance. I could see why Lala Ruu seemed so fed up.

“A-Anyway, could you step off to the side a bit? And what exactly happened, anyway...? It felt like you two were getting along pretty well yesterday.”

“Don’t ask me. I was just talking about the dish I ate at The Great Southern Tree yesterday, and she suddenly flared up at me.”

“Hmph! If you hadn’t gone and bragged like that, I wouldn’t have gotten annoyed. I want to eat more of Asuta’s cooking too...” Diel replied, looking a bit disheartened.

“Ugh, geez!” Yumi groaned while brushing up her long hair. “That really wasn’t my intention. It was just so delicious that I got all excited talking about it... But if that upset you, then I’m sorry.”

“No... I was too short-tempered there, too. I was just jealous of you, so I’ve also gotta apologize.”

What the heck? I thought with a somehow disappointed shrug of my shoulders.

A few seconds ago they were shooting each other angry glares but now they were both giving embarrassed giggles, only to turn my way with smiles on their faces.

“Anyway, that’s how it is. Asuta’s cooking was just way too delicious! That c-cubed giba meat stew, was it? Whatever it’s called, it was really good!”

“I-I see. I’m glad to hear you say so.”

“Sounds nice. That’s the dish that uses tau oil, right? I wish I could’ve tried it too,” Diel complained with a sort of childish bluntness. Since we were talking about my cubed giba meat stew, it used plenty of the tau oil that came from her home country of Jagar.

As she looked at Diel, Yumi placed her hands on her own slim waist and gave an awkward chuckle.

“You should go eat it too. Can you not slip out of the castle town at night?”

“That’s right. My dad says once the sun sets it’s too dangerous, so he takes away my pass. Plus they raise up the drawbridge at the gate during the night anyway. Hey, Asuta, isn’t there any way I can eat that dish during the day...?”

“Hmm, well I don’t start preparing it till after the sun hits its peak. But if you talk to the inn’s owner then he might be willing to sell it to you after that but before the sun goes down.”

“I see! Then if I can find a day where I’m not busy with work, maybe I could eat it too!” Diel said with a grin, her mood recovered. Meanwhile, Yumi wore a relieved-looking smile.

Diel had a youthful, petite look about her that reminded me of a young boy, while Yumi had rather womanly proportions, making them seem like polar opposites. And yet, their smiles were both equally charming.

“But yesterday was the last day for that cubed giba meat stew dish, right? The owner said from today on it would be a different dish.”

“Ah, yeah, it’ll be a soup today. As for the meat dish, I was going to have him try it out today and then decide. If he decides to use it, then it should make its debut tomorrow.”

“I see! Then I’ll need to try that one out too! Aah, I’m really looking forward to it!”

“Tch! This really is no fair!”

“Ahaha, sorry,” Yumi laughed while patting Diel on the head.

I was worried her temper was about to explode at being treated like a kid, but Diel just puffed up her cheeks instead. They really did seem to make for an amusing pair.

“So, what about you? Didn’t you say you had business to discuss too?”

“Ah, that’s right! There’s something I wanted you to take a look at, Asuta!” Diel excitedly stated, then she pulled out a knife she wore on her hip. Only today, it wasn’t one meant for self defense.

It was still in its leather sheath, but it seemed to be a cooking knife. Unlike the one that belonged to my old man or my vegetable knife from Sym, the handle was also made of metal, though with diagonal ripples etched into it, perhaps to keep it from slipping.

“Ooh. Is this one of the cooking knives your place sells?”

“Yup! It’s for cutting meat! It’s a little heavy, but it can even slice easily through a kimyuus bone!”

Diel was holding the handle out towards me, and so I accepted as I felt a great curiosity welling up inside me.



“Umm, is it alright if I remove the sheath?”

“Could you really understand how good of a knife it is otherwise?”

Of course I couldn’t. And so, I went ahead and pulled it free.

The blade was a beautiful silver. I didn’t know if I should call it a butcher’s knife or a western-style pointed carver, but regardless, it looked just a bit narrower than my old man’s knife overall.

It was a bit over 20 centimeters, and was slim but solid. And despite even the handle being metal, it actually wasn’t all that heavy. Yeah, this seems like it would feel every bit as nice to use as that knife that rode along with me from my old world.

“It certainly does seem like a good blade.”

It was heavier than my old man’s knife, but it was lighter than the hunter’s one I got from Ai Fa. And the metal handle felt more natural to hold than I had expected, balancing out nicely with the weight of the blade.

“Well? Go ahead and try cutting a bit, too!”

Naturally, I had absolutely no reason to refuse.

I had wanted a meat cutting knife to start with, so as not to overuse the blade that was my old man’s heart and soul. And I had already gotten permission from Ai Fa to buy one, too.

However, none of the blades on sale in the post town had jumped out at me. Perhaps it was because my expectations had been set a bit too high by getting to buy such a splendid vegetable knife from Shumiral out of nowhere.

Anyway, I went ahead and headed to the wagon, then pulled out the bundle of meat I was going to sell to Nail. When I opened it up atop my work space, I found the expected block of pico leaf-coated rib meat. I went ahead and tried out the knife on the edge of the soft meat and smoothly cut off several seven-millimeter-thick slices. Then, I went ahead and minced them up atop my cutting board in no time at all.

Yup, I had absolutely no complaints. At least when it came to cutting meat, it was every bit a match for my old man’s knife.

“This is definitely nice. I have no issues with how it cuts whatsoever.”

“Really? Then will you buy it?!” Diel asked, leaning forward as her eyes sparkled with excitement.

“Hmm, but this is meant to be sold in the castle town, right? So it must be pretty expensive...”

“Well sure, it’s expensive compared to the knives they sell around the post town, but in exchange, I can definitely guarantee its quality! It costs 12 white coins in total!”

12 white coins.

The vegetable knife from Sym that I had bought from Shumiral had cost 18. And the knives sold around town cost four or five, while the hunter’s knife I was borrowing from Ai Fa went for six.

Converting 12 white coins into giba horns and tusks, it would be equivalent to around 10 of the beasts, so this certainly wasn’t a cheap purchase. But my old man’s knife had already worked hard for 20 years, so I didn’t want to keep on overusing it.

“Right, I’ve made up my mind. Could I buy this from you, Diel?”

“Hooray! Thanks for your business!” Diel exclaimed with a truly overjoyed smile.

Seeing that extremely pure grin, Yumi and I couldn’t help but smile along with her.

“But why did you bring me a meat cutting knife all of a sudden? I was actually just looking for one recently, but still...”

“Huh? I mean, I just found it real frustrating how you weren’t using a blade from Jagar! That vegetable knife is clearly from Sym, and that other one doesn’t come from Jagar either, right?” Diel said, shooting my old man’s knife a serious look as it sat atop my work station. “And that’s a ridiculously nice knife, too. I don’t know what country it was made in, but I was definitely a little surprised when I saw it. And so, I went and picked out what I figured was the absolute nicest knife I had, to offer you something just as good.”

“I see. I really appreciate it. But shouldn’t you be selling something this nice to a noble instead of me...?”

“Hmph! I think you’re way more amazing than those chefs who work for nobles! And I just figured our best knife should go to the best chef around,” Diel replied, now wearing a truly bold grin.

Perhaps it was the way that her emotions always showed so clearly whenever she smiled, but it was just as charming as always. Maybe I’d gone a little strange in the head, as I could definitely recall finding her grin revolting back on the day we first met.

“Well then, see you around! I’ll definitely be back again tomorrow!”

“Guess I’ve gotta get back to work, too. And I’ll also be looking forward to tonight’s dinner at the inn!”

With that, Diel and Yumi departed to the north and south, leaving me feeling a warmth inside.

In their place, my customer who had the looks of an easterner, Sanjura, approached the stall.

“Asuta, I’ll take one, please.”

“Ah, thanks for your continued business. Um... and thanks for everything yesterday, too.”

“You don’t need to, thank me. It was my natural duty, as a citizen of the west,” Sanjura said with a gentle smile as he pulled back his hood, revealing his chestnut-colored hair.

But just as I felt myself being soothed by his grin, he went and said something truly shocking.

“That bandit child was captured, right? I’m glad that, the peace was protected.”

“Huh?!” I exclaimed, freezing in place. I could practically feel the blood draining from my face. “H-Hold on! The boy from yesterday was captured by the guards?”

“Was he not? I thought he was because, there were no wanted posters

around.”

“Wanted posters...?”

“Yes. When a criminal is wanted, the guards place up a poster in front of their station. But there wasn’t anything there when, I looked earlier. So I thought he had already been caught...” Sanjura replied while tilting his head and looking perplexed.

I had been holding my breath, but now I finally let out a sigh.

“So that was it? Ah, you really shocked me there... Oh, sorry. The truth is, we never went ahead with any of that.”

“You didn’t put in a request, to the guards?”

This time, it was Sanjura’s eyes that opened wide in shock. Well, it wasn’t all that huge of a shift in expression, but it really did feel unusual coming from someone who looked like he was from Sym.

Ah, but this was no time to be impressed by such things.

“You were assaulted, so you should report that to, the guards. If you leave the criminal be, someone else will get hurt.”

“Yeah, I suppose it is our duty to make that report as citizens of the west. But... He seemed like he was only after people of the forest’s edge, so the townsfolk shouldn’t be in any danger.”

“You all are in danger still, though.”

“We’ll be fine. After all, we’ve got these reliable allies to watch out for us.”

Sanjura’s pale eyes glanced over at Ludo Ruu, who was standing next to the stall.

And Ludo Ruu stared back with a completely serious look in his eyes, utterly different from the one he had when facing Labis.

“Even so, I still think you should, make a report. Are you perhaps holding back?”

“Holding back?”

“Yes. I have heard the people of the forest’s edge, have a complicated

position in Genos. I don't come here that often so I don't know that much about it, but you are feared and persecuted, are you not?" Sanjura asked, leaning forward with an earnest look on his face. "But the people of the forest's edge are also, children of Selva. I am too, though my mother was, a citizen of Sym. We westerners are all comrades. You needn't hold back, and I believe you should rely, on the guards."

It wasn't exactly "holding back."

However, I couldn't exactly go telling a customer like Sanjura how we couldn't rely on the guards because of the position held by Cyclaeus's younger brother.

"So, you're still reluctant after all...?"

"Yeah, sorry..."

"Then shall I make the report, in your place? I'm not exactly unrelated, so I think I should be qualified, to do so."

"A-Ah, no! That would actually be a problem for us!"

Trying to hide everything was proving difficult.

And so, I quickly but carefully chose my words.

"Um, you see... He seems to have a deep grudge against the people of the forest's edge. And so I'd like to talk to him properly, and if it's a misunderstanding I'd want to clear that up. But if he's captured as a criminal before that, there's never going to be a chance for that to happen... And so, we didn't put in a report with the guards."

Thinking more on it, Cyclaeus was the one point I really couldn't be open about.

That Zattsu and Tei Suun committed those crimes ten years back and the Red Beards were executed falsely in turn was steadily becoming common knowledge, so there was no need to hide everything. In fact, it would probably be best for as many folks to know as possible.

However, I'd like to avoid revealing Jeeda's background if at all possible. After all, I had no way of knowing how that information could end up reaching Cyclaeus.

Still, Jeeda had gone and openly pronounced that he was Goram Redbeard's son right in front of Sanjura, and the man hadn't reacted to the name. Apparently he hadn't been born in Genos, so perhaps he didn't know anything at all about the Red Beards.

At any rate, Sanjura didn't ask for any further explanation, instead pulling back while looking a bit sad.

"I see. It seems you have your reasons... I'm sorry for saying too much, there."

"Ah, no, that's not the case at all. I really appreciate your concern."

"I'll be praying that all of you stay safe. And I hope you can clear up that misunderstanding, too."

After shooting one last peaceful smile, Sanjura departed with a myamuu giba in hand.

"Hmm, he really does seem pretty darn skilled. Still, I don't think I'd lose, at least for now while his right arm is injured," Ludo Ruu muttered while watching the slender man slip into the crowd.

"Could you cut that out already? Just yesterday he helped protect us. So we owe him, don't we?"

"I know all that. I just feel uneasy when there are guys I'm not sure I can beat with my own hands wandering about. It's one thing when it's fellow people of the forest's edge, but we're talking about someone from town here..."

I guess that was what it meant to be a hunter of the forest's edge.

Now that I thought about it, Ai Fa still seemed to be wary of Sanjura, too.

Will those feelings fade if we can forge a healthy relationship with Genos?

In other words, will a day come when the people of the forest's edge come to view the citizens of the west as comrades, and vice versa?

As such thoughts kept on running through my head, the sun was finally approaching its peak.

Chapter 2: The First Day of the White Month, Asuta's Day (Second Half)

1

The sun had reached its peak.

It was at this time of day that I left the stalls up to Sheera Ruu's group and headed around to the inns.

Since I needed to take someone along with me to assist with the cooking, Li Sudra joined the team at the stalls in my place. And just as Reina Ruu had said, the Rutim and Lea each sent two young hunters to town, allowing our initial group of four bodyguards to accompany us and leave the stalls to the newcomers.

Naturally, Reina Ruu was the one I asked to act as my assistant. While she was clearly jealous of Sheera Ruu being left in charge of the stalls, she also seemed to have a strong interest in helping out at the inns.

The first place we headed to was The Sledgehammer, which was frequented by easterners. Normally Ludo Ruu would follow us to the kitchen, but Shin Ruu took that role today while the other three kept watch outside the shop.

"Listen, if you see a brat with red hair, make sure not to charge in alone, alright? Blow your grass whistle and summon everyone else instead."

Honestly, Ludo Ruu looked more excited than worried as he gave those instructions. I guess he wanted to see just how strong this hunter of Masara who even drove back Shin Ruu really was.

At any rate, after temporarily parting ways with them, we stepped into The Sledgehammer.

"Nail, I brought the giba meat I promised you."

As I entered the kitchen and opened up one of the bundles I had brought, Nail's eyes started sparkling with joy. Since he had gone and made up his mind

to purchase giba meat, I wanted to bring him a sample to try as soon as possible.

“Thank you. You said this meat today was to get a taste, correct?”

“Yes. The taste changes based on the part of the giba the meat comes from, but some parts have a lot more volume to them than others. And so, I would like to adjust the price based on the cut of meat,” I explained, opening up the bundles one after another as I did so. “However, it’s not as if any cut is necessarily higher quality just because you can get less of it. I believe they’re all delicious in their own ways regardless of price, so I’d like you to start by trying them all.”

“I see. Karon torso meat is softer and tastier than leg meat, but I don’t know how it is for giba. I’m certainly interested to find out,” Nail said, seriously observing the meat atop the counter.

For today, I brought 200 grams each of four different cuts: Shoulder, sirloin, rib, and thigh. Since you could get a lot less fillet and chuck, they were much more expensive cuts, so I didn’t include them in my lineup.

“You can get the greatest amount of meat from a giba’s hind legs, so I’d like to set the price there the same as karon legs. Then I decided to adjust from that baseline based on how much of each cut you can get from one giba.”

Nail had said he wanted to start by trying out a purchase of enough meat for ten meals each day, or roughly 2.5 kilos.

As for my prices, they were as follows:

Thigh: 9 red coins.

Shoulder: 11.5 red coins.

Sirloin: 14.5 red coins.

Rib: 16.5 red coins.

“The taste changes quite a bit based on whether you grill or boil them too, for example, so please go ahead and try all sorts of stuff. And of course, I don’t have any issue if you want to buy, say, five meals worth of thigh meat and five of shoulder meat or the like.”

“Thank you. And on that point, are there some parts that are better grilled and others more suited to boiling?”

“Personally, I feel that thigh and shoulder meat are easier to eat boiled because they’re tougher. But if you beat them with a pot or wooden stick to break up the fibers and then cut the sinew and slice them up thinly, that should also soften them up quite a bit.”

“I see. It certainly seems like this will be worth grappling with,” Nail replied, his eyes happily narrowing.

Kamyua Yoshu had said that the food at inns was like an extension of home cooking. However, I got the impression that Nail here and Naudis from The Great Southern Tree put a great deal of effort into what they offered.

And I was certain that what drove them to work so hard was their desire to satisfy their customers from the east and south who came far from their homes to reach Genos. It was because they were that kind of men that they were willing to buy more expensive seasonings from other nations, and why they asked some stranger like me to sell them cooking to serve at their places.

“Well then, I’ll go ahead and get to work for today.”

With that, I set about making 30 meals worth of giba sauté arrabbiata with Reina Ruu’s assistance.

◇

A bit under an hour later we wrapped up our work at The Sledgehammer and headed out for The Great Southern Tree.

Yesterday, this was when Jeeda attacked us along this same road, but this time we arrived safely without incident.

“Ah, I’ve been waiting for you, Asuta,” the owner Naudis greeted with a smile. However, that expression darkened quite a bit when he heard my request to once again have hunters of the forest’s edge keep an eye on the entrances to the inn. “Did you get mixed up in some sort of trouble again? Have the talks with the folks from the castle gone *that* poorly?”

For the sixth time now, I repeated what I had already explained to Milano

Mas, Dora, Zasshuma, Sanjura, and Nail. That it wasn't just the talks going bad, but also the fact that we were attacked by someone with a grudge against the people of the forest's edge, so we wanted to shore up how many guards we were using. It was a rather unsettling story, so it was no surprise to see Naudis's expression grow more and more clouded as I talked.

"Hmm... That certainly does sound troubling..."

Unlike Nail, Naudis didn't seem to take much of a stance when it came to the people of the forest's edge. He neither avoided them nor did anything to protect them. However, I got the feeling that he respected me as a valuable business partner. Even so, I felt like if this went on for too long, there was a risk that he'd eventually judge it too dangerous to keep being involved with us... But once again, he didn't tell us to leave.

"I had been thinking it was a bit troubling that the folks from the castle hadn't put out any sort of notice even after all that commotion. If they had just said it was the fault of both the people of the forest's edge and the castle, and that they were working hard so the same mistakes wouldn't be repeated, I believe that would have done a great deal to put everyone in the post town more at ease," Naudis stated. "I've certainly found that sense of uncertainty as to whether or not everything is now out in the open more than a little unpleasant. Well, not that I ever really expected the folks from the castle to own up to their own shameful mistakes, though."

Those words really went to show just how strained the connection between the Genos post town and the castle really was.

It had already been a month and a half since I first stepped foot in the post town. And in all that time, I'd never heard anyone who worked or lived there have anything positive to say about the castle or the guards, not even once. If Melfried really did become the lord of Genos in the future, would he find that a troubling situation he needed to do something about?

"All that aside, there's the matter of our business. I've been truly looking forward to the chance to eat the new dish you'll be making today."

"Right. I'll get started on that now."

As of today, I would be changing the dishes on offer at The Great Southern

Tree.

For now, that meant making a soup. But what should I call it, exactly? Giba soup prepared with tau oil? To be honest, it was pretty much the same dish I had been making for dinner at the Fa house.

I used giba thigh, shoulder, and rib meat, as well as aria, tino, chatchi, and gigo for vegetables. After boiling all that together, I then added rock salt and tau oil for flavor to create a new giba soup that brought to mind Japanese tofu and vegetable chowder.

Though I used a lot of different vegetables, I didn't put in a ton of each, which kept the cost/price ratio at a minimum. Without the meat it was 23%, and with meat we were talking 60%. And since cubed giba meat stew used a whole lot of tau oil and fruit wine, it went up another five percent from there.

The one point that differed from my regular soup was that when I initially boiled the meat, I added lilo leaves to thoroughly remove any stench. Since the meat had been bloodlet, there shouldn't be any strong smell left lingering about it, but since there were probably plenty of folks out there who would have an issue handling the taste of the meat compared to the less quirky kimyuus or karon, I added that extra little twist.

The real selling point to the dish, though, was definitely the potato-like chatchi and yam-esque gigo. The chatchi was heated steadily along with the water from the start, while the gigo got added last, after all the other vegetables were nice and cooked. Thanks to that, both of them came out soft and flaky.

"Once you're done scooping scum, maintain a low flame, alright?"

"Yes, just leave it to me," Reina Ruu replied with a smile. She had at least as much skill as me at making this soup, if not more, so I had no problem leaving it up to her. As an aside, Ai Fa hadn't come out and said that my soup was tastier. Ultimately, her impression was, "I'd have to say that they're about equal..."

At any rate, after entrusting the soup to Reina Ruu, I set about making the sample dish. Though Naudis had been satisfied with the taste of the giba soup, he had also asked me not to remove the cubed giba meat stew from the menu. And so, what I was unveiling today was a new replacement for that dish.

“So does today’s dish have a name?”

“Yes. I call it meat and chatchi stew.”

Upon hearing that, Naudis’s eyes opened wide.

“Not ‘giba and chatchi’ but ‘meat and chatchi?’ Why did you name it like that?”

“Ahaha, it’s because that’s what it was called back where I come from. And I have a dish called giba chitt over at The Sledgehammer, so I wanted to differentiate it from that.”

However, back in my home country, there was nothing known as a chatchi. Instead, we had the very similar potato. And so, naturally, the dish was meat and potato stew back in Japan instead.

I used to make it a lot back in the Tsurumi Restaurant.

Still, I needed to revise the recipe thanks to the differing circumstances. The chatchi and aria filled in for the potatoes and onions just fine, but unfortunately I didn’t have any soy sauce, sugar, or mirin on hand. What I did have was the soy sauce-like tau oil and the fruit wine. The latter definitely had a much higher sugar content than normal wine though, which was what led me to the idea of making the cubed giba meat and meat and chatchi stews.

The ingredients are one thing, but what I really need to do something about is the seasonings, I thought to myself as I dropped a pinch of giba fat into the metal pan and started frying the rib meat.

Once there was just a little red left I mixed in the aria and chatchi, and then when the fat had spread out properly, I added the tau oil, fruit wine, and water.

As soon as it reached a boil I scooped the scum, then put the wooden lid on and let it heat over a medium flame. Now I just needed to let it cook till the chatchi softened, and it would be done.

“So you just need to wait now, Asuta...?” Reina Ruu asked from the neighboring stove, having passionately watched me work.

“That’s right,” I answered.

“Then that’s a rather simple dish, isn’t it?” she replied.

“Yeah, the work itself is simple enough. But on the other hand, the proportion of tau oil and fruit wine, the amount of cooking time, and the strength of the flame can have quite an impact on the taste.”

And there weren’t any measuring cups or gas stoves here in this world, either. That made a chef’s intuition all the more crucial.

“Back in my old home country, it’s been practically synonymous with ‘home cooking’ for quite some time. Surprisingly enough though, it may be harder to explain how to make it than the hamburger steak or cubed giba meat stew.”

“Really?” Reina Ruu asked, looking all the more interested.

“Aah, what a wonderful aroma of tau oil and fruit wine,” Naudis said with a big sniff. “It’s not as if I’ve never used fruit wine in my own cooking, but I certainly haven’t used it as boldly as you do, Asuta. I’d say that mellow sweetness you get from it is just the way southerners like it.”

“Ah, now that you mention it, is there any sugar in Jagar?”

I vaguely recalled Aldas saying something to that effect.

“It exists in Genos too. However, I’ve never seen it sold outside of the stone walls.”

“So it’s rare enough that you can only get it in the castle town, huh? Hmm, the seasonings on offer here in the post town really don’t feel like enough. I mean, it’s not like you can even get a hold of tau oil without a special relationship with merchants from the south, right? Actually, now that we’re on the topic, are any seasonings other than rock salt usually sold around here?”

“I think saying they’re not would be the most accurate answer. After all, it varies from person to person whether or not they treat herbs like myamuu as a seasoning or a vegetable.”

As I tossed a small bit of firewood into the stove, I replied, “I see,” with a nod. “Now that I think about it, I’ve hardly ever seen pico or lilo leaves being sold. It’s only very rarely that I see them at a place selling rock salt.”

“That’s because around here, you can only harvest such things in the forest of Morga. The right to gather as much as they please is one of the very few special

privileges granted to the people of the forest's edge," Naudis answered, carefully choosing his words so as not to sound sarcastic or snide. I was sure that he was also striving his hardest to not treat us differently.

"So then in the post town, you've got to pickle meat in salt in order to preserve it?"

"That's correct. It would take too much time to buy fresh meat every day, and you can get it cheaper by purchasing in bulk. And so, I generally buy a few days' worth of meat and pickle it in salt."

"I see."

With any luck, I may get a chance to use karon or kimyuus meat to give Milano Mas cooking lessons. Would I be able to prepare a proper dish with something other than giba meat, though? I was honestly getting excited at the thought of the challenge.

"Ah, excuse me for a moment," I said, taking the lid off the pot as I figured it was about time.

Instantly, steam filled with the smell of tau oil and fruit wine exploded forth.

I had sufficiently submerged the ingredients in water, but now about half of that was gone.

After stirring the contents of the pot with a wooden spatula, I then stabbed some chatchi with a grigee toothpick. It smoothly slid on in without any resistance, but how was the taste?

The chatchi had already been split open by the toothpick, and so I tossed a chunk of that and the rib meat into my mouth.

It had a mildly sweet, subtle flavor. The chatchi was soft and flaky, while the meat was suitably tender. And when I bit into them, a perfect harmony of further sweetness and delicious flavor filled my mouth.

Still, the sweetness really is a bit on the weak side. I think a bit of a stronger flavor would be ideal...

I poured some tau oil into a wooden spoon until it was about halfway full, then dissolved that into the stock atop the plate and added it all into the pot.

While carefully stirring so as not to break apart the chatchi, I brought it to a boil once more and then gave it a taste.

Yup, that was seeming pretty good. Normally I would say that it was best to treat this like the cubed giba meat stew and let it cool down first to let the flavor permeate the dish. But even at this point, the taste was already satisfactory.

And so, I scooped out the contents of the pot onto a fresh plate.

“Please, dig in. I would say this is around half the size of a meal for one.”

Contained within was around 120 grams of meat, half an aria, and a fourth of a chatchi.

I would have liked to add a greater volume of chatchi if at all possible, but since I needed to keep the costs of making it around the same level as the cubed giba meat stew, that was as much as I could use. After all, chatchi cost two and a half times as much as aria.

It really does feel awfully pricey, but then again I’m used to looking at aria and poitan as a standard, and they’re actually super cheap, I thought to myself as I served up the other half on another plate.

“Reina Ruu, I’ll take over manning the fire, so would you like to give this a try?”

“Huh? Is it really alright?” she asked, sounding childishly excited.

Naudis had an equally big grin on his face, too.

The pair of them both brought their spoons to their mouths in sync, and exploded with joy at exactly the same moment.



“Asuta, this is so tasty!”

“Yes, it’s truly delicious.”

With Naudis in particular, I didn’t think I had ever seen him look so overjoyed.

“Aah, it really is good. The chatchi are wonderfully soft, and aria with the sweetness soaked into them are especially superb. Ah, but the giba meat is so delicious too... And the taste of the vegetables seem to stand out here even more than with that cubed giba meat stew dish!”

“Thank you... But unlike with that dish and the soup, I didn’t use any lilo leaves here. And I didn’t season it all that strongly either, so I’m still a little concerned that the quirkiness of the giba meat may not be to the tastes of your customers from the south.”

“I think that shouldn’t be an issue. In fact, I also felt that you may not need to add the lilo leaves to that giba soup either. It seemed to me that the strong aroma from them was interfering ever so slightly with the flavor of the tau oil.”

That was some rather keen perception, there.

If the lilo leaves had harmonized perfectly with the giba soup, then I’d have used them in the Fa house, too. Ultimately, it was nothing but a desperate measure to eliminate the smell of the meat.

“I don’t think giba meat has much of a stench to begin with, to be honest. In fact, I’d find it strange if there were any customers who disliked the taste,” Naudis said, tilting his head a bit while still smiling. Despite him being a hairy-faced middle-aged man, it really was a rather charming expression. “Perhaps it’s just down to the impression that ‘normal’ people shouldn’t eat giba meat? It’s true that it tastes very different from karon or kimyuus, and it’s a strong flavor at that, so I could see how having such thoughts in your head could lead to a bad impression.”

It was true that Pops and his group had thought so when he tasted my giba burger and said it was bad. But just a month later, he went and chose to buy a ton of giba jerky rather than karon. “A month of eating the stuff is plenty enough time to get used to a strong flavor like that,” Pops had said.

“It’s been a month now since you started doing business with your stalls, hasn’t it? In that case, the idea that giba meat is worth eating must have spread throughout the post town by now. This flavor is where the giba’s deliciousness lies, so I don’t think there’s any need to purposefully season it to weaken that.”

“You think so...? It’s very reassuring to hear you say that,” I replied with a smile. “Well then, will you be purchasing this dish?”

“Of course! Ah, but still... I find it difficult to imagine just abandoning the cubed giba meat stew. I don’t mind if it’s once every five, no, even ten days, but could you please still sell it to me...?”

“If you’re fine with it being that rarely, then that would be okay. In that case, how about on the first day of a ten-day contract I’ll prepare the cubed giba meat stew, and then alternate between the meat and chatchi stew and the giba soup after that?”

It seemed that rather than what his customers wanted, Naudis was primarily focused on his personal desire for cubed giba meat stew. It seemed that unlike Nail, he was also eating the meals he purchased from me for dinner. I definitely felt honored thinking how he wanted to eat it badly enough to sacrifice one meal’s worth of profits.

At any rate, the reason I had wanted to remove the cubed giba meat stew from the menu was because of the cooking time it took. But if it was just once in ten days, I should be able to balance that out with my other work. And even if I couldn’t, I would just have to shorten my time at the stalls that day.

Ah, but with the current circumstances, I guess we’d need to increase the number of guards we have around early in the morning, huh...? I’d certainly like it if we didn’t need them anymore by the time I’m able to start working with the other inns...

As that thought was running through my head, Naudis called out to me with a bit of a worried look.

“By the way, Asuta... You said you wanted to take a break every ten days, didn’t you?”

“Right. So from here on out, I’d like to make our future contracts ten days

each to align with that.”

“I don’t mind that, of course. However... Your plan is to take two days off this time around, correct? The seventh and eighth of the white month?”

“Yes. I want to take the chance to work on my cooking skills.”

“I see...” Naudis said, hanging his head.

In the meantime, Reina Ruu had gone and shared her meat and chatchi stew with Shin Ruu.

After I stole a glance at the boy’s eyes narrowing with satisfaction when he took a bite, I turned back towards Naudis.

“What is it? Is there some sort of issue?”

“There is... But it’s something I need to handle on my own,” Naudis replied, raising his head again with a look of determination. “Asuta, earlier you asked me if I would consider purchasing giba meat and cooking it myself. Is that offer still valid?”

“Huh? Yes, of course.”

“In that case... I believe I would like to buy some giba meat.”

“Why is that?” I couldn’t help but ask.

I found it hard to imagine that Naudis was just that interested in my proposal.

“For the sake of my business, of course. If there are two days in a row in which I’m unable to offer your cooking, my customers may end up heading to another place to eat instead.”

“A-Aren’t you just overthinking things, there? When I take a break it’ll be from all the inns, so my cooking won’t be sold anywhere on those days.”

“But you’re selling giba meat to the owner of The Sledgehammer, aren’t you? And you said you’re hoping to sell your cooking to The Westerly Wind and The Kimyuus’s Tail, too... In that case, it’s possible those inns may also come to offer their own unique giba dishes, isn’t it? That’s what concerns me.”

“Right...”

“I can’t imagine the other inn owners possess anywhere near your level of

skill. However, frustration at being unable to eat giba cooking can only be resolved with such dishes, wouldn't you say? At the very least, that's how I'd think if I were in my customers' shoes," Naudis said, then he deeply bowed his head. "Please, sell me giba meat too. I'd like to work hard with my wife over these remaining few days to create a dish that I wouldn't be embarrassed to serve."

Naturally, I bowed my head too and said, "Thank you."

My primary goal was selling the giba meat itself rather than my cooking. For not only Nail but also Naudis to make up their minds on that matter was something I felt so grateful for that it left me a little taken aback.

At any rate, I was able to complete my business in the post town for the day without the red-haired boy Jeeda attacking or Cyclaeus employing any wicked schemes. And with that, this strangely fulfilling first day of the white month was now two thirds of the way done.

2

The sun was now midway between its peak and sunset, or around 3:30 in the afternoon by my internal clock.

Having finished all of our work, we departed the post town and headed back towards the settlement at the forest's edge.

Fortunately, despite my regulars in the Silver Vase and the construction group all leaving at once, the sales at the stalls hadn't taken an appreciable hit. Today, we sold 143 meals in total. That was good enough that if Shumiral and Pops and everyone were still around, we would have easily sold out.

In other words, there seemed to be just as many folks coming to Genos as there were leaving, and the proportion of them who'd come visit our stalls seemed to be about the same.

But at any rate, we had managed to carry out our work for the day. As we parted ways with the young hunters of the Rutim and Lea in front of the path back to the forest's edge, I took hold of Gilulu's reins. Though I felt bad about not offering them a ride back, with Li Sudra and the youths from the Ruu branch

houses added to our group, the wagon was already at capacity.

And since we had a ton of ingredients and pots and the like with us too, I had Gilulu walk at a slow march on the way back so as not to push him too hard. However, this road had a pretty harsh slope to it, so it was definitely placing a fair bit of burden on the totos.

Even so, Gilulu wore the same aloof look on his face as always as he energetically pulled the wagon along. And despite the slow but steady pace, it didn't even take 30 minutes to reach the Ruu settlement.

After arriving there, I gave Reina and Sheera Ruu some detailed advice as they made the giba burger patties for tomorrow, then headed off back towards the Fa house. The one difference from yesterday this time around was just that Ludo and Shin Ruu were now riding atop Ruuruu and guarding us. On days when Ai Fa wasn't around, this was how we were staying vigilant even here in the settlement at the forest's edge.

It certainly didn't seem likely that Jeeda or Cyclaeus would set foot here, but even so... Donda Ruu's intention seemed to be to do everything that he could about this. And so I felt grateful for that, praying all the while that my peaceful everyday life would soon return.

"Hey there. We've been waiting for you, Asuta."

There were six women already there in front of the Fa house when we arrived: two each from the Fou, Ran, and Deen clans, all here for cooking lessons. Saris Ran Fou wasn't anywhere to be seen, but in exchange, Toor and Jas Deen were present.

"It's been a while, Asuta," Jas Deen said with a calm bow of her head. She was the elder sister of the head of her clan, and was an older woman with an intense gaze.

Toor Deen, meanwhile, timidly followed suit. The young girl was just ten years old, and had been taken in from one of the Suun branch houses.

I had thought she had opened up to me quite a bit when she instructed me on how to prepare innards, but now that a bit of time had passed, it seemed her shyness had returned. Still, that just meant I had to put in the time and get her

to steadily warm up to me again, and so I shot her a smile.

“Today the plan is for me to show you all how to make hamburger patties. You’ll give it your all, right, Toor Deen?”

“Ah, y-yes...” she replied while hanging her head.

However, there were no dark shadows in her big eyes as they glanced upwards at me.

“By the way, about the custom of the forest’s edge that you aren’t supposed to grill meat on another house’s stove... Is it alright as long as you’re just handling the preparations before grilling?”

“Yes. And with that in mind, we brought along the necessary ingredients,” one of the Ran women replied.

The Ran and Fou women were also pairs of a younger girl and an older lady, just like with the Deen. Adding me and Li Sudra to their six, there were eight of us in total, making for a fairly large gathering.

“We’ll go patrol until Ai Fa returns,” Ludo Ruu stated.

“Thanks,” I replied, then headed through the front door along with the women.

“First off, we’ll boil down poitan in order to make the thickening agent. If you can’t spare the time or effort then you could grate down gigo instead, but that would end up costing some coins. Anyway, it won’t take long for this many poitan to dry out, so let’s dice up the aria in the meantime.”

There was still a bit over two hours left until sunset. And now that I had decided to cut up the meat in the morning instead, I was completely free at this time of day.

And so, after sautéing the diced aria in fruit wine, we set about mincing up meat until the vegetables cooled down. Once that process was done, I started working on my own research.

The current topic was a careful examination of the produce I hadn’t used up until now.

I had done similarly in the past before starting big jobs like the Rutim wedding

or beginning business in the post town. As a result, I had encountered not only aria and poitan, but also tino, pula, tarapa, chatchi, gigo, and myamuu. But naturally, there were still plenty of other sorts of produce sold in the post town.

However, among them were also ones that I hadn't found a way to use. In other words, I was talking about ingredients like the poitan that I couldn't relate to familiar produce.

On top of that, there was also produce that was unsuited for use in my business. Those were ones where the amount harvested seemed to be unstable, and so it was questionable as to whether I could purchase enough each day.

Eliminating all those didn't leave me with all that many options at hand.

Hmm... I don't have that *much time to spare today, so I guess I'll just tackle this one,* I thought, reaching out for an orange fruit that had a spiky skin like a durian.

It was about as big as a grapefruit, and had an elongated shape like a rugby ball. The price for one was half a red coin. That was the same as a chatchi, but you definitely got more mass with it, making it what I'd still classify as a reasonably priced ingredient.

As for the name, it was called a sheel. Though they were sold all throughout the post town, apparently they were rarely ever purchased by anyone here in the settlement at the forest's edge.

The thorny skin was rather tough, and so I tried cutting it with my newly purchased meat cutting knife rather than my vegetable knife. Such so-called butcher's knives were fine to be used on ingredients other than meat, just like with my old man's knife. And the blade certainly didn't betray my expectations, as it sliced cleanly through the sheel.

The smell of fresh meat hanging about the room was soon overpowered by a sweet and sour aroma. Yup, that was clearly a refreshing citrusy scent.

The freshly exposed cross section was yellow, and it was full of little round bits like a pomegranate.

When I squeezed it atop a plate, a faintly yellowish fruit juice came trickling

down, and the aroma filling the room grew even stronger.

“It smells really sweet, doesn’t it...?” Toor Deen said shyly, turning back my way while she was mincing meat.

It seemed children really were more sensitive to sweetness even here in this world, too.

“This is called a sheel fruit, and from what I hear it isn’t eaten much here at the forest’s edge. Would you like to give it a try?”

“Huh? Is it really alright?”

“Yup,” I replied, scooping up a bit of the fruit juice with a wooden spoon.

Toor Deen had a troubled look in her eyes thanks to her hands being dirtied by the fat from the meat, and so I said, “Here,” and held out the spoon.

Despite her cheeks turning red with embarrassment, she went ahead and took the spoon into her mouth.

Almost instantly, her cute little lips loudly proclaimed, “So sour!”

“Yeah. I figure that’s why it isn’t used here at the forest’s edge.”

Just like you would assume from the smell, it was certainly a citrus fruit, but a sheel had a powerful sourness about it like a lemon. It was just a bit sweeter than that familiar yellow fruit, but its sourness still definitely overpowered everything else.

Toor Deen gave an angry, “Geez!” and raised her hand. However, perhaps because she didn’t want to hit me with a dirty hand, she instead bonked me on the back with her elbow.

“Sorry, sorry! But I think it’d be pretty tasty if you watered it down...”

“It’s not tasty at all! My mouth hurts!” she wailed, then she turned away in a huff.

Jas Deen looked very satisfied as she watched Toor Deen act so cutely, like someone her age should. And the Fou and Ran women were all suppressing their quiet giggles as best they could.

“Asuta, how does this look?” Li Sudra suddenly asked with a smile, pointing to

her cutting board.

There was a nice little pink mountain of minced meat sitting there.

“Yes, that’s plenty. Now knead in the aria from before along with the poitan broth. Oh, and it’ll taste better if you mix in a bit of rock salt and pico leaves too. The Fa clan can share some with you all for today.”

After that, the rest of the women all finished their mincing one by one.

The people of the forest’s edge sure were robust. Mincing meat like this involved quite a bit of manual labor, but they finished the task just as quickly as I did.

With how things were going, perhaps it would be quicker to finish giving them instructions first. And so, I placed the sheel and the plate with the juice I had wrung from it in the corner of the room, then walked them all the way through forming the patties.

“It’s also possible to use two stoves with one on a high and one on a low flame to cook large patties, but managing the flames is difficult, so for today we’ll just do small ones. Separate out around this much meat, and then make it into a round shape. Once you’ve done that, toss it back and forth to get all the air out of the meat.”

With that, I played catch with the patty between my hands, making a *pat, pat* sound. It was with this task that a bit of a gap in dexterity started to become apparent. Toor Deen and Li Sudra were definitely on the more skilled end. They really did seem to have a strong sense for cooking.

And though the Fou and Ran women murmured stuff like, “This is pretty tricky...” they all definitely looked like they were enjoying themselves. They seemed truly happy to finally be taking on a complex dish like hamburger steak.

“Ah, right... There’s something I’d like to discuss with all of you from the Fou and Ran clans,” I said, suddenly recalling my conversation with Lala Ruu from this morning. Which is to say, the matter of how to assign the work in the post town.

I wanted to spread the wealth around evenly, and so I went ahead and asked the four women present if they would help out in place of the Sudra clan.

However, their reaction wasn't exactly enthusiastic.

"Working in the post town...? The Fa clan has helped us out so much, and we'd of course like to repay that," the slightly older Fou woman replied, a serious look on her face. "You can ask any task of us, and we'll be sure to see it through."

"Ah, no, I wasn't looking for repayment. I just thought you might enjoy taking on a different sort of work than usual," I said, recalling the satisfied smiles worn by Lala and Reina Ruu and everyone else.

However, there was no shift in any of their expressions.

"Asuta, you aren't currently short of hands in the post town, are you?" Li Sudra asked with a gentle look.

"No, that's not currently the case. If I eventually increase the number of stalls up to three I'll need more personnel, though."

"I see. In that case, it wouldn't be too late to ask the Fou and Ran for help then, right? To be blunt, aside from large clans like the Ruu and Rutim, most houses would find it difficult to spare anyone for half a day," Li Sudra stated with a refreshing smile. "For our Sudra clan it actually works out in that we are so small we have an excess of women. Despite the fact that in recent years the branch houses and the like have all been absorbed into the main house, there are still ultimately only four men and five women in the Sudra clan. And we don't have any infants that need to be taken care of, either..."

Now that she brought it up, it was true that the Fou and Ran both seemed to be fairly short on women. In fact, it seemed to have taken quite a bit of effort just making the time for these cooking lessons.

On top of that, they were already earning plenty just by selling meat to the Fa clan. In that case, there was no real benefit to forcing them to switch with Li Sudra. And yet, these women had said they were prepared to take on that extra hardship as long as it was for the sake of the Fa clan, to whom they owed so much.

"Well then, when I really do need more help, I'll talk to you all again. And there are a number of other clans like the Gaaz and Ratsu that I'd like to reach

out to, too."

"Right. Well, when that time comes, please don't hesitate to ask. We would like to be of help to the Fa too, after all."

"Thank you. Those words alone are enough to make me feel grateful."

That settled that. However, there was one girl still standing there with a gloomy expression on her face: Toor Deen.

Before I could ask her what was wrong, though, Jas Deen spoke up.

"Our Deen clan has at least a little bit of leeway to work with in regards to our women. But as you know, we fall under the Zaza clan, who do not approve of the Fa's business dealings. It pains me greatly that we are unable to repay the great debt that we owe you."

"Ah, no, that's not..." I murmured.

I was well aware of that fact, which was why I hadn't extended the offer to the Deen. Since they fell under the Zaza clan, they were only permitted to take bloodletting and cooking lessons, but they were forbidden from supporting our business in the post town.

"You wish to help Asuta, don't you, Toor Deen...?" Jas Deen quietly asked.

However, Toor Deen just shook her little head back and forth, her two tied-off braids swaying along with the motion.

"I will follow the orders from our clan heads," she said in a firm voice, even if it wasn't overly loud.

However, I could see the tears welling up in her eyes a bit.

"I'll try my hardest so that the Zaza clan head one day acknowledges me. If that time comes and I ask the Deen clan to help out, could I count on you then?"

"Yes," Toor Deen nodded.

Right now we had our hands full with Cyclaeus and Jeeda, but someday I would definitely have to devote some serious effort to finding how to join forces with the Zaza clan head and everyone else who thought like him.

And even among my greatest allies at the moment, the Ruu clan, the next in line for clan head was Jiza Ruu.

It had been a long time now since I last had an open discussion with that eldest son of the main Ruu house. The last time I had heard his true feelings had likely been way back before the clan head meeting.

I really don't even want to imagine it, but if something were to happen to Donda Ruu, the Fa clan's position would end up seriously worsening.

We had such friendly relations with the other clans under them like the Rutim and Lea that I couldn't imagine even Jiza Ruu could go and do a complete about-face all of a sudden.

Still, I had no idea how things would turn out if two of the leading clans, both the Ruu and Zaza, started acting uncooperatively towards us.

Though I still felt there were plenty of troubles lying ahead of us, I went ahead and cheerfully called out, "Alright then," to clear away any gloomy feelings. "It looks like everyone's roughly formed their patties. And so I'll finish by grilling up a sample patty on the outdoor stove as an example."

The women seemed to have collected themselves again as they smiled and nodded, then rose to their feet.

For the sample patty, I had Li Sudra knead some meat from the Fa house, so while she did that, I opened up the door so we could take it outside alongside the fruit wine I was going to cook it with. And when I did, I found my beloved clan head Ai Fa standing there.

"Whoa, that sure is a big one!" I said before even thinking to tell her, "Welcome back." That was because Ai Fa had a male giba on her back that had to weigh at least 70-80 kilos.

"Indeed," Ai Fa nodded, her face glistening with sweat as she sounded just a bit short of breath. That was only natural, though, seeing how she lugged such a heavy load through the uneven terrain of the forest. At any rate, she lowered the giba to the ground with a small sigh. "It got caught in one of the traps I had set up relatively nearby. The bloodletting went well too, so I hurried back with it before the mundt showed up. However, it's left me feeling a bit tired..."

“Of course it did. Good work there, Ai Fa.”

“Right... You too.”

There was a faint, gentle light shining in Ai Fa’s eyes. And there was little doubt in my mind that that was because she was glad to see I had made it home safely.

However, perhaps because of all the women lined up behind me, her expression retained its usual solemn dignity as clan head.

“You’re amazing, Ai Fa! You took down this big guy all on your own?” Ludo Ruu called out as he and Shin Ruu suddenly came running up.

With that, Ai Fa turned around and thanked them with her eyes.

“You have my gratitude for protecting the Fa house.”

“Aw come on, don’t act so distant. Still, that sure is something. You said it got caught in a trap?”

“Yes. It fell into my pitfall, so finishing it off was no great task.”

“In that case, I guess it’s true that anyone could’ve taken it down. But knowing where to set the trap is proof of your resourcefulness as a hunter. And then on top of that, you pulled it out of the hole on your own, bloodlet it, and then carried it all the way here, right? That’s seriously impressive,” Ludo Ruu stated, his eyes filled with earnest admiration.

Still, maybe I was just imagining things, but Shin Ruu seemed to be a bit broody as he stood there. He had once asked Ai Fa to teach him the dangerous technique known as sacrificial hunting. Thanks to his elder sister Sheera Ruu now working in the post town, they didn’t have to worry about coins anymore, but was the young 16-year-old head of his house still dissatisfied with his current strength?

It was true that Ai Fa, Ludo Ruu, and Rau Lea all possessed far more strength than one would expect from their ages and builds. And on top of that, Shin Ruu had to be feeling ashamed for having let Jeeda slip away yesterday.

I think it’s just that all of them are abnormal, so there’s no reason for him to feel so inferior there... Still, I guess if that was enough for him, he wouldn’t be

having that problem in the first place.

Even I had to say that if I was losing out to everyone my age in terms of cooking, I'd probably feel so frustrated I couldn't sleep at night.

Still, it didn't seem like there was really anything I could do to help Shin Ruu out.

As I was pondering the matter, though, Ai Fa stared at my hands and asked, "Is tonight's dinner hamburger steak?"

"Ah, I'm just cooking this up as an example," I replied, but then I hurriedly shook my head. "No wait, let's have it for dinner tonight, too! Watching everyone make them has made me want to eat some, too."

Ai Fa murmured, "I see..." and her momentarily clouded gaze started sparkling again. As always, hamburger steak really was her favorite. She certainly hadn't done anything wrong, so I felt earnestly relieved that I hadn't gone and crushed her expectations there.

It was then that Ludo Ruu tilted his head and went, "Hmm? That's a totos approaching. Is it the Zaza or Sauti?"

Ai Fa and Shin Ruu both nodded and looked out towards the path.

I couldn't hear anything at all. However, less than five seconds later, a huge totos came into view. It had come flying out of the shadow of the forest and was quickly charging right towards us.

"Gyah!" I shouted out as I almost dropped the plate I was holding.

And a number of the women started to shriek, too.

But fortunately, the totos didn't collide with us. Or to be more accurate, the rider pulled back on the reins and brought the bird to a sudden stop right before crossing the point where Ai Fa or Ludo Ruu would've struck it down.

"Ah, sorry about that! I was just enjoying myself so much that I ended up kicking the totos's side more than I should've," a cheerful voice called out from overhead.

It wasn't anyone from the Zaza or Sauti, though.

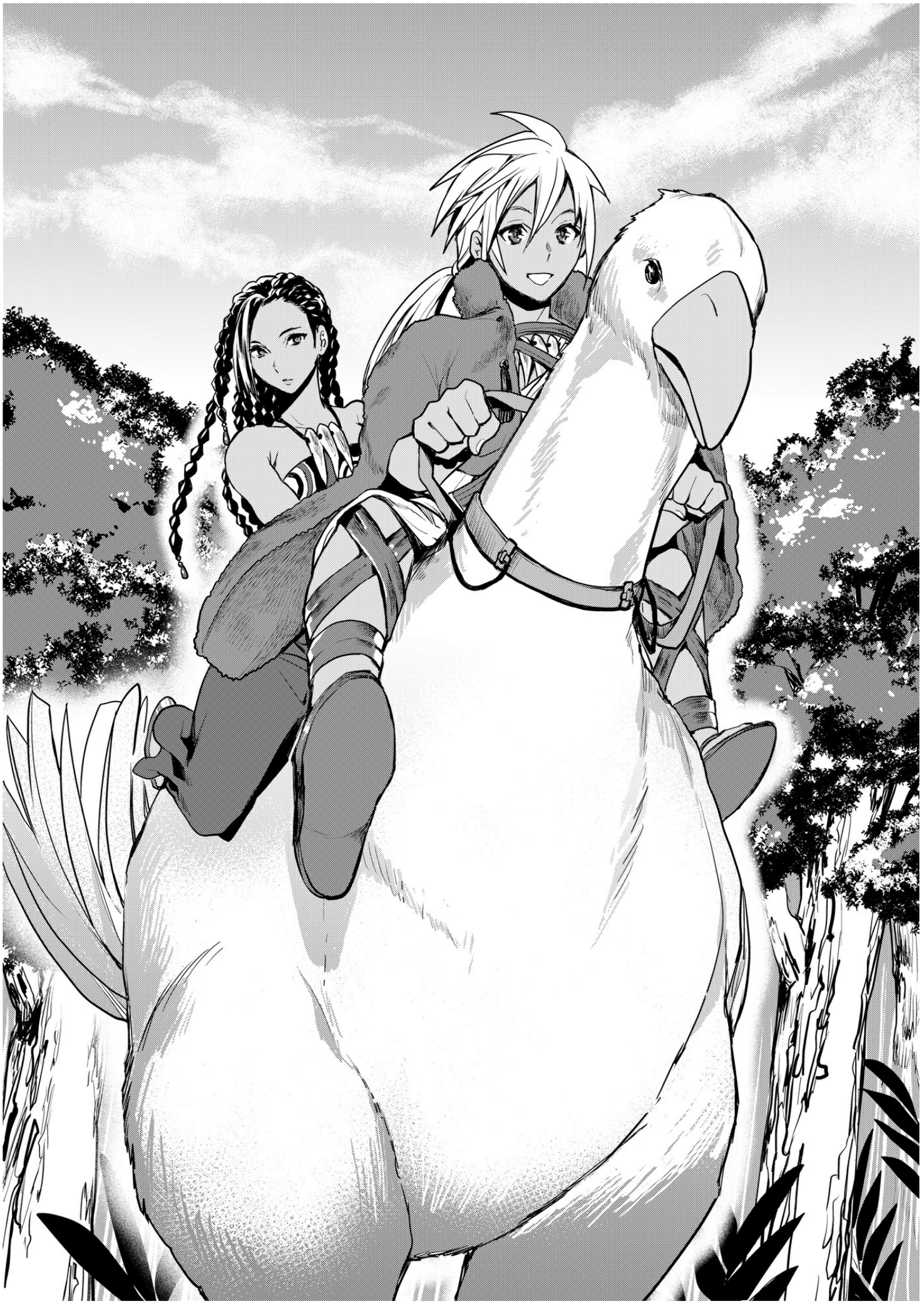
“Huh? Rau Lea?”

“Hey, there! I haven’t seen you since the festival of the hunt, Asuta.”

It was the young head of the Lea, with his long blond hair, light blue eyes, androgynous face, and a wild grin that didn’t quite fit with his looks.

“I really wish you would stop that... I thought we were going to die,” another voice moaned from behind him.

It was a slightly listless yet captivating voice that lingered in her throat a bit... In other words, it had come from Yamiru Lea. She was clinging to Rau Lea through his cloak.



“What are you doing riding a totos, Rau Lea? Did you borrow the Sauti clan’s?” Ludo Ruu questioned.

“No,” Rau Lea replied from atop the massive bird with a shake of his head. “This totos belongs to the Lea clan. I went to the post town today and bought it.”

“Huh?! You bought one? From one of the totos stables in town?” I was really taken off guard.

“Yeah, that’s right,” Rau Lea replied, puffing up his chest with pride. “I definitely lost quite a few horns and tusks as a result. But I wanted one, so I guess there was no helping that. Anyway, in the end I still went with the cheapest one I could find.”

Now that he mentioned it, his totos seemed to be a size smaller than the other ones we had here at the forest’s edge. Maybe it was still young, and not that used to having people ride it just yet. And its plumage was even lighter than Gilulu’s. The look in its eyes wasn’t quite so keen either.

“Anyway, sorry for scaring you all. I didn’t mean anything by it, so cut me a break, alright?” Rau Lea said as he nimbly hopped down to the ground. Then, he turned back towards Yamiru Lea atop the totos with a puzzled look on his face. “What are you doing? Hurry up and get down here.”

“Could you not treat the matter so lightly...? I’m not a hunter or anything of the sort.”

“Oh come on, that’s no height to be whining and hesitating over. Just jump on down already.”

“Hey, don’t move the totos,” Yamiru Lea demanded, shooting Rau Lea an icy glare. Her hands were rather desperately clinging to the totos’s back feathers all the while.

“Your looks sure are deceiving. You’re tall for a woman and look pretty strong too, but you’re as weak as a little kid. Guess that’s all down to how corrupt the Suun clan had grown, though,” Rau Lea grumbled with his usual bluntness.

It was certainly true that Yamiru Lea possessed less arm strength than the

average woman here. I was able to sense that much just from giving her cooking lessons a mere handful of times.

Still, it's not like it's enough to prevent her from doing her work, and having a fault like that is a bit charming, I guess... I thought to myself, only for Yamiru Lea's glare to turn my way too for some reason.

"Geez, you're helpless. Come on, hop down," Rau Lea said, holding out his hand.

With a little "Hmph," Yamiru Lea placed her hand on top of Rau Lea's head instead, then elegantly descended to the ground.

"Hey! Who uses their clan head's head as a support?!"

"So noisy..." Yamiru Lea muttered while swiping up her long blackish-brown hair.

Yamiru Lea's proportions were every bit a match for Vina Ruu's, but she had a completely different, somehow eerie feel about her. The way she let her elegantly braided hair just hang down was a bit unusual for a woman of the forest's edge, and though she had lost her ominous viper-like aura, there was still a chilly intensity lingering about her. But at least she looked to be doing well rather than seeming all gloomy, and that was what mattered most.

"So, why are you two here...?" Ludo Ruu asked for the group.

"Hmm? I brought Yamiru Lea here for cooking lessons, of course! We've been relying on the Rutim women's help up till now, but I figured she'd improve quicker learning from Asuta directly." Then, for some reason, Rau Lea stared at Ai Fa with eyes like those of a hunting dog. "And I came here to challenge the clan head of the Fa to a contest of strength! You may be a hunter too, but I can't simply let things stand when a woman has gotten the better of me!"

"What?" Ai Fa questioned with a tilt of her head, and then she gave a small sigh. "I know you've come quite a ways, but I have work to handle around the house, so I have no time to deal with a bother like that."

Rau Lea had lost to Ai Fa in the contest of strength held at the Ruu clan's festival of the hunt. And from what I could recall, he had looked pretty darn displeased the night of that banquet, too.

But in contests like that between hunters, while there was pride to be had for winning, there wasn't supposed to be any shame in losing. However, Rau Lea had seemingly been so frustrated he couldn't stand it in spite of that. And that indifferent response from Ai Fa caused his eyebrows to raise even further.

"What do you mean, 'a bother?!' You carried out your work as a hunter already, didn't you?! That's a fine giba right there!"

"Yes, and now I need to skin it and remove its innards. On top of that, I would also like to learn how to wash the intestines..."

"Huh?" I questioned, taken off guard.

While keeping her glare fixed on Rau Lea, Ai Fa bluntly stated, "It takes time to wash the innards. Asuta has to prepare dinner and has work related to his business in the post town, and so I've taken on that task instead. Therefore, I have no time for dealing with you."

"I'll help out with that work too! Then you can use the extra time that makes for me."

Ai Fa gave yet another sigh.

"I said I'm going to try to learn how to do it, so there's no point in borrowing someone else's aid for such a task. And besides, as I already told you that evening, no matter how many times you try, the results won't change."

"What's that?! Are you saying I'm really that much weaker than you?!" Rau Lea shouted, the glare in his eyes growing all the more dangerous.

However, Ai Fa just looked puzzled at those words, her eyes narrowing.

"I'm sorry to say so, clan head of the Lea, but I simply cannot imagine losing to you. Still, hmm... That certainly may seem unusual, I suppose. I sensed greater strength from you than even the second son of the Ruu..."

"Right?! I pride myself on being so strong that even Darmu Ruu wouldn't beat me!"

"Hmm... In that case, perhaps..." Ai Fa murmured, suddenly turning towards Shin Ruu. "Shin Ruu, my apologies, but could you take up the Lea clan head's challenge?"

With an incredibly calm look in his eyes, the boy stared back at Ai Fa.

“Rau Lea was strong enough to be chosen as one of the final eight... I would surely be no match for him.”

“I’m not so certain of that. I can’t help but get the feeling that you would win.”

With those words, Rau Lea lost his temper rather than Shin Ruu.

“Alright, then I’ll take him on! But if I win, then you better face me, Ai Fa!”

“As you please,” Ai Fa replied with a shrug of her shoulders.

And so, the Fa house was suddenly hosting a contest of strength between two hunters.

The pair removed their cloaks and blades, and faced one another atop the grass.

“You better come at me with all you’ve got, Shin Ruu. I won’t hold any grudges or anything if I lose.”

Since he said that, it seemed abundantly clear that Rau Lea didn’t have the slightest intention of holding back either.

However, that was probably only natural. This was likely no ordinary test of strength, but something even more sacred than that to these hunters, in a way.

Even Shin Ruu’s normally calm and composed eyes had the look of a hunter in them as he lowered his hips. From where I was standing, he felt every bit as intense as Rau Lea.

It wasn’t exactly easy to stay calm when watching such a contest between hunters from up close and personal. And so, I was definitely on edge as the two of them squared off.

Ultimately, though, the match was settled in an instant.

As soon as Ludo Ruu shouted, “Begin!” Rau Lea had ferociously reached out to grab at Shin Ruu... only for his hand to be twisted around and the larger man to find himself on the ground in no time at all.

“Huh?” Rau Lea questioned, springing up. “You’re pretty darn quick, Shin Ruu.

Sorry, but could I ask you for one more round?”

“Of course.”

This time around, his chest was grabbed and he was taken out by a foot sweeping from behind his heel to knock out his leg, more or less.

“What the? You’re seriously strong, huh, Shin Ruu! Why’d you lose so quickly back at the festival of the hunt, then?” Rau Lea complained while still sitting on the ground.

Shin Ruu turned and faced Ai Fa with a seriously confused look.

However, Ludo Ruu soon murmured, “I see... I’ve got it. Shin Ruu’s overwhelmingly faster. And even though you’re pretty slender, you fight like Darmu and Jiza, Rau Lea.”

“Huh? What does that mean?!”

“To put it simply, you’re relying on brute force. But Shin Ruu and I could never beat someone like Darmu with strength alone, and that’s probably true of Ai Fa too. If we don’t use our opponent’s strength against them as much as we can, we’d never have a chance.”

“I don’t get what you mean. It’s only natural to use brute force in a contest of strength, isn’t it? What sort of technique do you mean when you’re talking about using your opponent’s strength or whatever?”

“Man, thinking more on it, it’s honestly impressive that you were beating folks bigger than you like that. Have you ever lost to Ji Maam before?”

“We’ve fought three times, and I’ve won twice,” Rau Lea replied, puffing up his chest as he sat cross-legged atop the grass.

Ji Maam was a hunter with an exceptionally large build, even among the clans under the Ruu. Ai Fa and Mida had both beaten him, while Shin Ruu had lost to him.

“Were you perhaps an especially large child, clan head of the Lea...?” Ai Fa asked, crossing her arms as she thought.

“Well, yeah,” Rau Lea answered with a nod. “When I was a kid, I’m pretty sure I was the biggest one in the Lea settlement. And when I became a hunter, I was

still larger than most. But two or three years later, everyone ended up bigger than me."

"So that's how you ended up relying on your strength so much. I really am surprised you were taking down larger opponents like that... But you'll never beat Donda Ruu or Dan Rutim that way. And it would be difficult to beat Jiza Ruu or Gazraan Rutim, too."

"I mean, I wasn't exactly thinking I could beat any of them just yet, either..." Rau Lea murmured, but then his pale blue eyes shot wide open. "Hold on, there! Are you saying you're confident you could beat Donda Ruu or Dan Rutim, Ai Fa?"

"I have already lost to Dan Rutim... However, I believe I could win depending on how the match played out."

"Ah, same here. Well, I still haven't laid a finger on my old man or Jiza yet. But still, if I thought I had no chance at all, then I wouldn't bother trying to start with."

Though Ai Fa and Ludo Ruu's voices were calm, there were indomitable flames burning bright in their eyes.

"I am a woman. So from the very start, I was weaker than any other hunter. And so, I am always training while thinking intently on how to strengthen myself as a hunter."

"Hmm, so you're the same way, huh? I just haven't really been growing, so I'm always worrying about how I can avoid holding everyone else back," Ludo Ruu said with a daring grin. "And since I want others to acknowledge my skill, I'm always thinking on how I can beat them in a contest of strength. I'm sure it's the same for you, right, Ai Fa? Your dad seemed like he was a crazy strong hunter."

Ai Fa just looked down at the ground, not saying anything in response.

Keeping the same expression on his face, Ludo Ruu then looked over Rau Lea and Shin Ruu.

"In other words, it's like Morga's three-way deadlock, right? The varb wolves beat the savages, the savages beat the giant madarama snakes, and the

madarama beat the varb. Shin Ruu's the wolves, Rau Lea is the savages, and Ji Maam is the giant snakes."

"Why am I a savage?! And which ones are you and Ai Fa, Ludo Ruu? What about Donda Ruu and Dan Rutim?"

"Those two wouldn't ever lose to wolves or snakes. And that's exactly why I want to beat my old man..."

Losing his temper, Rau Lea started seriously scratching his head.

"Now that I think about it, I can't ever remember beating you, Ludo Ruu... I only recall going up against you two or three times, though."

"Yeah. Sorry, but I can't imagine ever losing to you either, Rau Lea."

"I knew it! In other words, I'm not even on the same level as you or Ai Fa..." Rau Lea murmured, furiously shooting to his feet. "Shin Ruu! Could I ask for one more match? Actually, could we just keep going without me having to ask each time?!"

"No, but... It's not like I'm having an easy time beating you, Rau Lea. It's more like I'm giving it all I've got and managing to squeeze out a win. If I didn't beat you to the punch with the first move, you probably would have crushed me."

"Then you should build up your strength, too! I mean, you lost to Ji Maam even though you beat me, right? Doesn't that frustrate you?!"

With that, Shin Ruu's brow tensed, and he muttered, "It does..."

"In that case, let's grow stronger together! If you don't have any hunting work right now, then it's the perfect chance!" Then, Rau Lea glanced over at Yamiru Lea, who was just standing there showing no interest whatsoever. "Like you heard, I'm gonna go train with Shin Ruu! You go take Asuta's cooking lessons... No wait, if they're washing innards, then you should learn that too! That giba heart was pretty darn tasty, after all!"

"Why is someone so thoughtless in charge of the Lea, I wonder...?" Yamiru Lea said with a little sigh. She had really started acting more like a human lately.

As I repressed the faint happiness I was feeling at that fact, I turned to face Ai Fa.

“Well then, I’ll leave the skinning and organ removal to you. In the meantime, I’ll teach everyone how to cook hamburger steak, and we can meet up at the washing place after that.”

“Hmm? You’re coming too?”

“Yeah, I’m also still an amateur when it comes to handling innards, after all. And we’ve got a reliable teacher around today, too...” I said, turning around only to be taken aback. Our little instructor Toor Deen’s face had gone pale, and she was clinging tight to Jas Deen.

Her big, round eyes were open even wider with fear, and her slender little shoulders were trembling bit by bit. As I followed her terrified gaze... I found Yamiru Lea standing there.

As for Yamiru Lea, her eyes narrowed questioningly as she stared at Toor Deen.

“Ah... You’re from one of the Suun branch houses, aren’t you, girl?”

Toor Deen was too terrified to answer.

“In that case, do you belong to one of the clans that was under the Suun?”

“Yes. I am the elder sister of the Deen clan head, and my name is Jas Deen,” the older woman answered, shooting Yamiru Lea an intense glare as she did so. All the while, her sinewy hands gently supported Toor Deen’s little shoulders.

Jas Deen’s younger sister had married into the one of the Suun branch houses and given birth to Toor Deen. And then, that woman was forced to obey the twisted rules of the Suun, unfitting for people of the forest’s edge, and to pillage the fruits of Morga. In the end, she died young and full of regrets.

Yamiru Lea then shook her head, her long hair swaying as she did so.

“If you wish to disparage me, then feel free to do so. You all certainly have that right.”

“No,” Jas Deen said with a shake of her head. “From what I have heard, you’re atoning by cutting your blood ties and living properly as a member of the Lea. That is what our clan heads decided, and we can only abide by that. That’s fine by you, isn’t it, Toor Deen...?”

“Yes,” Toor Deen quietly answered.

Though her little face was still pale and her body hadn’t stopped trembling, she didn’t turn away from Yamiru Lea.

As she looked back at the young girl, Yamiru Lea broke out in an amused smile.

Rau Lea chimed in, “The Suun clan has lost the right to lead our people. From here on out, it’ll be up to us to guide the Suun and those who used to belong to their clan. She certainly has her flaws, but even so, I entrust Yamiru Lea to you, woman of the Deen clan.”

“I understand,” Jas Deen replied with a nod.

“Well then, how about we get to work too, Shin Ruu? Oh, right! Asuta, how’s Yamiru Lea smell?”

“Huh? Her smell?”

“Yeah. It’s been over 20 days since the clan head meeting now, so I had her stop with the lilo leaves. I don’t think there should be any of that awful blood smell left, but what do you think?”

“Ah, yeah, it’s fine. That wasn’t an issue at all.”

“Really? Make sure you check properly. Hey, Yamiru Lea.”

With a small sigh, Yamiru Lea came over our way. Then, she lifted up her long hair and brought her neck in close to my nose.

The smell of the forest I expected from her people, as well as the natural scent of a young woman, crept into my nose.

“How is it...?”

“Completely and utterly fine!”

Yamiru Lea lifted her head and glared at me from up close and personal.

Her eyes had once had the chilly look of a serpent’s, but now they seemed somehow sulky.

“I-I’m just glad to see you doing well,” I suddenly found myself saying.

Thinking about it a little more deeply, it had been around half a month since I had last seen Yamiru Lea. Not since the day that Tei Suun lost his life in the post town, and we returned his body to them to bury in the forest.

Yamiru Lea turned away, and then she ever so quietly whispered, “You too...”

3

“Man, today sure felt packed, somehow.”

By this point, the sun had set. And having finished eating cheese and giba hamburger steaks made with dried milk from Sym, Ai Fa and I were now sitting there talking in the dark like always.

“Seems like we saw a lot more people than usual, and all sorts of business-related stuff happened... Even though Jeeda and Cyclaeus didn’t make any moves, it sure was a hectic day.”

“I see,” Ai Fa replied with a look of feigned disinterest as she carefully observed one of the wine glasses. It seemed she really was quite taken by that gift from Shumiral. In fact, she had kept on playing with it last night too, never tiring of it.

However, her gaze felt a bit more clouded this time. She seemed somehow displeased, but also somehow not? I couldn’t read what she was feeling at all.

“Ah, right. Now that we have the wine glasses and some fine wine, how about we treat ourselves to an after-dinner drink sometime?”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m just talking about having a drink to unwind at the end of the day. You’re definitely a drinker, right? I mean, you already had fruit wine in the pantry to start with.”

In spite of that, though, I had hardly ever actually seen Ai Fa drink the stuff.

Since it was just before bedtime now, Ai Fa’s long blonde hair had been undone, and so she halfheartedly brushed it up.

“But you don’t drink, right? And it would feel awkward if I was the only one

partaking. You can use it as an ingredient in your cooking though, can't you?"

"You don't need to worry about that. I mean, Donda Ruu chugs down fruit wine all on his own, doesn't he?"

"Are you trying to say that Donda Ruu behaves more fittingly for a clan head than I do...?"

"That's not what I meant. I just want to enjoy the kindness those folks gave us to the fullest."

While starting to fear that she really was displeased, I went and got two bottles from the pantry.

One was of the high-class fruit wine from Pops and his men, while the other was filled with the sheel juice I had squeezed this afternoon.

"I'll have some of this, so drink as much as you please."

"Isn't that juice you intended to use in your cooking?"

"Yeah, but I didn't end up with too much time to experiment today. It'd be a waste if it just went bad tomorrow, so I figured I'd indulge myself a little."

To be honest, I had planned to use it as a squeezed lemon substitute with giba steak and the like. My thinking was that the refreshing aroma and acidity would suppress the quirkiness of the giba, allowing the delicious flavor of the meat to be enjoyed more directly.

And if I paired it with fruit wine and other seasonings, making a lemon sauce of sorts also sounded nice. At any rate, I was trying to think up new approaches for tackling giba meat.

However, such experimentation got deferred to tomorrow. And so, I poured the sheel juice into my own wine glass, then cut it with water in a two-to-one ratio, using less of the fruit juice.

I poked at it with my fingertip and gave it a lick, and from what I could tell that had restrained the acidity well enough. However, it was still pretty much just lemon water. If it was possible, it would have been nice to add some honey or ice at least.

"Hmm, I think I will take just a bit of fruit wine to add some flavor."

Ever so carefully, I poured in so little that it wouldn't even fill a teaspoon.

However, even that was enough to drastically improve the aroma. While I didn't drink, I still definitely enjoyed the scent of wine and rum and the like.

"I mean, the fun of a wine glass is pouring something into it, right?"

The sheel juice was a faint yellow, and I had gone so light on the fruit wine that it hardly had any impact on the color. Still, just faintly swirling the glass was enough to scatter brilliant light from the candlestick about.

Perhaps that had finally been enough to catch her attention, as Ai Fa then poured the fruit wine into her own glass. And with the clear reddish brown of the liquid, the change really was striking. There were cuts made in the surface of the wine glass here and there, and they reflected a deep crimson light.

"So pretty..." Ai Fa let slip.

Feeling glad to see the first smile from her in a while, I went ahead and lightly clinked my glass into hers.

"Good work again today," I said, and then I sipped my drink.

Well, the taste made sense for pretty much adding lemon juice to room temperature water and using a bit of wine to add to the aroma. It was hard to call it especially tasty, but it was still rather pleasant, I had to say.

After a single shrug of her shoulders, Ai Fa drank down the fruit wine, and in no time at all, the nearly 80% full wine glass was completely empty.

"Hey, I know I'm the one who suggested it, but don't push yourself too hard, alright? This stuff's supposed to have a higher alcohol content than normal fruit wine."

"Alcohol content...?" Ai Fa questioned, tilting her head as she poured more fruit wine.

"It means it's stronger, and will get you drunk easier. That's how it is with flammable wines."

I had once used this high-class fruit wine to flambé at the Rutim banquet. Most of the stuff was only about as strong as the wine from my world, but from what I could tell, this particular fruit wine seemed to be closer to brandy or

whisky in terms of alcohol content.

“Even without such concern from you, I would never be so foolish as to drink myself into a dead stupor. After all, there’s no guarantee that we won’t be attacked under the cover of night,” she said, drinking half a glass this time.

Despite her words, that really was some hearty drinking.

“By the way, Asuta, did that Mikel of Turan person not show himself?”

“Yeah, not today at least.”

The mysterious man who knew of Cyclaeus’s crimes, Mikel of Turan...

I had been told by Shumiral that he would show up at The Sledgehammer at some point, but apparently that wasn’t today.

“Then what about Sanjura?”

“Ah, he stopped by to purchase a meal from the stalls. He seemed really worried about the fact that we hadn’t notified the guards about Jeeda.”

“I see...”

“You seem really cautious of Sanjura, Ai Fa. Is there some sort of reason for that?”

“Not especially. It would just be quite troublesome to make an enemy of him, so I cannot let my guard down,” she replied, downing the other half of the glass in a single gulp.

Apparently, Ai Fa was just as heavy of a drinker as Donda Ruu. It made for quite a sight, as she sat there cross-legged, pouring herself another glass.

“I’ve never seen any townsfolk that strong before. And altogether, the only outsiders I can think of who could compete with the people of the forest’s edge are Kamyua Yoshu and that gray-eyed noble...”

“You mean Melfried? Ah, but what about Jeeda...?”

“Ah, I suppose he’s on the same level of some hunters of the forest’s edge as well... But not to the degree of Ludo Ruu or myself, at least.”

“Then just how strong would you say Kamyua and Melfried are, exactly?” I asked, getting caught up in the conversation.

Ai Fa took another drink of her fruit wine, looking annoyed.

“If my judgment isn’t mistaken, Kamyua Yoshu is at least as strong as Donda Ruu, while that gray-eyed noble is about equal to Jiza Ruu.”

“So if we were to make a ranking, it’d be Donda Ruu, Dan Rutim, and Kamyua at the top, huh? Well, Kamyua’s the only surprising one there.”

“To be honest, I find that man’s strength difficult to judge. However, I can’t help but get the impression that Donda Ruu or Dan Rutim wouldn’t find it easy to defeat him.”

“I see. But you were able to have an even fight with Dan Rutim too, Ai Fa.”

In that case, maybe it was a top four rather than a top three.

Was Ai Fa really that unbelievably strong?

“I’m not confident that I could defeat them,” Ai Fa said while staring into her sparkling wine glass. “However... I don’t feel that I would certainly lose, either. I believe if things went well I could win, and at worst, I could at least defend my life. Even if I couldn’t win, as long as I could escape then things would work out.”

“Got it. So, Sanjura’s around Ludo Ruu’s level, then? Wait, how does Ludo Ruu compare to Jiza and Darmu Ruu, anyway?”

“Why are you concerned about such matters? All I can grasp is how their strength seems to me,” Ai Fa said, licking a bit of fruit wine while looking a bit annoyed. Had she realized she was going too fast there? At any rate, seeing her act so catlike was just adorable. “If the time were to come where they actually faced one another, the outcome could be completely reversed from what is expected, like with Shin Ruu and Rau Lea before. And so, even if I say Ludo Ruu and Sanjura are around the same level, and the same is true of Jiza Ruu and that Melfried man, it is difficult to predict how things would play out in an actual fight between them.”

“Yeah, that makes sense. I just wanted to ask about two more, then. About how strong are Zasshuma and Labis?”

“Hmm? Who are they?”

“Zasshuma is Kamyua’s buddy who pretended to be the leader of their merchant group. As for Labis... He’s that southerner who’s always accompanying Diel.”

As soon as she heard that girl’s name, Ai Fa’s brow furrowed and she started chugging down the fruit wine again.

“Who cares about men like that? They couldn’t get the better of even the youngest hunter here at the forest’s edge.”

Was that so?

But Zasshuma earned a living by fighting as a bodyguard, while Labis was supposedly a skilled enough swordsman to take on multiple bandits at once.

In that case, I couldn’t help but come to the conclusion that the hunters of the forest’s edge possessed abnormally great strength, and Ai Fa still stood out as one of the best even among them.

That really is something. I’d say Ai Fa’s a whole lot more astounding than folks like Kamyua or Sanjura, I thought to myself, just as my clan head suddenly brought her face in close.

“What are you thinking about, Asuta? It certainly couldn’t be that girl, could it?”

“‘Th-That girl?’ Do you mean Diel?”

“Don’t play dumb. Or could it be that westerner girl? You seem to be quite friendly when talking with her.”

“You mean Yumi? I had no choice but to talk to her like that. You were there when she went off on me about it, weren’t you?”

“Hmph!” Ai Fa glared while taking another sip from her wine glass. “I’m not fond of noisy women. And suspicious women like Yamiru Lea are out of the question, too.”

“I told you, I wasn’t...”

“If you’re going to take a bride, then someone like Sheera Ruu would be best. I prefer graceful women.”

I had heard such things before. However, that all had nothing to do with me.

And yet, Ai Fa's face steadily crept closer.

"Li Sudra might be good, too. And Ama Min Rutim's a fine woman. However, it feels like you've tried to keep such graceful women at a distance, Asuta."

"That wasn't my intention in the least! And besides, those two are married to begin with, aren't they?"

"So, you're looser with unmarried women?"

"I'm not loose with anyone!"

"It couldn't be that you have improper feelings towards that young Din girl, could—"

"Stop right there! Something's wrong with you. Are you a bit drunk after all?"

"I'm not drunk," Ai Fa replied while downing the rest of the contents of her glass, only to limply fall to my chest.



“You really are drunk, aren’t you?!”

“So persistent... This much wine couldn’t possibly do anything to me,” Ai Fa insisted, her warm breath soaking into my chest.

Actually, every bit of her that was touching me felt incredibly warm.

“If you’re to take a bride, then a woman like Sheera Ruu would be fitting...”

“I’m telling you, I’m not marrying anybody.”

“As your clan head, I have to give you my blessing...”

“I told you that won’t be necessary, didn’t I?”

“A clan head must wish for her clan member’s happiness...” Ai Fa murmured, clinging tight to my body.

Perhaps because of the wine, though, she wasn’t properly holding back her strength. Around when I heard my ribs cracking, I shouted out, “Gyah! That hurts! You’re seriously gonna break something! Snap out of it, Ai Fa!”

“Are you rejecting me, Asuta...?”

“That’s not it! It’s just that my pathetic, measly bones are screaming!” I yelled, desperately tapping Ai Fa’s shoulder. With that, she finally loosened her grasp. However, her arms didn’t fully let go of me, and her face remained pressed up against my chest.

I gave a deep sigh as I felt her soft hair tickle my nose.

“My greatest happiness comes from being by your side, Ai Fa...” I somehow managed to get out in a calm tone, though I’m certain she could feel my heart pounding away right now. After all, I could feel her heartbeat, too. “And so, I won’t marry anyone. Doing that has to mean wanting to spend your whole life with someone... And as long as I have you, I don’t need anyone else.”

I got no response.

Was the punchline here that she had already fallen asleep?

With yet another sigh, I gently wrapped my arms around Ai Fa’s head and back. As I felt her warmth all over my body, my heartbeat only grew quicker.

It's because you're here, Ai Fa...

In these past two months and some change, I had met many people who were now precious to me. There were lots of folks at both the forest's edge and in the post town that I couldn't stand the thought of losing. I was supported by so many people that I couldn't even count them all.

Even so, Ai Fa remained firmly fixed in the very center of my heart. Those feelings hadn't changed, even now. Actually, they seemed to only be growing stronger day by day.

And Ai Fa thought of me as someone precious, too. That I could have confidence in that fact made my current lifestyle feel so utterly blessed that it caused my heart to ache.

Until I was cast out of this joyful life altogether, there was no way I would ever marry any other woman. It really did feel strange to me that this fact hadn't gotten across to Ai Fa.

When exactly will you finally realize just how charming and wonderful of a person you are, Ai Fa? Or will you never be able to realize that yourself?

As that thought ran through my head, I hugged her body ever so slightly tighter.

And then, after a cat-like stirring, she whispered words that filled my heart.

"If you really mean that, then I am also blessed..."

I closed my eyes and pressed my cheek up against Ai Fa's soft hair.

With that, the long, long first day of the white month finally came to a close.

Chapter 3: An Unacceptable Omen

1

A great deal had happened over the course of the first day of the white month, but it had ultimately come to a peaceful close.

However, as if payment was required for that calm, my next several days ended up full of trouble.

And that was nothing but an appetizer before the great tumult still to come.

If that star diviner from Sym who was one of Shumiral's comrades were still around, just what sort of fate would he see lying ahead of us?

It wasn't as if anyone would lose their lives like with the incident several days back, but blood would definitely be shed.

And also, it would absolutely be a huge turning point for the whole of Genos, the forest's edge included.

I would like to think that I pushed things towards the better in the end, but along the way I would be shaken every bit as much as I had been during the events with Zattsu and Tei Suun.

◇

"Huh? Is your dad taking time off today?"

It was currently morning, and I was in the post town.

I had gone to purchase the vegetables I needed as always, only to find Dora's son manning the stall in his place.

Around once every ten days or so, Dora wouldn't be running his shop. On those days, one of the man's two sons would fill in.

Dora apparently ran a large plantation alongside four other farmers, and he was left entirely in charge of selling their produce in the post town. He would spend half of each day here in town, and the remainder of his time on tending

to and harvesting his crops. Honestly, he seemed to be just as diligent of a worker as the people of the forest's edge.

Well, at any rate, this certainly wasn't my first time seeing his son here... but it seemed that something was different about today. The youth had a firm build with a homely face, and a real serious look in his eyes as he whispered to me, "Dad got a little hurt, so he'll be taking a few days off work... Actually, some bandits went after our storehouse last night."

"Huh?!" I shouted out in shock, but I couldn't think of anything else to say. The sudden bad news about an attack that left Dora injured made my brain completely freeze up.

"There's no need to worry. He got hit in the shoulder with a club or something, which injured his muscles a bit. But he should be able to move again just fine after a few days of rest," the youth, Dora's son and Tara's older brother, continued on in a quiet tone.

He was right around my age, and he had a calm disposition and a favorable opinion of the people of the forest's edge. However, unsurprisingly his light brown eyes were full of concern today.

"I have a message from my dad, too. Apparently, the bandits wore giba pelt cloaks."

"Giba pelt... cloaks?"

In other words, what the hunters of the forest's edge wore.

Ai Fa and Ludo Ruu had been listening along, and now leaned in on either side of me with serious looks on their faces.

"And from what I heard, they had horn and tusk necklaces dangling in front of their chests too. He said it was hard to see since it was dark out, though... In other words, the bandits were dressed so that folks would mistake them for people of the forest's edge."

"That's an amusing story, there. So, what about their faces...? For the most part, you should be able to tell people of the forest's edge from townsfolk just by seeing their faces and skin color, right?" Ludo Ruu asked, but the youth shook his head.

“He said they had cloth or something wrapped around their faces. And as for their skin, he couldn’t quite tell because well-tanned townsfolk aren’t all that different from the people of the forest’s edge. At any rate, they did it when there was hardly any light out...”

“Hmm, yeah, that sure is something,” Ludo Ruu said, the look of a hunter flickering in his eyes.

At that, the youth went just a bit paler and looked like he was about to shrink away.

“Anyway, Dad was worried that somebody was trying to pin their thievery on the people of the forest’s edge. And so, he wants you all to take care. Um, also, there’s just one thing I’d like to confirm,” he said, a tense look on his face as he leaned forward. “All the criminals at the forest’s edge really were judged, right? There’s not anybody out there committing crimes without you knowing, yeah?”

“The people of the forest’s edge have all firmly sworn to live properly and without bringing anyone shame, after the huge shock of finding out about the leading clan’s crimes. I can’t say I’m personally familiar with each and every member of the hundreds living at the forest’s edge, but I’ve never once doubted that determination,” I replied, finally getting over my surprise.

Though my head was clearing up, I could feel a passionate rage swirling in the pit of my stomach.

“On top of that, to give you a reason that’s a little more concrete... Pillaging the fruits of the forest was a crime that most other clans wouldn’t easily notice, but now that the Suun’s deeds have been brought to light, I can’t imagine anyone at the forest’s edge would dare take a foolish risk like going after a farm.”

“Yeah, that’s true... Sorry. The truth is, the folks from the other houses who work our plantation were blaming the people of the forest’s edge right from the start, and we’ve been arguing with them. If it turned out some of your people really were behind it after all, it’d put my dad in a really bad position...”

“My old man is one of the new leading clan heads. I can’t imagine there’s anyone carrying out crimes at the forest’s edge without him knowing,” Ludo Ruu interjected. “Even if someone was stupid enough to think something like

‘Pillaging the fruits of the forest would damage my pride, but I can’t stand those townsfolk so let’s go after their plantation!’ they’d change their minds as soon as they imagined my old man or Gulaf Zaza raging at them,” he added in just as relaxed of a tone as always.

However, he was probably filled with even more intense anger inside than I was at the moment. After all, his pale eyes were still quite clearly those of a hunter.

The youth murmured, “Ah...” as he went pale and retreated backwards. And when he saw that, Ludo Ruu awkwardly rustled his blond hair.

“Did I scare you there? Sorry about that.”

“N-No...”

“I’d certainly like to try to live up to your trust there, so be sure to tell your old man thanks for worrying about us, alright. Ah, and that little runt wasn’t in any danger, right...?”

“R-Runt? Do you mean Tara? She’s helping take care of our dad. But once he’s all better, I’d imagine she’ll come to town again...”

“Got it, thanks. Hey, Shin Ruu...”

“Yeah?”

“Sorry, but could you get on Ruuruu and go let my old man know about this?”

“Understood.”

With the same calm look on his face as always, Shin Ruu pulled on Ruuruu’s reins and headed back the way we had come.

And as for us, we just had to keep on focusing on our own work.

However, Ai Fa asked one more question of the youth, wearing a pensive look as she did so.

“By the way, how many of those villains clad in the attire of the forest’s edge were there?”

“Huh? My dad said he saw three of them.”

With that, the conversation came to a close.

◇

“Ugh, what an irritating story!” Ludo Ruu grumbled as we got a breather after the morning rush.

Vina Ruu and I were currently taking a short break, while Ludo Ruu and Ai Fa were guarding us. Of course we weren’t just going to fill our own stomachs, so they were holding half-sized myamuu giba, too.

As he bit into the dish looking almost desperate, Ludo Ruu added, “This is clearly the work of someone from town or the castle, no matter how you look at it. After all, if they really were hunters of the forest’s edge, then they would’ve hid that clothing before hiding their faces! It’s such an obvious scheme, right, Asuta?”

“Yeah. But it might still prove seriously effective even so. The relationship between the forest’s edge and the post town is still unstable, so if this story spreads, it could be like the last incident all over again,” I replied while standing beside the wagon in the open space behind the stall, also filling my belly.

By ‘the last incident,’ I naturally meant all that stuff with the Suun clan. When Zattsu Suun himself spoke of the truth behind the mass murder ten years back, the people of the post town were gripped by powerful fear and wariness.

“But Dora’s got no choice but to report the facts to the guards as they happened, so it’ll definitely spread. The real issue is how the townsfolk will take it. Still, if this is a trap to bring down the people of the forest’s edge, then who exactly is behind it...?”

“Huh? It’s gotta be that Cyclaeus noble, right? Who else is there?”

“There’s one more possibility. Somebody else with a deep grudge against the people of the forest’s edge...”

“Oh, that red-headed brat Jeeda, huh...?”

“Yeah. And when you think about it, wouldn’t this sort of plot be more fitting for him?”

Jeeda’s anger came from his father having crimes unjustly pinned on him. So it wouldn’t seem strange at all for him to want to get revenge by casting

suspicion on the people of the forest's edge.

And to start with, I couldn't even see what Cyclaeus would stand to gain through such an act. I did feel such underhanded actions were more fitting to that deceitful noble than to Jeeda, but I still couldn't imagine him doing so just to harass us.

"I'm concerned about the fact that there were three of them..." Ai Fa quietly stated after a short pause in the conversation. "That fits perfectly with the number of hunters that Kamyua Yoshu took out of Genos. Is that just a mere coincidence?"

"What're you on about? Those guys he brought with him were from the Ruu branch houses. You're not saying they betrayed us, are you, Ai Fa?"

"Of course I'm not. But think about it calmly, Ludo Ruu. My belief is that this may be some sort of plot to frame those three hunters..."

That idea caught me off guard.

If someone had harmed those three hunters who had left Genos, then we wouldn't exactly get a chance to prove their innocence. And they were Ruu men at that. If things played out the way Ai Fa suspected, then trust in the Ruu clan could plummet, and Donda Ruu may even be dragged down from his position as one of the leading clan heads.

Then is it really Cyclaeus's plot after all...?

Cyclaeus had already expressed doubt as to whether or not the current leading clan heads were suited to their roles. And since they were casting suspicion on him, he undoubtedly found them nuisances.

Still, even if Cyclaeus had somehow managed to learn Kamyua Yoshu was taking hunters of the forest's edge out of Genos, would he have had a means of learning that they were from the Ruu clan?

I honestly didn't know. All I had to offer at the moment was a mishmash of conjecture.

It could even just be some random bandits with nothing to do with Jeeda or Cyclaeus, trying to lay the blame for their crimes on the people of the forest's

edge. It's all just guesses at this point, so I suppose there's no point racking my brain over it now.

As I stifled a sigh, I glanced over at Vina Ruu, who had been silent for a while now.

The eldest Ruu daughter was leaning against the body of the wagon and hanging her head. In her right hand she held a partially eaten myamuu giba, while her left... her left was gently stroking the bracelet with the pink colored stone around her wrist.

It went without saying, but that was the one that Shumiral had given her as a present, to ward off disaster. Vina Ruu really did have her own concerns to deal with.

"Still, what should we even do, ultimately? Post guards to keep watch over the fields?" Ludo Ruu angrily asked.

"Keeping watch, huh...? I'd love it if we could, but plantations are pretty huge, right? Could the people of the forest's edge really handle a task like that on their own?" I responded, the rage in the pit of my stomach bubbling up again.

Was it just a coincidence that the plantation Dora managed was the one hit, and not the numerous others in the area? I couldn't help but feel concerned by that question.

On the off chance that he was targeted for showing kindness to the people of the forest's edge, then I would never be able to apologize to Dora enough... And I could never, ever forgive the culprits for that. I couldn't possibly accept the idea that a man who advocated for us more than anyone despite being a westerner could be sacrificed for the sake of some underhanded plot.

As more time passed and I composed myself outwardly, I could just feel the pure rage growing inside me further. My head was cooling off, and yet it was like burning hot magma was swirling about in my heart and guts. To be perfectly honest, I think the last time I got this mad may have been when Diga and Doddo carried away a sleeping Ai Fa as part of their plot.

"That's quite a look in your eyes, Asuta..." Ai Fa said, suddenly grabbing my shoulder. "Your job is to make delicious food. Leave the troubling matters to

us... And don’t go wearing the face of a hunter like that.”

Despite the fact that her gaze was calmer than mine or Ludo Ruu’s, I could still see the anger burning away in the depths of her eyes. It really was only natural that everyone found these methods utterly despicable.

As we all quietly burned with anger, the youth from the branch houses who had been watching from the thicket announced Zasshuma’s arrival. And so, Ludo Ruu and the boy went back to their guard duty, while Ai Fa and I circled around to the back of the wagon.

Zasshuma was already aware of what had happened last night. Apparently while we were busy working, the guards had put up a notice to inform the townsfolk.

“It was an ordinary notice, saying they were three bandits all dressed in the attire of the people of the forest’s edge, and that no one should act rashly until the facts are made clear. It’s essentially saying that there’s no evidence behind it, so if people cause a commotion like the other day, they’ll be severely punished. I’ll be going to the castle town after this to look into what my employer’s thinking...”

Naturally, that “employer” was Melfried. Kamyua Yoshu may have been the one to come up with the fundamentals behind the plan, but Melfried was the one who was ultimately providing the funding.

“Um, would it be possible to provide protection for the plantation that was robbed?”

“Protection? That’s a job for the militia. They’re in charge of protecting not just the fields, but all Genos land. And with the report that bandits went after the place, they should strengthen their guard.”

“But they’re under the command of Cyclaeus’s younger brother, aren’t they?”

“Even so, it’s not like they can just go relaxing their guard. If they did that, folks would start suspecting they were guiding the bandits. Hey, I’m just asking to be sure, but you’re not thinking of assigning guards from the forest’s edge, right...? If you did that and then some other plantation got attacked, it’d make for a real mess. After all, there’s a chance they could even be aiming to drag you

folks out of the forest's edge like that."

"But..."

"I get it, already. I'll stress to my employer that if he just leaves things be, those hot-blooded people of the forest's edge will end up forming a vigilante group. With the ducal guards keeping watch, that'll make those folks in the militia act all the more diligently," Zasshuma stated, shooting me a look of great interest. "You sure are surprisingly stubborn. And that's a nice look you've got in your eyes there, too."

"It's only logical to feel angry when one of your acquaintances is attacked, isn't it...?"

"Hmph. Anyway, just leave the rough stuff to us. The more moves they make, the better a chance we'll have to find an opening," Zasshuma said, and then he turned and left.

Slapping my cheeks with both hands, I somehow got the violent emotions raging inside me under control, and then I returned to the stall.

And just like yesterday, I found Diel waiting there.

"Hey! I'll take one again today, Asuta."

It seemed like she didn't know anything of the commotion in the post town, as she was smiling brightly again today. I suppose she hadn't had a chance to hear about it since she was staying in the castle town.

It was only natural that I hadn't seen Tara, but Yumi hadn't shown up yet today either. Honestly, seeing the innocent smile of this girl who was so rich in emotions was actually helping soothe me.

"Hey, how long are you staying in the Genos castle town, anyway?" I asked.

"Hmm?" Diel responded with a cute tilt of her head while stuffing her face with myamuu giba. "I don't know. It seems like we'll really be able to expand our business this time around. So much so that if things go really well, we could even open a shop in the castle town."

"A shop? And you don't just mean a stall like this, right?"

"Yup. Apparently they're discussing whether to hire a westerner to run the

store and take orders for us in Nellwea. Then there wouldn't be a need for us to keep running around like we do now. It'd be amazing if it actually happens... But unless it looks like we can earn quite a bit from it, we won't be able to go forward with that plan," she replied, scratching her nose while wearing a real business-like look. "Does that old noble guy have a lot of pull when it comes to stuff like that, though? It just feels shaky to me, having nobles get involved in business discussions."

"Shaky?"

"Yeah. I mean, isn't it dangerous for foreign nobles to be giving us such favorable treatment?"

I still didn't know anything about the common sense or customs of this world, and so I didn't have any response to that. However, I couldn't say I much cared for the idea of Cyclaeus cozying up to Diel's father, a wealthy merchant.

"Anyway, that's what's going on. Seems like we'll be getting pretty busy from tomorrow on. And I think we'll be in Genos for the time being, but it may be a bit before I can eat your cooking again," Diel said with a look that reminded me of a puppy with drooping ears. Honestly, it made me feel a bit down, too.

"I see. I guess there's no helping it if you're busy with work, but that's still certainly unfortunate."

"Eh?"

"Hmm? What is it?"

For some reason, Diel looked truly bewildered by my response.

"Ah, no, you just sounded like you really meant that... Th-That was really unexpected. I figured you just thought of me as a nuisance..."

"Huh? Why's that?"

"What do you mean, 'Why's that?!' It'd be weirder if I didn't think that."

Hmm, was that really the case?

It was true that I had the worst first impression imaginable, she had slugged me in the face twice now, and things seemed real touch and go between her and both Ai Fa and Yumi. So yeah, she was definitely a customer who had

brought me a great deal of worries. But she had been coming to our stalls every single day, and on top of that she had gone out of her way to bring me that meat cutting knife. So in the end, I earnestly felt we had a good relationship.

“I never felt that way, at the very least. It makes you glad when someone’s taken by one of your products, right? In the same way, it makes me really happy that you travel all the way from the castle town each day to eat my cooking,” I replied with a bit of moderation.

Diel grinned at my words, looking truly overjoyed from the depths of her heart. Her beautiful jade-like eyes were brimming with happiness.

“Thanks. I hadn’t expected you to say that, but I’m really glad to hear it... Once work settles down again, I’ll definitely be back.”

“Right. I’ll be waiting.”

And so, Diel once again left with a spring in her step. Labis accompanied her as she went, ultimately not having said a single word the whole time.

In their place, though, Sanjura arrived. Ai Fa had just quietly stood there looking displeased while Diel was around, but now she wore a piercing glare.

“Welcome. Thanks for your continued business.”

By now, Sanjura was absolutely one of my regulars. After all, this made four days in a row of him showing up.

“I’ll take one again today, please,” Sanjura stated, acting just as calm and composed as always.

Actually, I couldn’t see any change in the air around the stalls in general. I figured if things were like before, everyone would’ve been shooting us skeptical glances once the news got out that there were bandits dressing like the people of the forest’s edge. Could I take that as our overall image having improved?

“I’m just glad to see you well, Asuta. What happened with that bandit child?”

Apparently that matter was still weighing more on Sanjura’s mind than the incident from last night.

“He hasn’t shown himself since then. Maybe he’s focusing on letting his injuries heal up for now?”

Ludo Ruu and the other guards hadn't sensed any strange gazes either yesterday or today. While that was a relief on the one hand, it was also frustrating since things would never progress if we didn't get a chance to talk to him.

And if he really was the one behind that attack on Dora, just how would I take that...? It would be a case of someone who hated the people of the forest's edge due to an unjust event then turning around and using similarly unjust means to get revenge. If we didn't sever that cycle of negativity as soon as possible, then I could only see tragedy looming in our future.

Perhaps that concern was showing on my face, as Sanjura's eyebrows drooped a bit sadly.

"Did I do something I shouldn't have back then? I cannot hold back, because I only have my left arm."

I hurriedly waved my hands upon hearing that.

"You didn't do anything wrong at all. Please, don't worry about it! But wait, is your right arm still doing poorly...? It must be quite a serious injury, huh?"

"Yes. I cannot work, so I'm a little concerned right now, about money," Sanjura said with a smile, his mood seemingly recovered.

Since he looked like he came from Sym, it sort of felt like what he was feeling was directly conveyed to me by any small movements in his expression.

At any rate, though, his grin soothed me just as much as Diel's had.

"That sounds rough. By the way, what do you do for a living? You don't really seem like a merchant."

"I do anything and everything. But I'm better at using my strength, than my head, so I mostly do things like pulling stones, carrying luggage, and helping construction groups."

"I see. So you travel from town to town, earning a living like that?"

Shumiral had said before that traveling was his life, and that he had been born into a tribe of nomadic people from the grasslands of Sym. Even if he was a child of the western god, perhaps such blood flowed through Sanjura's veins

too.

“So what have you been doing during the day? Ah, sorry if that was rude to ask...”

“During the day, I see the sights around town, while also looking for work. I’d like to get working again, as soon as my arm is healed. And I don’t come to Genos often, so I’m enjoying all the fresh sights.”

While eating his myamuu giba with his left hand, Sanjura tilted his head as if suddenly remembering something.

“Now that I think about it, I’ve heard that you should not, enter the settlement at the forest’s edge without reason. Are people forbidden from going there?”

“No, it’s just that the forest’s edge has its own laws separate from those of Genos, so it could lead to an unfortunate incident if someone stepped foot in the place without properly understanding them. I believe that’s why townsfolk are given such warnings.”

“I see. In that case, I would like to study those laws, and visit the settlement at the forest’s edge,” Sanjura said without the slightest hint of ill will in his voice.

Suddenly, Ai Fa interjected, a look in her eyes that wasn’t calm in the least.

“Your name is Sanjura, isn’t it? You have nothing to gain from entering the settlement at the forest’s edge with no particular business in mind. Why do you say you wish to visit the place?”

“I have no reason in particular. I just like seeing how people live in places that are unfamiliar to me. From what I heard, the people of the forest’s edge are vicious folk who hunt, the vile beasts known as giba. But giba meat is delicious, and I’ve found the people from that place who I’ve met, quite charming. And so... I have an interest, in the people of the forest’s edge.”

Ai Fa was just guarded against Sanjura because he was supposedly quite skilled, but when faced with such a straightforward smile, she didn’t really have anything to say in response.

And so, with a pout she responded, “Start by learning the laws of the forest’s edge,” at which point Sanjura shot her back an even brighter grin before leaving.

As she ruffled her hair in frustration, Ai Fa shot me a glare as if she was venting her anger on me.

“What a truly bizarre man. Why do such strange folks seem drawn to you, Asuta?”

“Hmm? It’s not like I only ever attract oddballs. It’s just that the more unique folks tend to stand out from the crowd.”

“Yes, but it seems to be the unusual ones that you end up forming deep bonds with.”

“That’s also just how things look. And besides, wouldn’t that make you the most unusual one of all, Ai Fa...? I mean, I got close to you before anyone else,” I joked, only for the look on Ai Fa’s face to grow all the more troubled.

“I suppose I cannot deny the fact that I am unusual. After all, no one is seen as stranger than me in the whole of the settlement at the forest’s edge.”

“Really? I guess I should accept that I draw in strange folks then, and take pride in that fact.”

Under the shadow of the stall, Ai Fa kicked me in the leg.

It was around then that more folks from the forest’s edge arrived in quick succession: Li Sudra, as well as the young hunters from the Rutim and Lea.

“Sorry for the wait. I’ll take over here, Asuta.”

“Right, thanks. Um, did things seem alright in town...?”

They all must have already heard what was going on through Donda Ruu.

At any rate, Li Sudra calmly replied, “Yes,” with a nod. “There was just a bit more murmuring than usual, but people didn’t seem as on edge as they were before.”

After passing the baton at the stalls to the newcomers, I was able to see the truth of those words for myself.

It was definitely true that things were just a bit more noisy than usual. I could also sense uneasy gazes as well as a good number of folks turning their heads in surprise. However, we weren't getting any clear looks of fear or anger.

Perhaps they were thinking that it was more than a little odd for people of the forest's edge to be making trouble at the moment? Or maybe that even if some of our people were the culprits, that had nothing to do with those of us doing business here in the post town?

At any rate, we were able to make it to The Sledgehammer without ever feeling in danger, or even that something was out of place.

We had gone from the crowded stone highway to a sidepath, and then into the residential district where there weren't many people around. And yet, Jeeda ultimately didn't show himself today either. Maybe he really was intending to stay out of sight until his injuries from Sanjura healed...

I'd feel a lot better if we could at least settle things with him...

Anyway, once we arrived at The Sledgehammer, there was a bit of an argument. Ai Fa and Ludo Ruu just couldn't agree on who should be the one to come into the kitchen. Now that I thought about it, they had the same sort of fight back during the whole incident with Zattsu and Tei Suun, too.

Ludo Ruu's argument was that a woman like Ai Fa was more suited to standing in front of the inn's entrance, since she was less likely to frighten the townsfolk. However, there weren't many passersby through the area, and we almost never saw customers coming and leaving. And so, Ai Fa insisted that there was no need for her to be the one standing outside. Then in response, Ludo Ruu angrily retorted that he had already yielded the kitchen role to Shin Ruu just yesterday.

It seemed that ultimately, Ludo Ruu saw the role of keeping watch outside the shop as more important. He would normally take the job himself thanks to that, but he at least wanted to head into the kitchen when someone as skilled as Ai Fa was around.

"Besides, your face is cute like a woman's, isn't it?!"

"Yeah, but you're a serious beauty, aren't you?!"

Though the words themselves sounded pleasant enough, they were both deadly serious. And besides, neither of them liked it when people talked about their appearance, so things were only growing more and more intense.

“Um, why not have Ai Fa take The Sledgehammer’s kitchen while Ludo Ruu does it for The Great Southern Tree? That’d be nice and fair, right?” I proposed, which finally brought the squabble to a close.

Ai Fa was quite clearly in a good mood afterwards, while Ludo Ruu grumbled as he gave instructions to the other two hunters. I’m sure neither would like to hear it, but I honestly found their childish sides quite charming.

At any rate, when we finally set foot in The Sledgehammer, Nail rose from his reception desk and said, “Welcome, Asuta.” Rather than leading me into the kitchen like always, though, he pointed in another direction entirely. “You have a guest waiting over that way.”

“A guest? For me?”

“Yes. He says his name is Mikel of Turan. And he said that you would know him when I said that.”

Mikel of Turan.

So he finally showed up, I thought, tensing up.

This was the person Shumiral had searched out, who apparently knew of Cyclaeus’s crimes. And the star diviner had said that he would bring greater strength to the forest’s edge, too.

As a plain old layman, I had absolutely no idea what those words meant. But since it had been Shumiral and his comrade who had said them, I also certainly wasn’t going to take them lightly.

“This way,” Nail gestured, and I started walking in the direction he had pointed out. That was where the inn’s dining room was, which I had actually never entered before.

And honestly, I was more than a little surprised when I saw the man waiting for me there.

“Honored guest, Asuta of the Fa clan has arrived.”

“Hmm...?” the man looked up, seeming annoyed.

His face was wrinkled, and he looked to be past middle aged. Aside from how they were a bit filthy, there was nothing unusual about the cloth vest and cylindrical legged pants he had on. However... he had been slumped in the chair, snoring away with a bottle of fruit wine dangling from one hand.

“So you’re the crazy chef who’s been cooking with giba meat of all things, eh...? You’re just a little brat, aren’tcha?”

His face was bright red, and his speech seemed slurred.

In other words, this man was clearly dead drunk in the middle of the day.

2

Turan was the name of the domain in the northern part of Genos that Cyclaeus ruled over.

From what I heard, there were orchards there that were more valuable than the plantations to the south, so a wooden fence had been built around them to protect against giba, and on top of that the people there were worked like slaves to increase profits.

Maybe it was just my own preconceptions, but I figured more pretentious folks lived there than in the post town or plantations, and that they tended to live in luxury while leaving all the hard labor for their slaves.

However, this Mikel man was dressed even filthier than folks around the post town, and on top of that he was drunk in the middle of the day.

It wasn’t like he had all that seedy of a look about him. It was just that his vests and pants were strangely blackened, and he smelled like something burnt. Did he do some sort of work involving flames?

As for his age, he looked to be just under 50. While he had a pretty solid frame for a westerner, his face and arms were unusually bony. It made him look a little out of proportion overall, like he had a sturdy skeleton but little in the way of muscles.

There was some white mixed into his unkempt hair, his eyes were a dark

brown, and his skin was quite tanned. He had a finely chiseled face, though his age was definitely starting to show in it.

However, that face was dyed red from drinking, and his eyes were bloodshot. He was half-collapsed on the wooden table, and a bottle of fruit wine dangled from his left hand as he glared at us. It was like he was the word “slovenly” personified.

“Hmph... Looks like I wasted my time coming here,” Mikel grumbled in a hoarse voice, taking a gulp of his wine. “Well, I’ve only got one thing to say regardless. Don’t go anywhere near Cyclaeus. Defying nobles will only lead you to ruin... Anyway, I’m off,” he added, swaying as he rose unsteadily to his feet.

“Ah, please hold on a moment,” I hurriedly yelled out. “You came to see me because of Shumiral, right? I’m certainly grateful for that, but I really don’t understand what’s going on.”

“There’s no need for you to get it. I’ve already done enough to pay my debt to that guy from Sym... So move it, kid.”

Now that he was standing, I finally realized that he was taller than me. Thanks to his drinking, though, he looked unsteady on his feet. In fact, if I just gave him a little nudge, he’d probably fall right over.

Even so, Ai Fa remained cautious, her hand on her blade’s grip as she carefully observed the man.

“At any rate, it’s not like Cyclaeus will be paying attention to a brat like you anyway... I don’t care if it’s giba or giiz cooking or whatever, just go ahead and keep on earning your coins like you have been.”

“It’s not like I’m picking a fight with Cyclaeus as a chef or anything... Um, what did Shumiral tell you, anyway?”

As he placed his right hand on the table to support his weight, Mikel of Turan’s cloudy, drunken gaze turned my way.

“That there’s a kid selling giba cooking in the post town, and that he may be feuding with Cyclaeus. And that he wanted me to loan you some wisdom. And so, I told you what I had to say. Don’t go anywhere near Cyclaeus.”

“I’d like to avoid that if I could too, but... Didn’t you hear anything about the people of the forest’s edge?”

“They’re the only ones around who’d be selling giba meat of all things, obviously. Well, you look more like you were born in the west or east, but that’s got nothing to do with me,” Mikel stated, and then he cast a disinterested glance at Ai Fa and Vina Ruu. “Still, I’m impressed with you bringing women to work. You sure are one heck of a chef. Just keep on enjoying yourself there, kid.”

“She’s my cooking assistant, and she’s here as a bodyguard. I won’t deny that I enjoy my work, but I certainly wouldn’t say I’ve been making light of it,” I replied without thinking.

But Mikel just kept on drinking and said, “What do I care?”

As I forced back the hostility I could feel swelling up inside of me, I said in as calm of a tone as I could manage, “Err, Shumiral told me that you knew of the crimes Cyclaeus has committed, and that talking to you would prove helpful for the people of the forest’s edge. Would you mind if I asked for a bit more detail?”

“You sure are an eccentric one, kid. You’re just gonna find it unpleasant, y’know?” Mikel said in a harsh tone. Even so, he plopped himself back down in his chair.

Seeing that, Nail whispered to me, “Well then, I’ll be waiting over that way. Once you’re done talking, can I count on you to set about today’s work?”

“Ah, of course. Sorry about this. I’ll try to wrap it up as quickly as possible,” I replied to Nail with a bow before taking a seat in front of Mikel.

Unsurprisingly, Ai Fa chose to stand right behind me.

“That man, Cyclaeus, is so much of a gourmand it’s ridiculous...” Mikel started, holding his wine bottle in one hand. “He employs numerous chefs, runs expensive restaurants, and has food made in his own manors... And on top of all that, I’ve heard the chefs in Genos castle fall under his patronage. Everybody’s got an interest in eating tasty food, but for him, it’s like a sickness.”

“Cyclaeus is *that* obsessed with good food?”

“You didn’t even know that much? Thanks to that, most chefs in the castle town are mainly polishing their skills in the hopes of being acknowledged by him. After all, if you catch his eye you’re pretty much guaranteed success. Anyone who thinks otherwise is gonna end up ruined, sooner or later.”

“Ruined...”

“If a chef isn’t skilled then they’ll have to close up shop, and if they are, they’ll end up serving Cyclaeus. But if they have the skills and refuse to become Cyclaeus’s servant... They’ll either be cast out of Genos, or have their arm muscles severed so they can’t keep on living as a chef.”

“What...? Do they really allow something that insane to happen in the castle town?”

I could fill a hot lump burning intensely in the pit of my stomach as Mikel’s lips twisted into a grin that didn’t look amused in the least.

“Cyclaeus is a noble with authority second only to Duke Marstein, who rules this land. And over the past 20 years, his power and position have become completely unshakeable. You folks from the forest’s edge helped him out with that too, didn’t you?”

“Huh?”

“That incident from ten years back, where the envoys from Banarm were all wiped out... And the one where the leader of the militia was killed. You people of the forest’s edge got rid of those hindrances for Cyclaeus, right?”

Unsurprisingly, I was taken completely off guard by him saying that.

“Why do you know something like that?”

“Some of the soldiers who guard Cyclaeus let it slip at a bar. Booze tends to loosen lips, after all.”

Was he referring to the same soldiers who accompanied the man to the meeting with the leading clan heads?

Honestly, that sounded like good news for us, as it meant that some of his soldiers weren’t absolutely loyal to the man. And though Mikel’s words caught me off guard, I felt that ultimately everyone in Genos needed to learn of the

truth behind those horrific murders.

“Anyway, thanks to that, there’s nobody in Genos who’d try to judge Cyclaeus for his crimes. Maybe things would be different if it was other nobles coming after him, but dealing with a chef or two is nothing at all for a man like him.”

“What an awful story. I feel sick just from hearing it.”

“Hmph. But in the end, there’s not a single chef in those stone walls who would dare oppose Cyclaeus. After all, if you just shut up and listen, things will work out just fine for you... All you’ve gotta do is make what he likes, using the tools and ingredients he gives you. Do that, and you can live a life of comfort. Anyone who opposes him is nothing but a fool.”

“Then I guess that makes me a fool. After all, I’ve got no intention of cooking for someone like him.”

“You’re not gonna win over Cyclaeus with damn giba cooking, so you’ve got no worries there...” Mikel sneered as he once again brought his fruit wine to his lips. However, the bottle must have been empty, as he snorted and placed it back down on the table. “No matter how many coins you may earn in the post town, it’ll still be a trifling sum to a noble. And cooking from a kid like you wouldn’t ever attract their attention to begin with. So I’m telling you, just keep on working away like you’ve been doing up till now.”

“Why are you insulting Asuta’s cooking when you haven’t even tasted it...?” Ai Fa suddenly interjected. “I’m well aware that westerners tend to avoid giba and the people of the forest’s edge. But I’d like you to stop repeatedly insulting Asuta’s skill. To be blunt, I find it unpleasant.”

“I’m not insulting him or anything. I’m just saying a kid like this would never catch Cyclaeus’s eyes, so he can relax,” Mikel said, showing no signs of fearing Ai Fa despite her being a hunter of the forest’s edge. “Cyclaeus would never crave cooking made with giba meat and cheap vegetables. Well, a first-rate chef can make a tasty dish with any ingredients, but I can’t imagine that’d apply to this kid...”

“See, you really are insulting him, aren’t you?” Ai Fa retorted, both eyes burning bright with irritation despite the fact that she remained expressionless.

“It’s fine, Ai Fa.” I told her. “That’s not exactly what we’re concerned about here. So, is that all you had to say, Mikel of Turan...?”

“Yeah. Or was there something else you wanted to ask me about?”

“I see. No, and thank you for your help. I’m grateful to you for coming all this way.”

In the end, no shocking new facts had come to light.

And Mikel of Turan didn’t seem to have any interest at all in the people of the forest’s edge to begin with. Honestly, I couldn’t see any reason to think that he had any useful information for us at all.

The only thing worth mentioning was that there were critical whispers about not only the people of the forest’s edge but also Cyclaeus in some bar in Turan or wherever. But still, there wasn’t much meaning to that without facts to back it up. Pretty much the only use I could see there was for Kamyua Yoshu to add it to his pile of damaging information.

Well, Shumiral was acting without any knowledge of what was going on internally with the people of the forest’s edge. I guess things ending up like this just makes sense, huh?

What was with that prophecy from the star diviner then, though? He had said that meeting this man would bring greater strength to the forest’s edge.

Maybe it’s not his information itself, but that this meeting will somehow lead things in a beneficial direction?

Still, I had no way of inquiring, so I couldn’t see any point to putting such weight behind that divination. And so, I just said, “Thank you,” once more and rose to my feet.

But when I thanked him, Mikel shot me a disquieting look as he said, “Guess this is about all I can expect from a chef from the post town. You don’t have even a single complaint about me mocking your skills, eh?”

“What? Well, it’s not like I’m preparing food for nobles or anything. As long as I can make my customers in the post town happy, that’s plenty enough for me.”

“In that case, do you think you can impress me? After all, I’m nothing but a

lowly old man who makes charcoal for a living," Mikel goaded, thrusting a finger my way.

Just like his clothing, that finger was also darkened. I could see charcoal caked in under his nail. Apparently, that was what had been making the sooty smell I had noticed earlier.

"You're a charcoal maker? So you can buy charcoal here in Genos? I've never seen it in the post town, though."

"What, you think folks from the post town or the plantations would go spending coins on stuff like that? More importantly, what do you say...? Do you think you can make a dish that would satisfy me, kid?"

"Giba meat has a strong quirkiness to it... Since some people may not like that aspect of the ingredient, I can't say anything for certain." There was no point to taking on a challenge from a drunkard like this. And since Shumiral had sent him my way, I didn't want to go needlessly agitating things. That was why I offered what I felt was a sensible reply... only for him to snort at me.

"That's some pretty shabby determination you've got there. That guy from Sym was praising you real hard, but I can't see a gutless chef amounting to much."

"Hey, you're going too far," Ai Fa stated, placing her right hand on the table as her eyes blazed.

"Cut it out, Ai Fa. Umm... How someone shows their determination varies from person to person, right? Would you say that if someone says to make a dish that will satisfy anyone and everyone, then just recklessly responding, 'Alright, I'll do it!' is showing a strong will? Because I don't agree."

"Hmph, are you more skilled with your tongue than a pot?"

"I don't believe I'm all that eloquent of a speaker at all. If you're interested in my cooking, then it's sold right here at The Sledgehammer, and I also offer it through my stalls. I'd certainly welcome you stopping by if you so please," I said, truly intending to put an end to the conversation.

However, that apparently didn't get across to Mikel.

“Then bring out that cooking of yours, here and now! If it’s enough to satisfy me, then I’ll acknowledge you as a full-fledged chef.”

I personally still thought of myself as just a chef in training... but if I said that now, it would probably just make this into even more of a mess.

“Alright. Please hold on for a short while, and I’ll bring out the dish. And I ask that you pay the inn’s owner for it.”

“Hmph, you sure do know how to get on my nerves, kid. Hey...! Bring me another bottle of fruit wine!”

Nail then calmly entered the dining room, holding a bottle.

Things sure have taken sort of an odd turn here.

Somehow, we ended up in a situation weirdly similar to my meeting with Diel. Still, if I didn’t hurry up and get started on my work, it’d end up causing trouble down the line. After all, I was finally going to be able to teach Milano Mas and his daughter cooking techniques, so I was supposed to head to The Kimyuus’s Tail after this.

However, today’s dish was chitt hot pot. After we left, Nail would still need to boil it for an additional 30-40 minutes before it was complete. That would just take far too long, and so instead, I made up a single serving of giba sauté arrabbiata with the spare meat.

“Sorry. It seems like I ended up inviting a pretty troublesome guest, there,” I apologized to Nail while sautéing up the meat.

“I don’t mind,” the inn owner calmly responded. “He’s still a paying customer. And since I’m getting to sell an additional meal on top of the usual 30 from you, it’s also certainly profitable for me,” he assured me, though he looked a bit worried. He then added, “However... Cyclaeus is the name of the count who rules Turan, is it not? It seems dangerous getting involved with a noble like that.”

“Ah, yeah... I’d like to have as little involvement with him as possible too, but he seems to have ties of a sort to the people of the forest’s edge.”

Still, I figured there was virtually no chance of my cooking ever ending up in

Cyclaeus's mouth. From what I heard, nobles pretty much never set foot in the post town, and since I didn't have a pass I couldn't exactly go visiting the castle town.

Still, if they had an interest in my cooking, then a noble could surely use their privileges in any number of ways to do something about that. At least for now though, there hadn't been any signs of that. And if Kamyua Yoshu's words that Cyclaeus didn't even see the people of the forest's edge as human were true, then there's no way the man would ever be interested in giba cooking to start with.

As those thoughts were running through my head, I finished up the giba sauté arrabbiata.

"Let me come with you too," I told the owner. "I'd feel bad if he foisted his complaints on you, after all."

"Right. I appreciate that."

Leaving Vina Ruu to man the flames for the chitt hot pot, Ai Fa and I headed back to the dining room alongside Nail, who was holding my completed dish on a plate.

"Hmph, that was pretty darn quick, there," Mikel said, chugging away at his second bottle of fruit wine while shooting me a wild glare.

"This is a dish that Asuta made for my establishment. Without the fuwano it costs three and a half red coins, while with fuwano it's five."

"You seriously think I could eat fuwano while the sun's this high in the sky? Nah, this fruit wine's plenty," he said with breath that stunk of booze as he slapped his coins down atop the table.

Nail placed the plate down, and then carefully picked up the three full red coins and the one that had been split in half.

"Hmph," Mikel snorted as he casually grabbed hold of his spoon.

Atop the plate sat steaming hot giba sirloin coated in a red sauce made with the chili pepper-like chitt and tomato-esque tarapa.

I had heard a lot of westerners were also fond of the spiciness of chitt, but

how was it for Mikel? For the time being, he at least wasn't showing any signs of being intimidated by the mouthwatering aroma.

Perhaps because of all the booze in his system, his movements were a bit awkward as he scooped up a bit of meat and tossed it in his mouth.

Instantly, there was a glimmer in his eyes like a lightning strike.

He carefully chewed the meat, then he washed it down with fruit wine. After processing what he'd tasted, Mikel shot me a seriously intense glare.

"You mixed diced aria in with this tarapa, didn't you...?"

"Yes, in order to suppress the acidity of the tarapa."

"And this taste, it's fruit wine and myamuu, eh? And you used tau oil, too..."

"That's right. Just a bit, as a subtle seasoning."

I was honestly feeling pretty astonished that he could pick all that out despite the spiciness the chitt gave to the dish. Apparently, he had a rather discerning palate. So much so that he likely had a keener sense of taste than anyone else I had met here in this world.

"Sure seems giba's a first-class meat. If we were talking kimyuus or karon leg instead, they would've easily gotten lost under all the strong seasonings you've got going on here. Hey, kid..."

"Yes?"

"Don't go anywhere near Cyclaeus."

"Huh?"

And then, something happened in the next moment that took me completely off guard.

Mikel's rugged fingers reached towards my chest with surprising speed... Only for Ai Fa to grab him by the wrist even quicker.

"I'll ask you not to act so rudely, Mikel."

"Geez, that hurts. You're gonna snap my scrawny arm, there."

Her point made, Ai Fa casually shoved aside Mikel's wrist.

Giving a “Tch,” the man firmly slammed his now free left hand on the table. “You’re hopeless. If you want to live a peaceful life, then you shouldn’t go anywhere near that corrupt noble bastard... Well, it’s a different story if you want to let him use you up for coins, I guess.”

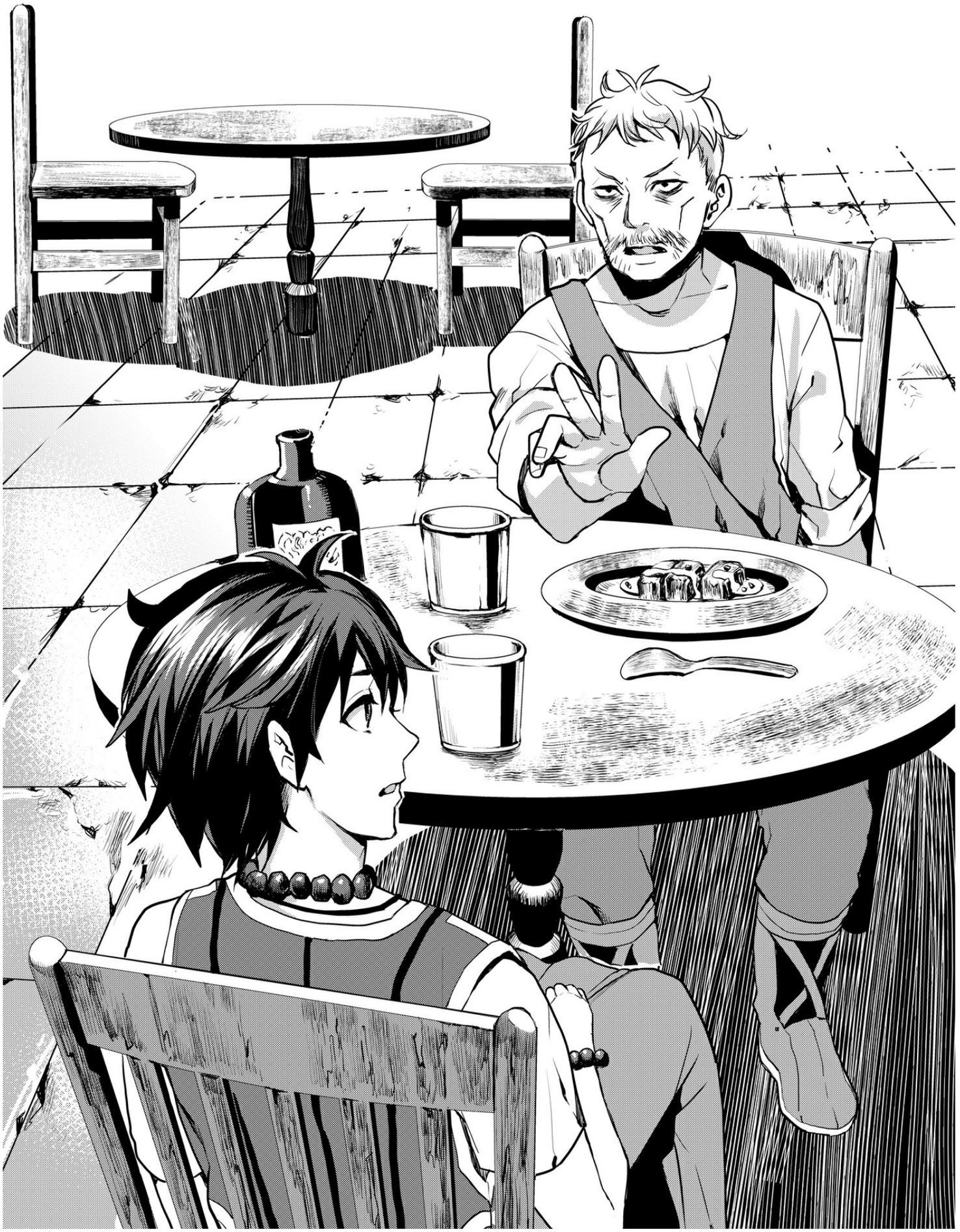
“If you’re praising me, then I suppose I should thank you...”

“What part of that was praise? I’m just here to warn you because of how persistent that oddly smooth-talking guy from Sym was, remember?” There was a restless light in Mikel’s eyes, spilling out bits of emotion like a boiling giba soup. “There’s no shortage of chefs out there who take pride in being able to earn more. If you’re one of them, then I’ve got nothing to say to you... But if you aren’t, then you absolutely have to keep away from Cyclaeus. If you aren’t willing to trade your self-respect for coins, then all that awaits you with him is ruin...”

“You’re talking about chefs having their arm muscles severed so they can’t cook anymore, right? Yeah, I think I’d like to avoid that.”

“Right? Even if you survive, that’s a life no different than death,” Mikel grumbled, lifting his right hand off the table and slowly bringing it to about eye level.

As he thrust his blackened palm in front of my nose, I saw that those bony fingers were surprisingly long.



And on that hand, his pinky and ring fingers were teetering oddly.

“On my right hand, these are the only two fingers I can still move. I can’t even hold a cooking knife or a pot with this arm.”

My breath caught in my throat.

As Mikel’s eyes, filled with regret, moved closer, he said, “If you don’t want to end up like me, don’t go near Cyclaeus, no matter what. In fact, you’re better off leaving Genos entirely... This town is no place for a proper chef.”

3

I had promised to give Milano Mas and his daughter cooking lessons at The Kimyuus’s Tail after wrapping up work at The Sledgehammer and The Great Southern Tree.

Currently, there was a little under an hour until work would wrap up back at the stalls. I had used up some time talking to Mikel of Turan, but I still had plenty enough left for a preliminary trial. And the first few days would likely just be me getting familiar with karon and kimyuus meat, anyway.

That conversation with Mikel had sent all sorts of thoughts running through my head, but for now, I had to concentrate on work.

Ai Fa’s sure to yell at me if I get distracted and screw something up, I thought, stealing a glance over at my clan head as she walked alongside me, when I noticed she was wearing a dark expression.

“Hey, is something wrong, Ai Fa...?” I whispered as we walked down the stone highway, only for her to shoot me back a truly helpless look.

“It’s really nothing. That Mikel man’s words just left me a bit out of sorts...”

“Huh? Why’s that? Are you worrying about my muscles getting severed too?”

“I’ll never allow such a thing to happen. Don’t go saying ominous things like that so lightly, you fool.”

“Then what is it? You’re not possibly thinking I’ll follow Mikel’s warning and leave Genos, right...?”

In response, Ai Fa gave a somehow childish-looking shake of her head.

“You would never abandon the people of the forest’s edge like that. Worrying about such matters would be akin to trampling on your pride and resolve.”

“Yeah, you’re right. I’m relieved to hear it’s not that.”

“I’m simply feeling a bit uneasy... About whether or not this current lifestyle of ours holds enough appeal to keep you here...” Ai Fa said, her fingers casually gripping the sleeve of my t-shirt.

Meanwhile, the others of our group just kept on walking ahead of us, not noticing anything.

“You have formed bonds with all sorts of people, but ultimately you’ve spent more time with me than anyone else. And yet, I cannot completely wipe away the concern, questioning whether you truly feel that much happiness from being with me...”

“No, like I’ve said—”

“I know. Each time I have had such worries, you have firmly denied them. It’s not as if I’m doubting your feelings... It’s just my own weakness, that I can’t help but feel concerned even so,” Ai Fa stated, listlessly hanging her head.

Just last night I had told her that I wasn’t happy unless I was by her side. Did she not remember because she was drunk, or was that still not enough to clear away her worries? Well, if it was concerning her, then I had no choice but to keep fighting against those doubts, no matter how many times it may take.

“It’s alright. No matter what, I’ll never leave your side. No matter how troublesome of a foe Cyclaeus may be, I’ve got nothing to fear when all of you are backing me, right?” I said, placing my own hand atop the one clinging to my shirt.

Ai Fa took one more careful stare at my face, and then she gave a firm shake of her head.

“I allowed my timidness to show. I’m embarrassed as a clan head.”

“That’s nothing to feel embarrassed about. I mean, I’d be an absolute wreck if I thought that you were in danger, Ai Fa.”

Still, it wasn't as if there was actually any concrete danger closing in on me. Mikel had just said that if Cyclaeus actually ate my cooking, he would probably fall for my skills as a chef then and there.

No matter how many times I thought it over, I just couldn't see Cyclaeus having any interest in giba cooking. And besides, at the moment he was practically at war with Melfried, the next lord of this land, so he didn't exactly have time to be bothering with me anyway. After all, it was pretty much a question of whether his self-preservation or gourmet tastes mattered more to him.

"Still, a man who was once a chef in the castle town recognized your skills. At least take that fact to heart, Asuta," Ai Fa said, something or other seemingly having improved her mood. However, her hand still kept on lightly gripping my t-shirt.

"That definitely is an honor. Regardless, I'd like to believe I'll never even get a chance to meet Cyclaeus once," I stated, not knowing quite how optimistic the statement may be.

Even if Cyclaeus himself didn't wish for it, there was no telling how the prank-loving goddess of fate could intervene with our destinies. However, it would be a bit later till we figured that out.

At any rate, my work still wasn't over yet for the day. And after a short while, we had arrived at The Kimyuus's Tail.

"We didn't run into anyone in the end... Well then, Ai Fa, I'll be the one heading inside this time, alright?" Ludo Ruu said, to which Ai Fa replied, "I know," almost pouting. However, she stopped herself and stood a bit removed from the inn's entrance.

Shin Ruu and the boy from the branch house circled around to the rear entrance, while Ludo, Vina Ruu, and I passed through the front door.

"Oh, so you're finally here, eh?" Milano Mas said, standing up at the reception desk.

"Sorry for the wait," I called back, but then I stopped short, realizing he had an abnormal look on his face. "Wh-What's the matter? Did something happen,

Milano Mas?”

“I guess... I can’t just say it’s nothing, eh?” he replied, making a face like he was desperately forcing down his anger. And it wasn’t just any ordinary anger. His face had gone completely pale, and he looked just as haggard as he was mad. “My daughter went out to do some shopping a little while ago. And then, she got surrounded by ruffians out in town... and was almost abducted.”

“Huh?! I-Is she alright?”

“Yeah. One of the customers who stays at our inn happened to be there, and then the guards showed up during the commotion that ensued and the ruffians scattered.”

That must have been one of the bodyguards who was pretending to be a guest at the inn while protecting Milano Mas and his family. While truly thanking Kamyua Yoshu for giving that order, I said, “I see...” with a sigh of relief.

However, his story wasn’t over just yet.

“And apparently, those ruffians were saying all traitorous fools who support the people of the forest’s edge will get what they deserve.”

“Wh-Why were random thugs around town saying something like that?!” I questioned, slapping my hands down on the reception desk and leaning in close towards Milano Mas.

In a voice trembling with rage, Milano Mas responded, “You folks from the forest’s edge have no shortage of enemies right now. And that includes the sort who fear and scorn you without any real rhyme or reason. Hmph... Looking at it that way, that Redbeard’s kid at least has a reason to hate you all. That at least makes him feel a bit more human than scum like them.”

“Is there a chance they were working with Jeeda...?”

“I can’t imagine so. They were probably failed mercenaries or the like who were just using you folks from the forest’s edge as an excuse.”

Was that really the case?

After all, just last night Dora was attacked by bandits dressed like hunters of

the forest's edge. I found it hard to imagine this was all just a big coincidence, considering the timing.

Still, even when I told him of the incident with Dora, Milano Mas just shook his head and said, "It's nothing but a coincidence. It wasn't like my daughter was attacked by guys pretending to be people of the forest's edge, after all. Both of them may involve you folks, but the details were different."

"But in the end, they were trying to give the same impression to their victims, right? That nothing good comes of getting involved with the people of the forest's edge..."

"Who would even benefit from something like that? The nobles? The remnants of the Redbeards? What's there to gain from upsetting the relationship between the post town and the people of the forest's edge at this point?"

He certainly may have been right, there.

The incident with Dora seemed to be a plot to make folks despise the people of the forest's edge... but what meaning was there to the attack on Milano Mas's daughter?

The one thing I could think of was to set back my business with the stalls. It was certainly an unpleasant thought, but if Milano Mas and Dora both got fed up with me, then it would be a bit tricky to keep on going as I had been.

However, even if it made things more difficult, it's not like even that would shut me down completely. There were plenty of places here in the post town to purchase vegetables and rent stalls, after all. If they really wanted to make me give up my business, they would have to keep going until nobody in the entire post town was willing to take my money.

There had to be plenty of more efficient ways to interfere with my work, right? Or was it just down to the fact that it was easier to go after the townsfolk rather than attacking the people of the forest's edge directly?

"At any rate, you should just leave scoundrels like that to the guards. It's their job to catch criminals, after all. And we've got our own work to focus on," Milano Mas stated, turning his back to me. "So let's get to it, already. My

daughter's unsurprisingly feeling hesitant, so it'll just be me for today."

"Ah, wouldn't it be best to put that off for the time being? I'd feel terrible if you or your daughter ended up getting attacked again."

"What, so you want to move your contract for the stalls to another inn? Or are you gonna give up on doing business in the post town entirely...?" Milano Mas grumbled, his back still facing me. His frame wasn't all that large, but I could clearly see it trembling with anger. "And then you'd just hole up in the forest's edge again, not even trying to form bonds with anyone from town? Would that really satisfy you folks?"

"No, but—"

"Even if this is some plot by nobles or bandits, you really think we'd crumble so easily? This post town is built on business, and I won't let guys like that interfere with ours."

With that, Milano Mas disappeared into the kitchen.

As I stood there worrying about whether or not I should follow him, Ludo Ruu said, "Get going, Asuta," and gave my back a push. "Ai Fa said it too, right? Your job is to make delicious food and succeed at your business here in the post town. Leave the rest up to us," he added with his usual grin. Despite that smile, though, his eyes were shining with the look of a hunter. "That old guy said someone saved his daughter, right? That means one of Kamyua's allies did his job. And if you give up on your business, wouldn't that be like throwing away all the pride and trust people have in you?"

"Got it..."

It wasn't just Ludo Ruu and Kamyua Yoshu. Dora and Milano Mas would say the same too. That no matter what danger I might face, I shouldn't bend from my path. They must have had at least that much resolve when they decided to lend us a hand.

How would I have acted if I were in their position? Would I decide that since things looked bad right now, it was best to keep some distance to deceive our enemies?

No, I doubt it. If I were the one facing harm, I'd definitely stubbornly insist on

never bending to something like that.

Wait, does that mean everyone's just as stubborn as I am...? That's honestly sorta worrying, I thought to myself as I stepped forwards.

Milano Mas was waiting for me in the kitchen, his arms crossed.

"You said you wanted to try handling karon and kimyuus meat today, right...? I've got everything prepared."

Sure enough, there was a large pot sitting by his feet. Or was it more of a jar? At any rate, its mouth was open wide, revealing that it was packed tight with bluish rock salt.

"Right. In order to instruct you, I need to first learn about kimyuus and karon meat myself, so that's where I'd like to start."

"Got it. Well then... Here's to working with you," Milano Mas said, taking his hat in his hands and giving a deep bow.

After taking a deep breath and letting out all the anxiety and worry I was feeling, I bowed back at the same angle, responding, "I look forward to working with you, too."

"First up, this is karon meat," Milano Mas stated, reaching into the jar and pulling out a hunk of red meat.

It was around 15 centimeters long, five wide, and one thick. And it was practically all red meat, without any significant fat to be seen. However, there was a web of fine white sinew running throughout it. This was my first time seeing raw karon meat, but the vivid red color about it reminded me a lot of beef.

"Hmm, at The Kimyuus's Tail, you mostly boil karon, right? Most stalls tend to grill it instead, though."

"That's because stalls don't use plates. And it's easier to just grill up some tough karon meat and sell it."

"Ah, karon leg meat is tough, right? Excuse me..."

With that, I gently poked the chunk of meat sitting there.

It was more that it was overly sinewy rather than tough. Honestly, the feel of it reminded me more of beef shank or shoulder than leg meat.

“It certainly has quite a bit of sinew. Is it sold in cuts this way?”

“No, it comes in a bigger block when I buy it. Then I slice it thinly like this and salt it, so that it won’t be a pain to deal with later.”

“I see. If the opportunity arises, I’d like to see it in that block form, too. How you do the initial cuts can make quite a difference... Why don’t we start by beating it with a wooden pole?”

“Beating it...?” Milano Mas question, knitting his brows in confusion as he got me a thick pole meant for stirring.

I took that from him, wrapped it in a clean cloth, and then carefully beat the meat.

“By breaking down the fiber like this, you can soften up tough meat.”

I beat it till that one-centimeter thickness was about halved, which left the meat a whole lot softer.

However, there were still lumps left all throughout, and so I thrust my meat cutting knife into it again and again. While this was also an essential step, I had to be careful since overdoing it could cause the meat to fall apart.

“Alright, let’s try grilling this a bit... By the way, does karon need to be cooked carefully?”

“No, since you can apparently even eat it raw as long as it’s fresh. So you definitely don’t need to grill it as thoroughly as kimyuus. And if you overcook it, it’ll end up getting even tougher on you.”

“Is that so?”

For the time being, I cut off a bit more than a mouthful and dropped it into the pot, then pulled it out onto the wooden plate when just a bit of redness was left.

It pretty much looked like beef yakiniku, and it smelled similar too. Ultimately, it stimulated the appetite to a fairly average degree, as you’d expect.

But when I tossed that little chunk into my mouth... Perhaps because of the lack of fat, it came across as rather dry, and the remaining bits of sinew stuck in my teeth.

The meat itself wasn't as tough as giba, but it was just far too sinewy. Since it came out like this even after such a thorough tenderizing, maybe it wasn't all that suited to grilling after all.

However, despite the fact that it was dry and sinewy, I could still sense the flavorful meat beyond its overpowering saltiness. Yes, it definitely seemed like an ingredient that was best suited to boiling.

"Hmm... I tried some food from a stall before in the past, but that was cut incredibly thin and wasn't very tough to eat. How did they slice it, I wonder?"

"I don't know for sure, but I figure they probably cut it after grilling it. It's tough to get it too thin while it's still raw."

"Ah, I see."

The kebab stalls I saw at festivals and like back home came to mind. So they were shaving it off the grilled surfaces, then?

In that case, I wanted to try thinly slicing it while it was still raw.

I laid the karon meat out flat atop the cutting board, then cut perpendicularly to the fibers. As swiftly as I could, I lifted the blade from below as if scooping up.

"You sure are skilled," Milano Mas groaned.

I went ahead and had Milano Mas give it a try with his own knife too, and it seemed he could still cut it down to a thickness of about seven or eight millimeters. Even if he hadn't been a skilled chef to start with, the man had been preparing food for his inn for years now. Honestly, I'd probably rate him as more skilled than most of the women at the forest's edge.

Anyway, we ended up finely slicing about half of that initial chunk Milano Mas had brought out. It had only been around five millimeters thick after I tenderized it, so the pieces ended up like an odd bunch of strings.

"Alright, now let's try grilling this up with fruit wine and myamuu for flavor."

I chopped up the myamuu and heated it along with the meat, then added the fruit wine in at the end.

When I plated the dish, it ended up looking like a pepper steak without any vegetables.

“Yeah, this goes down a lot easier than just grilling it normally,” Milano Mas stated, his eyes open wide in surprise after sampling it. “And for the taste to get this much better just by adding fruit wine and myamuu... Honestly, I’d be fine just serving this to my customers as is.”

“Karon also has quite a bit of nice meaty flavor to it too, so it seems to pair well with myamuu. If you sauté it up along with something like aria, pula, or tino, it could actually come together real well.”

Honestly, it seemed to be going rather nicely for something I was just thinking up on the spot.

However, there was still room for improvement in how we were flavoring it. We could try steeping it in a marinade like with the myamuu giba, or pairing it with other condiments... Maybe it was because I hadn’t used any pico leaves, but the flavor just felt too mild, somehow.

Still, pico leaves aren’t free here in the post town. And I can’t get a hold of tau oil except through Naudis.

This certainly seemed to be an ingredient worth tackling. However, since I was limited on time, I went ahead and stopped my examination of the karon meat here.

“Well then, I’d like to try out the kimyuus, too.”

Milano Mas nodded and thrust his thick arm into the jar once again.

Unlike before, though, the meat he pulled out was whitish. Or to be more precise, it was a gentle, pale pink color.

“This is from the torso, and this is leg meat.”

The leg meat was still on the bone, and looked quite similar to a large chicken leg.

But the torso... it didn’t look much like poultry at all. No, it looked more like

the torso of some four-legged beast that had been cut in half. And it was about the size of a small rabbit.

“Are these the only cuts you have? Back where I come from, we made some tasty cooking with the wings, too.”

“The wings? There aren’t many usable parts on the head, so that just gets left with the kimyuus sellers. They pluck the feathers and sell them separately.”

“Wait, the head? The wings get left along with the head?”

“I mean, yeah. That’s where a kimyuus’s wings are attached, so of course.”

A bird with wings on its head...

With my meager imagination, I was honestly having trouble picturing the beast.

Well, it’s not like visualizing a live kimyuus would help with my cooking, anyway.

“You said you grill kimyuus meat, right?”

“Yeah. It’s not as tough as karon, after all.”

From what I could recall, kimyuus was a light meat akin to chicken tenders. My earnest impression was that though it seemed easy to handle, it also just came across as dull.

There was little in the way of fat on both the breast and leg, and both had already been skinned. Whether I boiled or grilled them, they were bound to end up bland. When I asked Milano Mas, he responded that Kimyuus skin was used in leathercraft, so it was pretty expensive to buy meat with the skin still on.

So I’ll have to pickle it in seasonings, huh? If I stab it full of holes with a skewer and let it absorb some moisture, that should do something about the dryness, too...

Still, with the half hour or so we had left, there wasn’t enough time for pickling.

As my thoughts raced trying to figure out if there was any new cooking technique I could try here and now, it suddenly hit me like a bolt from the

heavens.

“That’s it! Milano Mas, do you have any spare gigo?”

“Gigo? Yeah, I’ve still got some of the stuff I use for boiling with karon left over.”

Boiling beef shank-like karon and yam-esque gigo together, huh? I hadn’t ever had any dish like that, so how exactly would they go together? Though, when I considered beef tendon stew, I couldn’t help but think it may work out surprisingly well.

But for now, I was focusing on the kimyuus. Experimenting with boiling like that would have to wait till I had a bit more time to spare.

“There’s something I want to try. Could you light the stove one more time?”

With that, I minced up around 100 grams of kimyuus breast, grated a little bit of gigo onto it, then made it into an oblong chicken meatball shape.



When I tossed that into the hot pot, the pale pink meat swiftly turned white. Because there wasn't any oil, it clung to the pot and I had to take care when flipping it, but even so I somehow managed to grill it up without it crumbling.

"How's this? Could you give it a try, Milano Mas?"

The texture seemed pretty good.

With just the gigo to hold it together, the stickiness was pretty weak, so it definitely seemed more crumbly than the chicken meatballs I was familiar with. And the only flavoring it had was from being pickled in salt, so it was unsurprisingly more than a little dull.

Still, this refreshing new flavor really did seem worth working on.

"This is like that dish you make at your stall, isn't it? This softness certainly is unusual, and I could see it getting attention... But it'll feel lacking to folks who have eaten your cooking, right?"

"That's true. But if I come up with a good way to season it, I think it could end up delicious in a whole other way than hamburger steak."

If I could just use tau oil, I could make it into teriyaki, and that would settle things... The only seasonings I could use were rock salt, fruit wine, and myamuu, though, so that could prove tricky. And the tarapa sauce wouldn't pair perfectly with it, so the gap would only be more apparent between it and the giba burgers if I tried something like that.

I was becoming painfully aware once again of how much the overwhelming potential of giba meat had saved me. Even just coating giba in salt and pico leaves and then grilling it up was enough to make it tasty, and it also had a powerful enough presence that it wouldn't be lost even when I seasoned it strongly. That was precisely why I was still able to make proper cooking, even when I was so seriously lacking in terms of seasonings.

On top of that, the karon leg and kimyuus had hardly any fat at all to them. Since there didn't seem to be any cooking oil here in the post town, being able to use giba fat instead may have given me a serious advantage.

"I'm going to have to do some homework, I guess. I'd like to go around the

stalls and try to find out what herbs pair well with kimyuus meat.”

“Herbs?”

“Yeah. Since it doesn’t have a strong taste to it, I figure pairing it with the fine flavoring of herbs should work out.”

To put it bluntly, if I could find something like shiso, I could see myself making these kimyuus meatballs nice and tasty. And kneading it into minced meat and then boiling or grilling it could work out well, too.

Or what if I could find something like a Japanese plum? I got the feeling that may be the best way to go about tackling a Japanese-style dish if I couldn’t use tau oil.

“The one other thing I’d like to try is a sauce with a fruit wine base. I feel like this kimyuus meat may go well with a sweet flavoring. Ah, the sourness of sheel juice could pair nicely, too... I’m actually investigating how to use sheel fruit back home right now.”

“You sure look like you’re enjoying yourself...” Milano Mas said with a shrug of his shoulders. “Still, it’s for the best if you just keep on striving at your work like that. If you can enjoy what you do for a living that much, then you really should be thanking our god for that.”

◇

Though it left me with plenty of homework to tackle, my business at The Kimyuus’s Tail had come smoothly to a close.

At this rate, I’d probably be able to come up with something decent in another two or three days. It was honestly a bit strange to be creating a dish to compete with giba cooking, but it was also undoubtedly satisfying work.

And I could really tell. Giba meat really is on a whole other level compared to kimyuus or karon legs.

In other words, it was the highest grade meat on offer here in the post town.

On top of that, giba meat was rarer than karon or kimyuus, which were raised on farms. With that in mind, if we could just dispel the negative image surrounding the people of the forest’s edge, then it should be possible to raise

the price of giba meat. And so, I ultimately felt a sense of satisfaction as I grabbed hold of Gilulu's reins.

"Well then, how about we head back to the forest's edge?" I said to everyone as we met up after returning the stalls.

There was certainly plenty to feel down about, what with the hardship inflicted on Dora and Milano Mas's daughter, as well as the nasty rumors surrounding Cyclaeus that we heard from Mikel of Turan. However, my comrades and I at the forest's edge had no choice but to push through all that in our own way.

"We'll lead the way again. Don't separate too far from us, alright?" Ludo Ruu called out as he rode atop Ruuruu, heading off first with Shin Ruu walking alongside. Ai Fa was right behind the driver's seat, while the boy from the branch houses took his position at the rear of the wagon.

However... something did end up happening, at the very end. After several minutes of traveling the path back to the forest's edge, Ludo Ruu let out a "Gah!" and brought Ruuruu to a sudden stop.

Fortunately, we had only been going at a slow march. And so, I pulled back on Gilulu's reins and managed to avoid rear-ending them.

"Fall back, Asuta!" Ai Fa shouted, pulling me back into the wagon. She then took my place in the driver's seat, yelling, "What is it, Ludo Ruu?!" as she took hold of the reins.

"An arrow shot at our feet! From above!" Ludo Ruu responded, brandishing his hatchet as he did so. Sure enough, there was a wooden arrow deeply embedded in the ground by Ruuruu's feet.

"Who's there?! Come on out! Show yourself, you coward!" Ludo Ruu shouted, looking up above.

A nearby tree rustled just a bit near the top.

And then, a voice dripping with resentment said, "You damn people of the forest's edge..."



“From that voice, you’re the boy who called himself Jeeda, aren’t you? Start by showing yourself. And then, listen to what we have to say,” Ai Fa called up, having regained her iron-like spirit and unshakable calm in the blink of an eye.

However, there was no answer.

“We have no intention of harming you. And if we must cross blades, there is no harm in exchanging words first.”

Silence.

“Hey, you’ve got a grudge because your dad was executed in place of criminals from the forest’s edge, right? Then that’s all the more reason you should hear what we have to say,” Ludo Ruu added. Perhaps thanks to Ai Fa’s influence, the anger was now gone from his voice, too. “My name is Ludo Ruu, and my father Donda Ruu is one of the new leading clan heads. The ones who committed all those crimes belonged to the previous leading clan, the Suun. I get that you’ve got a grudge against us, but won’t you at least try talking to my old man first?”

Still not a word.

“We hadn’t realized the extent of the Suun’s crimes. And so as atonement, we all swore that we would live properly from here on, and never do anything like that again. Of course, we aren’t trying to pass this all off on the Suun clan. So please, give us a chance to apologize.”

“So why are you acting all carefree and doing business in the post town of all things...?” a muffled voice replied, sounding like he was desperately holding back his rage. “You killed all those merchants, and then thrust that crime on my dad and his men... So why is it that you’re able to swagger about and laugh your heads off in the post town...?”

“Like I said, I want you to hear our feelings on the matter. And if you decide you still find us people of the forest’s edge unforgivable... Then I guess that’s when we’ll have no choice but to cross blades. After all, we’re not just going to sit around and let you kill us,” Ludo Ruu replied, lowering his hatchet. “But I’ve got no intention of making light of your feelings. So won’t you please try talking to the new leading clan heads until you can be sure of your decision?”

“The people of the forest’s edge are my enemies...” the voice stated, sounding more distant.

Was he planning on retreating now that his sneak attack had failed? Instinctively, I leaned forward towards the driver’s seat.

“Hold on! These past few days, people connected to us from around town have been targeted! Was that you? If it was, please stop involving folks who have nothing to do with this!”

The foliage violently shook.

To me, that felt like a sign that the boy there was shaken.

“If not, then that’s fine. Actually, I’d have to apologize to you for the false accusation. But we—”

At that, a streak of wind fwooshed in front of my nose. In a flash, Ai Fa’s sheathed blade also swung before my eyes.

By the time I had perceived all that, I saw a deflected arrow fall to the ground.

“Stop spouting nonsense... Why would I go and do something like that...?” the voice asked, trembling with anger as he ground his teeth.

Feeling a complex mix of fear and relief, I straightened out my back.

“If my suspicion was entirely wrong, then I seriously am sorry! I just wanted to make sure we were clear on that right from the start. After all, we could never forgive someone for dragging innocent people who have nothing to do with this into our problems.”

“You’re talking about forgiveness...? You’re the most unforgivable one of the lot, you damn black-haired giba eater...”

Once again, I heard a sound tear through the air.

And once more, with a flash from Ai Fa’s blade, an arrow fell to the ground, this time having been split in half down the middle.

“Stop it! You’re directing your hatred towards Asuta?!” Ai Fa shouted, her once calm voice now filled again with anger. “He only came to the forest’s edge several months back! That incident from ten years ago has nothing to do with

him whatsoever! There's no reason at all for you to hate him!"

"As if... If it weren't for him, you all wouldn't be walking around town so smugly... You shameless bastard, making them think they can just do as they please..."

"It's not as if all of the people of the forest's edge are criminals! Just how much do you even know about that incident from ten years ago? Do you even know that the culprits from back then are all dead?" I asked.

With those words, the foliage shook all the more heavily.

"They're all... dead...?"

"That's right. That's why we're working on a plan to bring the entire truth to light, so that the same mistakes won't ever be repeated. Even if the criminals from the forest's edge who actually got their hands dirty are gone, there may still be someone left who was giving them orders!"

"You... You can't fool me with that nonsense..."

"It's not nonsense! That's exactly why we want to work together with you! And not just you, but your mother, too!"

After a long silence, there was more rustling from the treetops.

"I'll never give up on getting revenge for my father..." the voice said, now clearly growing distant.

"There's no point to chasing him," Ludo Ruu said with a click of his tongue.

We were already on the outskirts of the forest. Plus the foliage was so thick around here that it would prove difficult moving outside of the cleared path.

And so, our second encounter with Jeeda came to a swift close, without us even meeting face to face.

"Still, that wasn't a half bad response. It seemed like he didn't even know anything about Zattsu and Tei Suun, huh? He must not have been here in Genos for long," Ludo Ruu said, returning his hatchet to his hip. "Once he learns what's going on, he'll probably be at least a bit more inclined to lend us his ear, huh? Still, for now I'd say it's best we stay on guard against arrows flying through our windows as we sleep, right, Ai Fa?"

“Indeed,” Ai Fa replied with a troubled look as she returned her blade to its sheath and shot me a glare. “Asuta, don’t lose your composure. No matter what anyone may say, your presence has been a great aid to the people of the forest’s edge.”

“Yeah,” I nodded back.

Jeeda’s words had certainly dug deep into my chest. But even so, I couldn’t swerve from the path that I felt was the right one.

What Zattsu and Tei Suun did was absolutely unforgivable. However, that’s no reason at all that every last person of the forest’s edge should have to live the rest of their lives curled up in little balls.

The Suun clan, the nobles, and the people of the forest’s edge... I wanted that boy named Jeeda to learn about all of them. Only the gods knew what conclusion he would arrive at in the aftermath, but at the very least, I didn’t feel so much as a shred of hostility towards that boy of 13 or 14, held captive to his hatred.

I’d like to have a proper discussion with him at least once more, before anyone’s blood is shed... I truly, painfully felt that sentiment.

Chapter 4: Misgivings and Answers

1

It was now the dawn of the following day, the third of the white month.

And this morning wouldn't prove to be all peaceful and uneventful, either.

In fact, there was an unusual commotion before we could even head to the post town for the day.

"Hmm... Those are totos footsteps," Ai Fa stated after we had more or less wrapped up our work for the morning and were in the middle of loading the wagon.

The current setup we had was that on days when Ai Fa didn't come to town, Ludo and Shin Ruu would come meet me on Ruuruu. However, there was still 30 minutes or so left until we were supposed to head out.

"Did something happen with the Ruu clan? I hope it's not bad news," I said, only for Ai Fa to shake her head.

"I hear footsteps from the north. It isn't Ludo and Shin Ruu."

"From the north?"

There were five clans here at the forest's edge with totos. The three leading clans, the Fa, and the Lea. And of those five, the Zaza were the only ones settled further north than the Fa house. So sure enough, the ones to come dashing out of the forest with a totos were men from that clan.

"What is it? Some sort of urgent message?" Ai Fa called up to the man riding horse... er, totosback, not looking intimidated in the least.

However, I couldn't help but feel a bit wary. The totos was pulling a small uncovered wagon, and in it were two men.

Adding in the rider, there were three of them in total. And they were all fierce hunters of the Zaza clan, wearing pelts with giba heads still attached to them.

As always, they seemed even more intimidating and ferocious than the other hunters of the forest's edge.

"So you haven't headed to the post town yet? Then I'll tell you too," one of the men's voices rumbled as he got down from the wagon. It was one of the three leading clan heads, Gulaf Zaza.

I couldn't really see his face too well on account of the giba head. However, there was no way I'd ever mistake that huge frame and intimidating aura that were a match even for Donda Ruu.

"You see, someone snuck into the Zaza settlement last night."

"What?"

"It was late at night, when everyone had fallen asleep. And so, only the ones assigned to watch the criminals overnight noticed. Apparently... those intruders appeared around the house where the criminals were being kept."

By criminals, he meant Zuuro Suun, Diga, and Doddo.

Since fleeing from the Dom clan, Diga and Doddo were once again being treated as such. But since they had separated from Zattsu Suun of their own volition and come to warn us of danger, they at least avoided a death sentence.

In exchange, they were under constant watch during the day, during which they had to work on repairing the burnt Dom settlement, while at night they were locked in the same house as Zuuro Suun. Essentially, they were facing a suspended sentence.

"You're not going to say that Zuuro Suun was abducted, right...?" I nervously asked.

Cyclaeus had raised an awful suspicion that perhaps the people of the forest's edge had intentionally let Zattsu and Tei Suun escape, and were planning to do the same with Zuuro Suun. If that former leading clan head was kidnapped now, we would no longer be in a position to convincingly deny that claim.

However, his eyes burning bright from the shadow of the giba's upper jaw he wore, Gulaf Zaza replied, "Don't go thinking so little of us like that, Asuta of the Fa clan. It's true that the Zaza let Zattsu Suun escape, and the same is true of

the Dom with Tei Suun and those two fools. That was a big enough slip-up to be worthy of any criticism imaginable. However, we're not foolish enough to repeat that same mistake."

That was why Gulaf Zaza had borrowed Darmu Ruu and some other Ruu men in order to strengthen their watch. The clans of the north certainly seemed insular and arrogant, so I figured they really must have brooded a lot over the decision to ask Donda Ruu for help.

Well, more than brooding over it, perhaps it was more that they didn't like the idea of devoting so much manpower to guards and interfering with hunting work, and so they just had to rely on the Ruu clan since they were currently taking a break. At any rate, it was certainly a big change from when they served under the Suun and saw the Ruu as their enemies.

"The intruders fled without doing anything as soon as they were detected. It's frustrating that we couldn't catch them... But the real issue is what happened afterwards."

"Afterwards?"

"The criminal Zuuro Suun lost his senses. He yelled that those intruders were underlings of the folks from the castle, and that he didn't want to be dragged there. And so, he told us to scalp him then and there if he was sentenced to die anyway."

"Wh-What's that all about...?"

"In all likelihood, his nerves gave out on him... If he's handed over to the castle, who knows what may become of him? And so, he cried out that it would be better to live as one of us till the very end and have his soul return unsullied to the forest," Gulaf Zaza explained, his bearded face twisting with displeasure as he recalled the events. "I certainly can't say I didn't think, 'What are you rambling on about at this point?' but... we had depended upon the man as the leader of our people until very recently. He certainly had many vexing aspects, yet he served as the leading clan head. And more than any other of our people, our clans are deeply guilty of failing to realize just how far his crimes went."

"Y-You're not saying you decided to handle Zuuro Suun like he was asking then, right?"

That would be rebeling directly against Cyclaeus's demands.

His eyes blazing brighter, Gulaf Zaza grumbled, "I'm well aware that we shouldn't. That's precisely why I wanted to let Donda Ruu and Dari Sauti know as soon as possible. After all, I can't make the decision on my own."

So did Gulaf Zaza want to grant Zuuro Suun's wish after all?

That man was like a symbol of the Suun clan's corruption, so for him to wail about how he wanted his soul to return to the forest as one his people... I could honestly see myself feeling pretty moved, too. And since he once served under Zuuro Suun, Gulaf Zaza must've had even more complicated feelings on the matter.

I once again faced the Zaza clan head straight on, trying to observe him as just a single man.

He was certainly just as much of a giant as Donda Ruu was. No wait, he actually seemed to have a wider build, and I got the feeling he was a little taller. And he seemed to be about the same age as Donda Ruu, from what I could tell. There was a firm, dark brown moustache above his mouth and square jaw, and I could make out deep wrinkles on his tanned, leathery face.

I believe Zuuro Suun was around the same age too... Though he may have been a bit younger, I thought, recalling the man who had the appearance of a squashed toad.

It was honestly hard to imagine, but even Zuuro Suun and Gulaf Zaza must not have looked like that from the very moment they came into this world, of course. They must have been born innocent babies just like Kota Ruu, and as they grew in their respective clans, one fell to the depths of corruption, while the other became the muscular giant of a hunter standing before me now. They seemed like such complete opposites... But like Donda Ruu or Dan Rutim, and Jiza Ruu or Gazraan Rutim, they were tied by blood.

Considering the relationship between their clans, they must have interacted from a young age... What must it feel like to be betrayed by someone like that?

Gulaf Zaza had been the one to insist the whole main Suun house should be put to death when he heard about their pillaging of the fruits of the forest. That

must have been down to his anger as someone who had his trust thrown into the mud, as well as the cool-headedness of a man of the forest's edge who valued the law above all else. However... even a massive, wild beast of a man like him was still human. Just what had he felt underneath the rage that filled his heart? As an inexperienced youth, I frankly found it hard to imagine.

"Where are the Fou and Beim clans located? Since the three leading clan heads are gathering, we need to summon them too," Gulaf Zaza asked, turning towards Ai Fa after shooting me an annoyed glare.

"The Fou live in the first settlement you'll find heading south down this path. I don't know where the Beim live, so please ask the Fou clan head about them."

"Understood. Sorry for the bother."

With that, he started walking back towards the wagon, but then he stopped and turned my way.

"Right... I actually just talked to a woman from the Deen."

"Ah, from the Deen clan?"

"That's right. She said she was Jas Deen, the elder sister of the head of the main house. Anyway, that woman asked me if there was any way that the Deen could assist the Fa in their business."

In the back of my mind, I recalled the events from two days ago.

Jas Deen had stared at Toor Deen with a gaze that was strict yet also filled with compassion.

"She said, 'The Zaza clan doesn't approve of the Fa's actions. However, we need to form a bond and know them more closely in order to truly determine whether or not what they're doing is correct. As the closest clan under the Zaza, could the Deen be given that role?'"

"I see... So she said all that...?"

"And Dari Sauti has been really persistent, saying how he wants to carefully sample your cooking again. But rather than something like that, we should be putting all our efforts towards figuring out what to do about that Cyclaeus man, right?" Gulaf Zaza muttered, sounding incredibly annoyed as he stepped back

towards the wagon.

“Gulaf Zaza, about Jas Deen’s request—”

“I can’t go deciding stuff related to the clans under me all on my own. First we’ve got to gather the heads of all seven of the clans I lead, and then debate the matter. We’re too busy for a hassle like that right now...” Gulaf Zaza said, glaring at me with the eyes of a wild beast all the way to the bitter end. “At any rate, you two have disturbed the customs of the forest’s edge more than anyone, so the duty rests on your shoulders to prove what you’re doing is right. Don’t go shirking that duty, Asuta and Ai Fa of the Fa clan. Now, we depart...”

◇

As Ludo and Shin Ruu accompanied me to the post town, I told them what Gulaf Zaza had said.

“Hmm... So Zuuro Suun went and regained his pride as a person of the forest’s edge right at the bitter end, huh? Well, I guess he might just be scared of the folks from the castle, though...” Ludo Ruu grumbled with an irritated look on his face as he stood next to the stall. We were finally getting a chance to talk now that the morning rush had ended.

On days like this when Ai Fa didn’t come to town, Ludo Ruu was always the one right on the front line.

“Still, if we just go and execute Zuuro Suun on our own, I’m sure the folks from the castle would have one complaint or another. My old man and the other leading clan heads have it rough.”

“Yeah, and just what were those guys after, sneaking into the Zaza settlement last night? Were they trying to free Zuuro Suun so the people of the forest’s edge would be blamed for slipping up again? Or were they trying to shut him up? I can’t imagine Jeeda would have figured out about Zuuro Suun so quickly after our discussion yesterday, so it’s more obvious to think this was Cyclaeus’s doing, right?”

“What are you asking me for?! Ugh, there’s so much stuff I don’t get going on that it makes my head hurt...” Ludo Ruu whined, rustling his own hair.

Two nights back, Dora’s plantation was attacked, and then yesterday Milano

Mas's daughter was almost abducted. And on top of that, we had those intruders in the forest's edge last night. That was enough to induce a headache in anyone, not just Ludo Ruu.

Heck, there was that attack by Jeeda three days ago, too. That meant that assailants had come after three separate groups with guards: Us when we came to the post town, the folks from The Kimyuus's Tail, and Zuuro Suun while he was confined at the Zaza settlement.

It was hard to even know what we had to be on the lookout against, so that's why we ended up having to deploy such an extensive guard as a preventative measure. And among all the targets, the one we weren't able to keep an eye on, the plantation, actually suffered damage and bodily harm to someone there. That meant that things had exceeded even the worst case scenario we were prepared for.

And the only incident where we clearly know the culprit and motive was that attack by Jeeda. Was everything else part of Cyclaeus's plotting? But what would he even get out of doing stuff like that?

When it came to Zuuro Suun, maybe he wanted to shut him up permanently, but that also might not have been the case.

With Milano Mas and Dora, it could be just plain harassment, yet I couldn't be certain.

The truth was still hidden in the shadows.

"Welcome. Do you just want the one?" I heard Lala Ruu ask, snapping me back to my senses.

It was then that I noticed a customer from the west standing there on the other side of the iron tray.

"Ah, welcome. That will be two red coins."

"Two red ones, huh? That's pretty darn cheap... Still, you've got a pretty gloomy look on your face, there. A businessman shouldn't let his customers see a look like that."

"Ah, sorry," I started, only to suddenly notice I was talking to a middle-aged

man with a fairly large frame, wearing shabby clothing around his bony body. In other words, Mikel of Turan.

“Th-Thanks for stopping by. Did you come to purchase my cooking?”

“It’s a food stall, so why else would I be here?”

It seemed like he was in a bad mood again today.

However, his face that reminded me of an old tree wasn’t red from booze today, and his gaze and stance seemed firm rather than shaky. He was big to start with, so when he stood up straight like this it practically made him seem like a completely different person than the slovenly drunk from yesterday.

“Two red coins, right? I’ll take one, then,” Mikel said, slapping his coins down on the counter.

Though I felt rather flustered, I went ahead and set about making the myamuu giba.

“You sure are going all-in with the myamuu. If you lacked skill, you could easily end up ruining the meat with that overwhelming scent.”

I couldn’t tell if he was complaining or what, but he certainly looked annoyed as he said that and then bit into the poitan.

There was no change in his expression. However, he kept persistently chewing away at the meat rather than swallowing.

Another customer arrived in the meantime so I wasn’t able to keep focusing on him, but Mikel only moved aside slightly rather than leaving the stall. And then, around when that new customer got their order and left, he finally swallowed his first mouthful and spoke.

“Hmph... I was drunk yesterday so I couldn’t fully trust my tongue, but I suppose at least for now there’s no need for me to withdraw my advice.”

“Was it to your liking...?” I asked, only for his no-longer bloodshot eyes to level a glare my way.

“Myamuu and fruit wine, and this is the taste of aria, isn’t it? You diced up the aria finely and mixed it into the sauce in advance?”

“Yes, that’s correct.”

“Hmph. You used myamuu, fruit wine, and aria in the dish from yesterday too, didn’t you? So since you can’t get proper seasonings here in the post town, you’re using those to cook instead, eh?” As he talked, Mikel carefully inspected the myamuu giba, which he had only taken a single bite out of. “Still, this fuwano has an odd flavor. It’s not bad, but it’s got a real light texture to it. And I feel like I’m picking up a faint flavor of gigo, too...”

I was astounded that he could even pick up the taste of the tiny bit of gigo I had mixed in with the baked poitan.

“Yes, but that’s not fuwano, it’s poitan. It’s true that I mix in gigo in order to improve the texture, but you’re the first customer I’ve had notice that.”

“This stuff is poitan?” Mikel grumbled, and then he took another bite of the myamuu giba. “Poitan, huh...? I can’t say I’ve ever really eaten the stuff, but they’re preparing it like this in the post town lately...?”

“I can’t say for certain. It’s possible that our stalls are the only ones cooking poitan like this. But I haven’t looked into it that much.”

With that, Mikel went silent as he swiftly finished off the rest of the dish.

And then, he glared at me again.

“Seriously, who are you, kid? At the very least, you weren’t born in Genos. What town did you learn this level of technique in?”

“I learned how to cook under my old man back in my home nation. It would take a long time to explain where that was, but it’s actually outside of this continent.”

“Outside the continent? You’re from overseas, eh?” That was enough to cause even Mikel’s eyes to open wide, but he soon regained his usual sour look. “Well, whatever. Just don’t go forgetting my warning from yesterday. As long as you just don’t step foot in the castle town, you shouldn’t go catching his eye.”

“Yes, but Cyc—”

“Don’t go saying his name carelessly in the middle of the road,” Mikel warned, thick veins bulging on his forehead. “Even if he’d never show his face in a place

like this personally, it's entirely possible for there to be a merchant or soldier with ties to him prowling about. You really should refrain from inviting trouble like that."

"Sorry. But that man does have ties to the people of the forest's edge. Right now there hasn't been any sense that I'm in danger yet, but I'm sure he's at least heard of my business."

Apparently it didn't come up at the last meeting at all, but during the previous incident with the Suun, the leading clan heads were ordered that I wasn't to take a break from my business with the stalls. And in fact, I suspected that it was someone related to Cyclaeus who leaked the information of how well my business was going to the Suun clan in the first place.

Diel was getting angry saying she heard people mocking giba in the castle town, too... Though I don't know if that came from Cyclaeus himself or not.

At any rate, rejecting Diel's proposal about wanting to bring giba cooking back to the castle town certainly seemed to be the right call.

"There's no need to worry about your reputation in the post town. Nobles wouldn't even consider stuff that can be bought for two red coins to be food in the first place. And I can't see them acknowledging giba as a meal meant for people."

"I see. I can't say that actually makes me happy to hear, but I suppose I should be glad I won't go catching that man's eye."

"Hmph," Mikel snorted as he pulled back. "Still, if you get unlucky and he fixates on you anyway, you'll never be able to make that giba cooking of yours ever again. So make sure you don't go anywhere near the castle town, alright?"

With that final warning, Mikel promptly departed.

Lala Ruu had silently watched over the whole exchange, but now she grumbled, "What was that about? That sure seemed like one self-important customer."

"That was Mikel of Turan. You all heard his name back when we said farewell to Shumiral, right?"

“Huh? He’s the one who’s supposed to lend greater strength to the people of the forest’s edge?” Ludo Ruu interjected in shock. “He just seems like a totally normal old-timer. I really can’t imagine him getting involved with the future of our people.”

“That was just some fortune-telling stuff, right? You’d be stupid to believe something like that.”

Though they were saying such things, I couldn’t help but feel differently.

Naturally, I had no idea precisely what role Mikel would actually play. However, there was no way he was just a “totally normal old-timer.” At the very least, I couldn’t even imagine picking out the taste of the gigo I mixed into the baked poitan when faced with the overwhelming flavor of my myamuu giba.

A man who used to be a chef in the castle town, huh...?

I felt oddly excited, somehow.

Still, no matter how Mikel got involved with me and the people of the forest’s edge, it didn’t change what needed to be done here and now. We just needed to keep on striving as hard as we could to pulverize the obstacles that lay in front of us.

2

After that, I finished up my afternoon work too without any incident.

On the surface at least, the town seemed peaceful.

I got the feeling that there were more guards patrolling around town now, but aside from that, I didn’t see any significant changes. Our sales for the stalls didn’t fall below the norm, and customers even occasionally said stuff like, “You guys seem like you’ve got it rough in a lot of ways,” without showing any hint of feeling intimidated by the people of the forest’s edge.

Perhaps it was less that folks were feeling more favorably towards us, and more that they were just that distrustful of the people from the castle.

Only the Suun, the former leading clan, had received favorable treatment from the castle, while everyone else lived even harsher lives than the folks from

the post town. Thanks to the commotion with Zattsu and Tei Suun, that information had spread quite a bit amongst the townsfolk. Afterwards, it felt like negative feelings towards the people of the forest's edge had decreased significantly, while distrust towards the folks from the castle had increased.

And so when it was reported that thieves appeared wearing attire from the forest's edge, the first instinct folks had seemed to be doubting the intentions of the people from the castle and wondering what the truth really was.

If that impression I'm getting is correct, then it sure serves that Cyclaeus jerk right... Though I can't feel all too happy about it.

After all, the fact remained that Dora's plantation had been attacked, and that was certainly nothing to feel glad about.

And besides, it was still definitely a minority that felt favorably towards the people of the forest's edge. Most were guarded against the castle while also shooting us sharp, questioning looks.

"Are the people of the forest's edge really not a gathering of outlaws? Isn't this just the right time for the truth to come out?" It's like more and more folks were watching to determine the answers to such questions as they held their breath.

Still, the work itself went along nice and peacefully. In fact, I'd actually say a number of things happened on the business side of things.

First off, Nail from The Sledgehammer chose sirloin out of the cuts of giba I had offered, and decided he would grill it up and add it to his menu. His cooking method was quite simple, apparently just consisting of slicing it thin and grilling the meat.

However, it supposedly would come accompanied with a dipping sauce made from a blend of the sauce used in pickled chitt, fruit wine, and a variety of spices. I got to give it a try, and it was a truly spicy, exotic sort of flavor.

"It doesn't come close to your cooking, but I'll make it cheaper in exchange, so I don't think I'll get too many complaints."

In order to turn a profit, he sold my dishes at the fairly high price of five red coins. But this was cooking made with meat he bought for the same price as

karon, so just like with meals made from that meat, he could sell his new dish for four red coins.

“I would imagine I shouldn’t have any issue selling at least ten meals a day. And so I’d like to make 20 meals for each day you’re taking off. Could I ask you to sell me enough meat for that on the day before?”

Perhaps Nail had the same fear Naudis did of losing his customers to another inn. At any rate, I went ahead and gave an enthusiastic, “Of course.”

On the other hand, there was The Great Southern Tree, where I had only just yesterday handed over a sample of giba meat.

However, my time off was just four days from now. And perhaps as a result, Naudis only needed a single day to make up his mind to order giba meat. As for the cut, he chose the more expensive ribs.

“That one seemed the tastiest when just grilling it normally. Could I get enough meat for ten meals tomorrow and the day after, then 70 three days from now?”

“70 meals?! You must be really sure about this!”

“I’ll just salt any leftovers I end up with. At the very least, I can’t imagine any of it going bad.”

Even so, 70 meals worth meant 17.5 kilos of meat, and a price of 117.5 red coins.

He must have been planning to serve ten meals on the night three days from now, and 30 on each of the days I was taking off. Normally he bought 40 meals from me each day, so it wasn’t exactly like he was being overconfident... Well, at any rate, I certainly appreciated it.

“Thank you for the business. Still... the owner of The Sledgehammer also asked for a soft cut well-suited for grilling. Both the leg and shoulder meat are good for making boiled dishes, plus they’re cheaper, so I’m honestly sort of surprised.”

“Hmm, I would assume The Sledgehammer’s owner also realized the gap between his skill and yours would be too apparent when it came to stews and

the like. But giba meat's tasty when you just grill it, so it's only natural to want to start from there."

I see, I found myself thinking.

Naturally, giba meat was plenty suited for using in boiled dishes, but just boiling it alone wasn't enough to make it tasty. It made sense that just doing that would feel lacking compared to stuff like my giba soup and chitt hot pot. The lack of seasonings really was having an impact here too.

At this rate, though, we'd end up with nothing but leg and shoulder meat at the Fa house. Of course, I could use that for stuff like soup and hamburger steak so it wasn't a serious issue for the time being, but I'd like to move towards being able to sell all the different cuts proportionally.

Well, since Naudis had access to tau oil, he probably wouldn't have a tough time putting out just as good of a grilled dish as The Sledgehammer.

Thinking of it like that, I'll have to put more effort into helping The Kimyuus's Tail so they can compete with those shops that can use foreign seasonings.

Speaking of that establishment, in addition to experimenting more with karon and kimyuus meat while there, I also gave a bit of a cooking lecture.

Rather than being about handling meat, though, it was on how to use vegetables. For the time being, I went with explaining how to deliciously prepare the ones I was especially familiar with, like aria, tino, tarapa, pula, chatchi, gigo, and myamuu.

That meant cutting techniques like thin slices, round slices, wedge cuts, and mincing, as well as the appropriate cooking techniques for each, and even how to properly heat them to best draw out the flavor of each ingredient. In other words, there was a ton to cover.

However, Milano Mas was once again my only student for the day. Apparently his daughter was busy with other work somewhere else.

"She had a strong fear of the people of the forest's edge to begin with... But well, I guess I'm at fault for raising her that way."

"That's nothing for you to worry yourself about, Milano Mas."

The man's wife had lost her older brother ten years ago, and due to her built-up anxiety she also died young. Zattsu and Tei Suun were to blame for her older brother dying, so it wasn't strange in the least how much Milano Mas had hated and avoided the people of the forest's edge. And yet, he hadn't cut ties with us, and was even accepting these cooking lessons knowing I was using them as a preamble towards selling him giba meat.

And then there was his daughter, who I was hardly acquainted with at all. Even when I had seen her, she always got frightened and ran away. However, Milano Mas must have gotten permission from her too before deciding to allow us into his kitchen.

However, her heart had been scarred by yesterday's incident, and so she was still hiding from us. I really, truly despised those mystery villains causing trouble of late.

"All traitorous fools who support the people of the forest's edge will get what they deserve," huh...?

The identity of those scoundrels remained a mystery, even now. What they were saying was exactly the same as Jeeda, but if I trusted the boy's words, then he had nothing to do with them.

However, there was no proof that Cyclaeus had a hand in their actions, either. If he really was unrelated to the matter, too... Then that meant there were still folks here in the post town who held a powerful hatred for the people of the forest's edge.

That certainly didn't justify those bastards' actions, though. In fact, my thinking was more like, "I'll never let you get away with this!" It really might have been true what Milano Mas said, that Jeeda's actions of pointing his hatred directly at the people of the forest's edge made a lot more sense.

"You killed all those merchants, and then thrust that crime on my dad and his men... So why is it that you're able to swagger about and laugh your heads off in the post town...?"

Those words from Jeeda were getting to me even now.

Considering all that Zattsu and Tei Suun had done, it wasn't strange at all for

there to be folks out there who still hated the people of the forest's edge this much. Actually, Milano Mas might have really been unique, seeing how he had just dealt with us normally rather than letting any past feelings interfere.

Still, I can't help but feel anxious...

Having come from another world entirely, I felt a strong affection for both the people of the forest's edge and the folks from the post town. And there were things that only someone in my position could do to help. So I wanted to give everything I had to see that through.

◇

"That Jeeda kid didn't show up today," Ludo Ruu said while fastening Ruuruu to a tree after we finished up work and arrived at the Ruu settlement. "Isn't there some way we can drag him in front of my old man? Doesn't it feel like if we could just do that, it would be surprisingly easy to settle this?"

"Huh? Why's that?"

"I mean, he doesn't seem to worry about complex stuff like the folks from town. And apparently he trained as a hunter on some mountain, so doesn't it seem like he'd get along well with us?"

That was certainly an optimistic way of looking at things.

Those words certainly were fitting for Ludo Ruu... however, the youth had never even so much as seen Jeeda. And he had never been glared at by those eyes mad with hatred, either.

Shin Ruu, meanwhile, had actually taken a beating from Jeeda, and he didn't say a word as he helped unload.

"Oh, is that you, Asuta?! Long time no see!" a large figure called out, emerging from the main Ruu house. Though it was hard to say just how long it had actually been since we'd seen each other, it was Dan Rutim.

"Ah, hey there. Were you having a meeting about the stuff with Zuuro Suun?"

"Yup! The discussion itself ended quickly, but it'd be dull just heading straight on home, so I was playing with Kota Ruu!"

Same as always, he was a pretty free spirit for a clan head.

As she giggled at the jovial sight, Reina Ruu said, “We’re done here. Sheera Ruu and I will head in to prepare for tomorrow.”

They had gotten so good at making giba burger patties by now that I just gave the taste and size a final check at the end by this point. And even that step was just me being extra careful, so I was thinking I’d leave the whole process entirely up to them starting tomorrow. I could just let them go on and continue my chat with Dan Rutim.

“So, how is Zuuro Suun going to be dealt with?”

“There’s not really anything we can do. The folks from the castle told us to hand him over, and so we can’t exactly go and execute him while we’re still in the middle of negotiating... Or at least, that’s what the leading clan heads are thinking.”

“You sound a bit displeased, Dan Rutim.”

“Oh, you bet I am, and big time! That ridiculously corrupt bastard Zuuro Suun finally managed to summon up some guts as a man of the forest’s edge, and I think we should honor his resolve!”

“But couldn’t you say he’s just afraid of the folks from the castle? Like if he was going to be killed after getting tortured anyway, then he’d prefer to take the easy way out now,” I said almost as a self-rebuke, since honestly I was of the same opinion as Dan Rutim.

“Even so, it’s not easy to bring yourself to tell someone to scalp you. On top of that, he’s being kept in the Zaza settlement, right? I mean, I could certainly see Gulaf Zaza pulling his blade out then and there when he heard that,” Dan Rutim grumbled, displeased wrinkles forming on his slick head. “Someone born as one of our people is begging to have his soul returned to the forest. Why do we need to brush those words aside and let the folks from the castle deal with him? I just can’t understand what the leading clan heads are thinking.”

“I’m sure they’re in a tough place. After all, the castle’s already demanding we hand over every last member of the main Suun house. On top of refusing that, if we tell them we won’t even hand over Zuuro Suun, the people of the forest’s edge would be seen as being in open rebellion against Genos...”

“We wouldn’t be rebelling or anything. We’d just be brushing off some unreasonable demand.”

Dan Rutim’s assertion was entirely accurate. So much so that it left me at a loss for words.

Cyclaeus had thrust the demand on us based on his opinion that the people of the forest’s edge couldn’t be trusted. And so, when you cleared away all the quibbling and bargaining, it was only natural to end up with an opinion like Dan Rutim’s.

“Besides, pillaging the fruits of Morga isn’t even punishable by death under the laws of Genos, right?”

“Yes, that’s what I’ve heard. In most cases, the punishments under the laws of the forest’s edge are heavier than those of Genos.”

In fact, it was the son of the frustrated man in front of me now who had delivered that information in the first place.

“Then wouldn’t he have a better chance of living longer if we hand him to the castle? In that case, I’ve got some respect for him saying to scalp him then and there even so.”

“That’s true. That would certainly be the case normally...”

However, we were dealing with the enigmatic man known as Cyclaeus. Zuuro Suun wailed and questioned just what would become of him if he was handed over, so there was no doubt that he was seriously frightened.

On top of that, the noble had persistently insisted that not just Zuuro Suun but the whole main Suun house be handed over. Cyclaeus’s argument was that the people of the forest’s edge were being too lenient in their punishments, so he must have had some sort of reason he needed to get rid of them.

With that in mind, Zuuro Suun’s intense fear was certainly understandable...

But it was then that a little doubt emerged in my mind.

What reason could there be for needing to go that far to wipe out the Suun clan?

Thinking about it normally, it would have to be something related to the

criminal, Zattsu Suun.

If that man and Cyclaeus had shared some sort of secret agreement, then I could see that crafty noble finding the possibility of anyone else in the Suun clan knowing about it troubling. And so, I would get him wanting to torture Zuuro Suun for answers, and even jumping at shadows and deciding the whole main house needed to be silenced.

The real issue, though, was whether or not such a secret agreement even existed in the first place. I mean, if it did, would it really make sense for Zuuro Suun to keep hiding that fact so securely?

It had already been over 20 days since the former leading clan head had become a prisoner. And the Zaza men had thoroughly investigated his other crimes during that period, so he certainly had plenty of opportunities to confess.

Actually, if he was that scared of the folks from the castle, wouldn't it make more sense to reveal anything and everything that he could while he was still here at the forest's edge? If he exposed it, then that secret agreement wouldn't be so secret anymore, and there wouldn't be any reason left for him to be tortured or silenced. He had resolved himself to be scalped already, and that sort of behavior would be a lot more fitting of him.

Was it a secret fatal enough to Cyclaeus that revealing it would put all of the people of the forest's edge in danger...?

I simply couldn't imagine that being the case. If it was, Cyclaeus never would have drawn things out and let Zuuro Suun be for so long. And we had been resigned to hand Zattsu and Zuuro Suun over to the castle to begin with, so if they hadn't gone and said to turn over the full Suun clan, things would have never gotten this complicated.

Heck, thinking on it further, the idea of a secret agreement between Cyclaeus and Zattsu Suun felt off the mark to begin with. I mean, did Zattsu Suun really have a cooperative relationship with that crafty noble, or were they just using one another? Even if it was the former, it was hard to imagine that vile old man going to his grave without spilling everything. After all, Zattsu Suun died raging and spewing forth his hatred towards the people of Genos.

The same was true for Tei Suun, too. So I can't imagine Zuuro Suun alone was holding on to that secret...

But then what in the world was going on?

What did Cyclaeus want Zuuro Suun and the rest of the main house for? And what made Zuuro Suun so terrified to be handed over to the castle? No matter how much I turned it over in my head, I just didn't get it.

However, there was one thing I did know. While we couldn't ask Cyclaeus about those questions, we *could* ask Zuuro Suun.

"Is Donda Ruu in there...?"

"Yeah," Dan Rutim replied, and so I stepped foot into the main Ruu house on my own.

Waiting inside were the clan head, his eldest son, and the son's wife and child.

Was the family enjoying some nice peaceful time together now that their lively guest had finally left? At any rate, I went ahead and apologized for the sudden visit as soon as Sati Lea Ruu guided me in, carrying Kota Ruu along with her.

"Never mind the pleasantries. What is it you wanted to discuss with me?" Donda Ruu responded, looking just as annoyed as always.

I went ahead and explained the doubts I was having, but perhaps because it was all too vague, my sentiment didn't really seem to get across.

"I don't really get it... Could you put it a bit simpler, kid?"

"Sorry. I'm honestly having trouble grasping the focal point of the problem, myself... I guess the big question is, just what is Zuuro Suun so afraid of? He's sentenced to die even if he stays here at the forest's edge, so what reason is there to fear the folks from the castle at this point?"

"But last night, intruders invaded the Zaza settlement. Wouldn't it fit that he panicked learning just how fixated on him the folks from the castle really were?" Jiza Ruu chimed in.

As always, though he was smiling, I couldn't tell what he was thinking at all.

“Yes, but even if they were seeking to silence him, he’s going to be executed either way so what does he have to fear? So that sounds like a fate worse than death must be awaiting Zuuro Suun if he’s handed over to Cyclaeus, right?”

“A fate worse than death... So torture, then?”

“That’s what I thought at first, too. But if Zuuro Suun was holding on to secrets worthy of that, then if he revealed all that before he could be handed over to the castle then there’d be no reason left to torture him.”

“Then what other possibility is there...?” Donda Ruu questioned.

“I don’t know,” I replied with a shake of my head. “So doesn’t it make sense to interrogate Zuuro Suun directly on the matter? Ask him just what exactly has him so afraid, I mean. Zuuro Suun was the one who maintained a relationship with Cyclaeus for the past ten years as leading clan head, right? So wouldn’t it make sense for him to be able to guess at what exactly that noble is thinking?”

“That’s true... Zuuro Suun was corrupted by the poison from the city of stone, so he may just be able to predict what they’re plotting,” Donda Ruu replied, scratching at his mane of hair. “I wish you’d brought this up before the other leading clan heads left... Hey, Ludo’s gonna be using the Ruu clan totos after this too, right?”

“Yes. The plan is that he’ll escort me to the Fa house, and then stay there until Ai Fa returns.”

That all went without saying, since Donda Ruu had personally decided on all that.

“In that case, we’ll just have to use another totos. When the Lea clan head shows up at your place, tell him what we just discussed and send him to the Zaza settlement.”

“Huh? Rau Lea will be stopping by the Fa house?”

“Isn’t that the agreement you had? He said something like that.”

We hadn’t made any such deal, but it seemed he was planning to bring Yamiru Lea along to the Fa house again.

“Understood. If Rau Lea shows up, I’ll be sure to tell him that Zuuro Suun

should be interrogated about just what exactly has him so scared.”

“Yeah, and if he doesn’t stop by, then have Ludo do the job with the totos once he’s done guarding you, and... G’wrk.”

“Huh? What was that?”

I got the feeling I had heard him say, “Good work,” but it hadn’t come across all that clearly.

“Never mind! If you’re done here, then hurry up and leave already.”

“Right! Excuse me,” I said, obediently retreating back outside.

At the very least, I had managed to clearly convey the doubts I had been feeling to Donda Ruu.

It’s hard to see what’s right under your nose, I guess... With Zattsu Suun gone, Zuuro Suun has interacted with Cyclaeus longer than anybody at the forest’s edge, so we should have been focusing more on him.

Yamiru Lea had once said that Zattsu Suun had given up on his son thanks to his lazy personality. I guess that’s why I had figured he had nothing to do with any plots coming from Cyclaeus.

However, Zuuro Suun had ten years of experience with the crafty noble by now. Even if he didn’t know a thing about any plots or secrets, that alone was valuable in and of itself. We just had far too little background information on Cyclaeus. But if we could use this to get at least some sort of lead on him, then maybe we could finally move forwards a bit.

And so, feeling almost satisfied in a way, I exited the main Ruu house.

However, there wasn’t anyone waiting outside. The only ones there were Gilulu and Ruuruu, casually pecking away leaves. Had Ludo and Shin Ruu gotten bored of waiting and decided to go watch their sisters cook instead?

Just as I was wondering where Dan Rutim went and started looking around for him, an overwhelming tremor rumbled through the ground.

“Gwahaha! You may be big, but you sure are sloppy! You’ll never be able to beat me or Donda Ruu like that!”

There were two large figures over near the entrance to the settlement.

The one loudly chuckling away was naturally Dan Rutim, while lying at the clan head’s feet was Mida. And there were a number of little kids darting about around them.



“A contest of strength...? Ah, good seeing you again, Mida.”

Since I had seen Dan Rutim back when Shumiral visited, it had been longer since I’d last met with Mida.

I’d been stopping by the Ruu settlement every day lately, but since we were each busy with our own work, there hadn’t really been much of a chance for us to build up our relationship.

At any rate, as he lay sprawled out on the ground, Mida let out an unintelligible “Ngh...” and lifted his massive frame. “Ah, Asuta... There’s something I wanna show you, Asuta.”

“Huh? What is it?”

With that, Mida thudded off around the back of Shin Ruu’s house.

I followed after him alongside Dan Rutim, only for something truly surprising to soon come into view: a wooden house.

“Whoa, you finished it already?”

Mida had been building his own home under the guidance of Shin Ruu’s father, Ryada Ruu.

However, I first learned of that on Lala Ruu’s birthday, the 25th of the blue month, and at that point he had still been cutting lumber. He sure finished it quickly, seeing how it had only been ten or so days since then. And though it looked perhaps a bit smaller than the Fa house, it didn’t seem poorly made compared to the other homes I’d seen in the least.

“Ooh, nicely done!” Dan Rutim exclaimed as he patted the wall with one of his large hands. “I’m impressed. I never imagined you would finish it this quickly.”

“Right... I worked hard, for Asuta and Ai Fa...”

“Huh?”

“I’m gonna return that house I’ve been using up till now to you guys...”

Now that he mentioned it, Mida had been sleeping in the only vacant house, and so Ai Fa and I hadn’t been able to stay overnight at the Ruu settlement.

But, well, Ai Fa wanted to return back home instead whenever possible, so as long as we had Gilulu we probably wouldn't have a need to stay... but of course, I wasn't about to go and say anything so thoughtless.

"Thanks. You really did give it your all, huh? That's amazing."

"Ryada's the amazing one, though... I couldn't have done anything all on my own..."

"That's not true. It never would've been possible to finish it this quickly without your strength."

Mida's fatty cheeks trembled. As always, that surplus fat was getting in the way of him making proper expressions, but I was pretty sure he looked happy.

"Yup, this shows some definite skill. I'd love to get your help the next time the Rutim need a new house built," Dan Rutim chimed in with a hearty laugh. "And it looks like you're losing that excess fat bit by bit, too. Keep on giving your all, and you should be able to make a strong showing at your next contest of strength. Work hard, and eat well!"

"Yeah... I'll try hard so I can eat Asuta's cooking next time..."

Surely I wouldn't be tasked with manning the stove each and every time they had one of their important festivals of the hunt. After all, the Ruu women's cooking skills were improving remarkably fast.

I wouldn't bring that up, though. I didn't want to seem dismissive of his efforts.

"I'll definitely be looking forward to the next festival of the hunt. And if I happen to get asked to man the stove again, I'll give it my all, for sure."

"Yeah... I'm looking forward to it too..." Mida said, his little piglet-like eyes sparkling.

Mida's thick, log-like arms had once destroyed stalls in the post town, but now they were being used to make a new house here at the forest's edge. Even for someone who had such a limited relationship with him like me, that thought still felt deeply moving.

Mida and Yamiru, and surely Oura and Tsuvai too, had overcome their crimes

and Tei Suun's death, and had started living fresh lives in their new clans.

But what about Diga and Doddo? They must have been regretting their own sins and weaknesses, surrounded by the terrifying men of the Dom.

At any rate, I again felt strongly that as long as Cyclaeus couldn't come up with much better reasoning than the leading clan heads were bringing to the table, we absolutely couldn't let those new lives be destroyed.

3

"Ooh, we've been waiting for you, Asuta and Shin Ruu!"

By the time we made it back to the Fa house, Rau and Yamiru Lea were already there waiting for us.

"I'm counting on you to give Yamiru Lea cooking lessons again! Meanwhile, I'll be training with Shin Ruu!"

"Unfortunately, I've got a message for you from my old man, Rau Lea."

Once Ludo Ruu explained the situation from atop Ruuruu, Rau Lea puffed up his cheeks with dissatisfaction.

"Why do I have to be an errand boy?! You've got a totos too, so you should go, Ludo Ruu!"

"If you're gonna complain, then do it to my old man. But now that you mention it, Darmu did head to the Zaza settlement," Ludo Ruu answered, looking a bit pensive. "It doesn't seem like he'll be coming home for a while, so maybe I should go see him... Just don't get so wrapped up in your training that you neglect keeping watch, alright? I'm sure you already heard too, but some intruders approached the Zaza settlement just yesterday."

"Understood! Thanks, Ludo Ruu!"

And so, it was decided that Rau Lea and Shin Ruu would stay here and keep watch.

As for me, I had to prepare dinner, do some cooking experiments... and also give Yamiru Lea lessons.

“So, what should we do today? Do you have any requests?”

“You really think I would have any...?”

Yamiru Lea had a captivating yet listless air about her again today.

Now that I thought about it, it may have actually been a bit rare for just the two of us to be working together. But the other neighboring women weren’t scheduled to visit the Fa house today, so there was no helping it.

“The Lea women received lessons from the Rutim clan, right? I guess the real issue is just how skilled they ended up.”

“I can’t say... For now, they still seem to be struggling with that dish you call hamburger steak. I suppose Ama Min and Morun Rutim are the only ones who can actually make it properly.”

“They’re struggling, huh? I see.”

The Rutim women had pretty much all learned from the Ruu in turn, too. That made them the disciples of my disciples, and the Lea women were another step removed from that. Reina and Mia Lea Ruu were incredibly skilled, but it was only natural that things would be lost as more and more folks were inserted in the chain.

“Hamburger steak becomes harder and harder to cook through the larger it is. Apparently the Fou and Ran are having a good bit of trouble with it, too... Well then, how about we tackle meatballs today for a change of pace?”

“Meat... balls?”

“To put it simply, it’s sort of like making little hamburger steaks. That makes it far less likely to over-or undercook them.”

The idea had come to me from the kimyuus meatballs I had tried out at The Kimyuus’s Tail.

In both the settlement at the forest’s edge and inns in the post town, it seemed dishes that took a while to prepare weren’t all that appreciated.

“We’ll start with the same preparations as the hamburger steak. After boiling down the poitan, we’ll switch over to dicing and sautéing the aria.”

Using the dinner for the Fa house as an example, I then had Yamiru Lea practice preparing a sample.

We boiled down the poitan and dried it to use as a thickener, and in the meantime diced the aria and sautéed it while also grinding the meat. I hadn't employed diced aria in the kimyuus meatballs, but since the taste of giba meat was so strong, I always ended up using them in dishes like this.

However, this seemed like a good opportunity, so I went ahead and tried making some without any aria, too.

And what about adding gigo to the thickener? It took some time to boil down and dry out the poitan, so it was a good bit of added effort when it wasn't done alongside the usual baked poitan.

I altered those two variables, whether or not there was any aria or gigo in the thickener, making for four varieties in total.

"All that's left is adding salt and pico according to your tastes, and it might be good to grate in some myamuu at this stage too. And we also mix in fruit wine in the Fa house."

"How complicated. The Lea clan doesn't add that many different things in."

"Is that so? Well, I figure kneading salt and pico leaves in should be plenty to start."

Even with the giba burgers I sold in the post town, I didn't knead anything but salt and pico into them. That was because I already used plenty of fruit wine and myamuu in the tarapa sauce.

But at the Fa house I had tried out things like a tau oil-based sauce, cheeseburgers, teriyaki burgers, and so on, and I attempted all sorts of flavorings in the patty itself while doing so. Ai Fa had once judged the hamburger steak I made as tastier than Reina Ruu's, but I figured aside from how much we cooked it, that was where the difference would have to lie.

"So when kneading the meat, you want to ball them up to around this size. And there's no need to worry about getting the air out." The size I indicated was enough for a single big bite, about as big as a takoyaki ball. "It's too early to start cooking meat for dinner, so let's just grill up one to give a try. First off,

we'll add a bit of giba fat so that the meat doesn't stick to the pot. Then we'll keep the stove at a medium flame, cooking it and rolling it about until it turns a nice even brown. But if you move it around too much at this point it'll crumble, so take care."

Once the surface was a golden brown, we added the grated myamuu, salt, pico leaves, and fruit wine, then let it cook through in a covered pot. Those were all the steps needed to prepare the dish. And the diced aria and thickener were just my own personal touches, so it should certainly be possible to simplify it further.

It was a bit late to be having the thought, but since the people of the forest's edge weren't too fond of complicated tasks, meatballs might have been a more fitting dish for them than hamburger steak in the first place.

"Now, this one was the one with gigo but no aria in the filling, wasn't it...? Anyway, go ahead and give it a try."

"You aren't going to eat it...?"

I was about to say that I had a full dinner ahead of me so I couldn't, but instead I said, "Then I guess I'll try half."

So, this was the meatball Yamiru Lea made, huh? Even if I was the one to actually cook it, I figured she would feel a lot more confident if I approved of the taste.

"Ah, yup, this is plenty tasty," I earnestly stated.

Using gigo had made the texture a bit fluffier.

And sure enough, not adding the aria brought out the giba meat's strong flavor even further. In other words, this way could be more suited to the tastes of the people of the forest's edge.

Also, they had a nicer, chewier texture in this shape than with the thin mini-burgers. And there were no issues with the meat juices, as there was plenty of that too. It was similar to yet different from hamburger steak in a way that I could definitely imagine the people of the forest's edge enjoying.

What about Ai Fa, though...? Even if I could see everyone else feeling satisfied,

I get the feeling she'd still pout, I thought to myself, only for Yamiru Lea to give a deep sigh.

"What's the matter? Is something wrong?"

"No, it's quite tasty. I just can't help but wonder if it's alright to be taking it so easy..."

I tilted my head, not getting what she meant, and she shot me a glare from beyond her long bangs.

"I heard about Zuuro Suun. The meeting from the other day didn't settle things at all, so what in the world are the new leading clan heads planning on doing from here on out?"

"Ah, that's what you meant? I'm not sure... But I know they won't let you all be handed over to the castle."

"They said to turn over the whole main Suun house, correct? In that case—"

"You know we aren't going to hand over you and Zuuro Suun alone to take the fall, right, Yamiru Lea?" I said, beating her to the punch.

Yamiru Lea sighed and responded, "How perceptive of you. The Lea clan head kept on saying the same thing."

"Oh, you talked to Rau Lea about that too? I'm sure that must've made him pretty angry."

Rau Lea was currently grappling with Shin Ruu as Gilulu watched. That put him close enough that we could see each other, but he shouldn't have been able to hear what we were saying.

Yamiru Lea turned away and gently stroked her left temple.

"He didn't just get mad, he hit me. What a truly awful man."

"Well, I do agree that Rau Lea shouldn't have done that, but I can understand him getting at least a little upset to hear you talking like that."

Yamiru Lea didn't have anything to say in response.

"Even if you're trying to save Mida and Tsuvai, please stop thinking it's alright to go and sacrifice yourself. You should already know from the clan head

meeting that that won't work."

"But Zattsu Suun had his eyes on me to be his successor. Those folks from the castle must be terribly eager to execute someone like me."

"We don't even know what they're up to in the castle, so I can't see any logic in blindly following all their demands. You're one of our precious brethren, after all."

Yamiru Lea looked down just a bit, hiding her expression behind her long bangs.

"You've done enough. Don't you realize that if you just hand me over, that might be enough to satisfy the folks from the castle? You really are stubborn fools..."

"That's my line. Please, try to understand why Rau Lea and I are so upset."

At that, Yamiru Lea suddenly started biting the nail of her thumb. It was a really childish action that was quite unlike her.

"You're angry too, Asuta...?"

"I guess I'm more sad than angry. Doesn't it depress you, saying things that ignore everything our brethren are trying to do here?"

"You're a foreigner, not one of our people."

"I consider myself one of you, even if I *am* a foreigner."

Yamiru Lea went silent.

There was a somehow gloomy feel lingering in the air, and so I tried calling out in the brightest tone I could manage, "Also, I don't think the folks from the castle would have any interest in Zattsu Suun's successor or whatever. They're still insisting the incident from ten years back was the work of bandits, so I can't see them really pursuing the Suun clan for those crimes."

"They won't pursue those crimes...?" Yamiru Lea quietly repeated, her expression still hidden. "Hmm, so that's it... Is that why Zuuro Suun is so afraid of being handed over to the castle, perhaps...?"

"Huh? You know what that's about, Yamiru Lea?"

“I can’t say I do. But you can naturally imagine when you think about it, can you not?”

“I really, really can’t. That’s why we’re asking Zuuro Suun personally,” I said, then I drew close to Yamiru Lea without thinking. “Please tell me. Why do you think the people from the castle want to get a hold of Zuuro Suun?”

“If it’s not to investigate crimes, then there’s only one other possibility, isn’t there?” There was now some sort of mysterious light in Yamiru Lea’s eyes, behind her long bangs. “The revival of the Suun clan.”

“The revival of the Suun...”

There was a chill to those words that caused them to sink deep into my chest.

“Do Zuuro Suun and the rest of our former house hold any other value? The new leading clan heads have been proving troublesome for those people from the castle, haven’t they? And so wouldn’t it make sense for them to wish to place Zuuro Suun back in that position and once more have the people of the forest’s edge act according to their wishes?”

I... honestly couldn’t just write that off as some crazy idea.

All sorts of memories were clicking together in my head, building to a single conclusion.

At the start, Cyclaeus had insisted every last member of the Suun clan be handed over to the castle, the branch houses included. And when that wasn’t working out, he switched to just focusing on the former members of the main house.

But why?

Cyclaeus had said from the start that it was to judge the weight of their crimes, right?

But was he looking not to punish them for their crimes, but to wipe their slates clean...? In order to undermine the current leading clan heads with unjust slander and reinstate the Suun clan under his approval?

That would also explain why Cyclaeus doesn’t seem to be in any sort of rush. If he wanted them to protect some sort of secret then he’s taking things way too

slowly, but if he was hatching a scheme like that instead, there'd be no issue with taking his time.

In that case, the reason he was asking not just for Zuuro Suun but his whole family... Was it to have hostages to get the former leading clan head to listen to him, or to use one of Zuuro Suun's sons in his place if the man himself wasn't working out?

And were the intruders the other day meant solely to confirm Zuuro Suun's presence rather than to do him harm? Were Cyclaeus's words that the people of the forest's edge were too lax in their punishments just a feint or bluff to hide his true intentions?

Of course, no matter how much I thought about it, it wasn't like there was any proof. Still, it made a lot more sense than him wanting to kill every last member of the Suun to keep them quiet.

"But then... why did that make Zuuro Suun so panicked? Even if it was caused by the presence of those intruders, if he had the same thought that you did then I can't see any reason for him to get all upset."

"Unfortunately, I cannot claim to understand how Zuuro Suun thinks. Though he is my father, we aren't alike in the least," Yamiru Lea replied in a monotone voice, gently hugging her own body. "However... Perhaps he realized he lacks the strength needed to refuse the folks from the castle. So if he was reinstated as the leading clan head, and had to face the hatred and resentment of all his brethren... I could see that thought causing him great distress," she added, her shoulders lightly trembling.

And so, I firmly grabbed hold of those shoulders with both hands.

"It's going to be alright. The leading clan heads won't hand you over to the castle. I feel that even more strongly now after hearing what you had to say."

"What if this is nothing but some delusion I've made up inside my own head...?"

"We won't just abandon our fellow people of the forest's edge, whatever their plan is."

Despite how cold she always seemed, sure enough, there was blood and

warmth flowing through even Yamiru Lea's body. And that was a fact I was constantly aware of as I held her shoulders till her trembling steadily came to an end.

◇

And then, night fell.

We had finished eating our meatball dinner, and Ai Fa and I were currently talking.

"So, things have been growing more and more complicated. Just what will end up becoming of Zuuro Suun?"

"The leading clan heads can't exactly go deciding on a path forward at this point. First, we must figure out the truth."

It really was just as Ai Fa said.

The time to settle things was steadily creeping nearer, but we were still left with nothing but a bundle of mysteries, doubts, and speculation. There was no way we could decide how to proceed with things like this.

"For now we must simply protect ourselves and wait for Kamyua Yoshu's return. That's all we can do."

"No, there's one more thing, right? Convincing Jeeda and making him into an ally."

"With him, we'll just have to wait until he shows himself. Waiting for your prey to appear is one form of hunting."

"Yeah, that's definitely a hunter-like idea."

Now that I thought about it, I had seen Donda Ruu act surprisingly passive quite often. Did that intimidating man usually operate by lying low and waiting for the perfect chance rather than moving around aimlessly?

Under the dim light from the candle, I stared at Ai Fa's face from the side.

She was just a bit close. Currently, we were leaning up against the wall, quietly chatting with one another. And we were at a distance where our shoulders were almost touching, but not quite.

“If you’re not by my side when an arrow is shot through the window, I won’t be able to protect you, now will I?” Ai Fa had said, and so we had remained in this spot ever since dinner.

When we went to sleep we would cover the windows to guard against attacks. But the wind felt quite nice tonight, so we decided to leave them clear until we turned in for the night. It wasn’t like anyone had suggested the idea, though. We just sort of agreed without speaking.

And so, we had been quietly chatting while seated so close we could almost feel the warmth from each other’s bodies.

“It would be nice if our peaceful everyday lives could return soon... Or at least peaceful enough that we don’t need to worry about arrows shooting in through our windows.”

“Hmm? What brings this up? Is the situation starting to get you down after all?”

“No. I’ve got a lot of thoughts swirling around in my head, so much so that I could get all worked up if I’m not careful. But I just can’t help feeling like I’d be truly blessed if all I had to worry about was you making it home safely and how business was going.”

Still keeping her eyes on the window, Ai Fa broke out in a frown.

Most of the time when I started making statements like that, Ai Fa would just go silent like she was now.

She really was catlike, especially considering how she would just go ahead and nuzzle close without asking when she was feeling uneasy.

But, well, I can’t say that exactly upset me or anything.

“Still, getting back to the matter at hand, it certainly is tiring just waiting for the other side to make a move. I keep worrying that something else is going to happen to someone close to us.”

“Indeed. And we also still have no idea who is responsible for all that, either.”

“Yeah. Still, if it really is all Cyclaeus’s doing... It may be a plot to force things back to how they used to be.”

“Force things back...?” Ai Fa questioned, tilting her head. And as she did so, her long hair tickled the bottom of my neck.

“You don’t think so? Returning Zuuro Suun to his position as leading clan head, reinstilling doubt towards the people of the forest’s edge in the townsfolk, interfering so that we can’t keep on doing business... Every last one of those sounds to me like Cyclaeus attempting to force things back to how they were.”

“If your thinking is correct...” Ai Fa whispered, using a quiet yet firm tone, “that Cyclaeus man is undoubtedly an enemy of the forest’s edge.”

“Yeah. If he were that obvious of a villain, he’d definitely be worth taking down,” I replied, half serious and half joking.

Ai Fa smiled ever so slightly, but then her eyes suddenly became those of a hunter.

“He’s here...” she whispered, grabbing hold of her blade’s grip.

In a fluster I followed her gaze, and found a pair of yellow eyes staring our way through the window.

I gulped. It felt as if I had run into some hungry beast in the dark of the night.

“You’re that boy who called himself Jeeda, aren’t you? So, do you finally feel like exchanging words?”

“Step outside... Both of you.”

With that, those blazing yellow eyes suddenly vanished.

Ai Fa rose to her feet, still holding her blade.

When I also stood, she shot me an intense look.

“Asuta, make certain not to leave my side. If he suddenly attacks I’ll push you towards the house, so be prepared.”

“Got it.”

And so, we carefully stepped outside.

Jeeda was just five meters from the door, standing there like some sort of ghost.

As always, he had on that leopard-patterned cloak that marked him as a hunter from elsewhere.

And the pale moonlight was giving him a seriously eerie feel.

“If you hold no malice, then I welcome you. I am the head of the Fa clan, Ai Fa, and this is my clan member Asuta.”

Jeeda didn’t respond.

“As we mentioned the other day, we have no hostility towards you. But before you throw all the hatred you hold for our people on us, we’d like to first try talking.”

Since his hood was hanging a good bit down, I couldn’t really see Jeeda’s expression. However, I could definitely see his yellow eyes like those of a wounded beast smoldering away.

And yet, perhaps because of the moonlight, his body looked somehow smaller than I remembered.

He was shorter than even Ludo Ruu to begin with, and slender too. And today, I wasn’t sensing any of that overwhelming fury bursting forth from his small frame.

“Before that though, just let me ask... How did you know where our house was? Asuta arrived by carriage, so I can’t imagine you managed to chase after him.”

“I followed the wagon’s tracks... It was far easier than tracing an animal’s footprints,” Jeeda replied, his face still hidden by his hood’s shadow.

That voice had once been crackling with thunderous rage... But now that he was talking calmly, it sounded like the slightly husky voice of a boy going through puberty.

“The criminals... Are they really all dead?” Jeeda quietly asked after a few moments of silence. “They’re saying in the post town that two of them were executed. But there’s no way two criminals from the forest’s edge could have slaughtered that entire merchant caravan on their own... What happened to the rest of them?”

“From what I’ve heard, they all died out over these past ten years. For whatever reason, many members of the Suun tend to die young, and all of the criminals belonged to that clan,” Ai Fa calmly responded.

“You’re lying,” Jeeda shot back with a glare. “As if something so convenient could possibly be true. You’re trying to protect those criminals, aren’t you...?”

“No, we’re not. To begin with, apparently very few people were involved with that incident from ten years back. They pulled off their plan by setting giba upon the merchant caravan. Using a trick like that, even a single person could take down 30 others.”

“Then who was it who attacked that plantation two nights ago, exactly? Every last one of you really are criminals, aren’t you?”

“Most certainly not. That was a scheme to lay false blame on the people of the forest’s edge. I firmly believe that there are no longer any hunters left among us who would dare to sully their pride,” Ai Fa firmly yet calmly stated.

As I stood there by her side, I had my breath taken away by how tough yet full of integrity her voice was. Usually she didn’t let her inner feelings show around others, but Ai Fa was really baring her soul now, which caused a strange sensation to well up inside of me.

Jeeda didn’t say a word as he glared back at Ai Fa.

But after another long silence, he opened his mouth... and a pleasant breeze blew through our hair while also swooshing down Jeeda’s hood.

“I... I trained so hard in order to have my revenge against the people of the forest’s edge...” the boy uttered, his unkempt fiery red hair silently swaying in the dark. “If all the criminals are already dead... Then who should I even be swinging my blade at...?”

Jeeda’s face suddenly came fully into view. It had once been twisted with rage, but now it was filled with sadness.



What a truly sorrowful expression...

Was this really the same boy who had angrily pointed his blades our way? That terrifying assailant?

His eyes were so big, and were almond shaped and at a slightly upward angle. His nose and mouth were both small, and his chin was slender too. Honestly, from his face alone, he looked younger than his age of 13 or 14. I just couldn't imagine it shifting into that expression that called to mind a wounded leopard baring its fangs.

However, those yellow eyes of his alone still burned away like flames, even though they were filled with great sadness.

"Why exactly are you trying to get revenge, Jeeda...?" Ai Fa calmly asked.

With that, the fires burning in the boy's eyes grew even more intense.

"Don't go asking such stupid questions. To restore my father Goram's honor, after he had those crimes thrust on him and was executed, of course."

"I see. We people of the forest's edge are also in the process of restoring our honor that was sullied by our former leading clan."

Jeeda was silent.

"Asuta already said as much yesterday, but even if the Suun clan was the one to actually carry out those crimes, there might still have been someone behind them pulling the strings. Right now, we're fighting to determine the truth of that matter."

Still the boy didn't say a word.

"To you, we may be nothing but enemies you wish to take revenge upon. But won't you join together with us to bring the truth to light? That is the path forward that we wish for."

Without offering any reply, Jeeda pulled his hood back up. And when he did, I spied his left hand just a bit from under his cloak, as well as the fact that it had a grey cloth wrapped around it.

"I'll get my revenge in my own way..." Jeeda uttered in a voice that made it

hard to tell what he was feeling. “If you don’t like that, then take me down here and now. That should be easy enough with the strength you possess, especially since I’m injured.”

“I have no reason to cut you down. In fact, I feel glad that I did not do so three days back.”

Silently, Jeeda turned away.

Hurriedly, I called out at his back, “Please wait. Didn’t you hear anything from your mother? The truth is, some of our allies are actually searching for her now. With her testimony, they may be able to expose our enemy’s crimes, so—”

“My mother doesn’t accept the idea of me living for revenge. It’s been a year now since I cut ties with her... That woman was defanged when my father died.”

“A year... So you’ve been apart for that long?”

“I’ve been living on Mount Masara. I come down to town to sell the barobaro birds I catch... And that’s how I learned about you, Asuta,” Jeeda stated in a monotone voice, his back still to us. “That the people of the forest’s edge were doing business in the Genos post town... and that their crimes had been forgiven while the other criminals had been judged... The merchants were all saying stuff like that. I got so mad I couldn’t even think straight and ended up coming here to Genos...”

“I see. But I don’t think the people of the forest’s edge have truly been forgiven just yet. That’s why we’ve been giving our all trying to form proper bonds with the townsfolk.”

Jeeda didn’t say anything in response.

And before long, his small back started to vanish into the darkness.

I stepped forward without thinking, only for a voice to quietly say, “Don’t follow.”

With that, Jeeda disappeared.

“Hey, Ai Fa... Is it really alright to just let him leave without a fight?”

“There was no helping it. That boy is searching for a path forward he can

believe in. And that's not a task anyone else can interfere in," Ai Fa replied, her gaze firmly fixed on the direction where Jeeda had vanished. "Besides, he possesses the same spirit that we do. I believe that he won't be standing in our way as an enemy again in the future. So with that in mind, we just have to keep waiting for our paths to someday naturally overlap..."

"I see. You may be right, there."

At the very least, I could definitely sense that it would be incredibly foolish to try to forcefully restrain the young hunter.

And besides, if Ai Fa trusted in Jeeda, then I would too.

At last, our enemy was starting to vaguely come into view. And no matter what sort of plot Cyclaeus might try to throw our way, we would never yield.

If he really was planning to forcefully rewind the history of the forest's edge, and if those actions were acknowledged and accepted... It would be like trying to deny my entire existence since coming to this world.

Unfortunately, I had no way of proving that my actions were the correct ones. And that was precisely why I had to lay everything on the line and stand against Cyclaeus.

Starting with Ai Fa, a great many people had accepted me by this point... and I didn't want to let that all be in vain.

"It's getting late. Let's go to sleep, Asuta."

"Right."

With that, we bid farewell to the windy night air of the forest's edge, and once more tried to rest up for tomorrow.

Intermezzo: The Youngest Son of the Ruu and his Family

“Oh yeah, I went to see Darmu a little while ago,” Ludo Ruu casually threw out there in the middle of dinner, causing quite a stir.

Most of the shock was coming from his sisters. He had already reported the matter to his father and older brother, while his mom and grandmothers weren’t the sort to be easily flustered.

“But why? Isn’t the northern settlement where Darmu’s staying really far away?”

“Yeah! Besides, it’s no fair that only you get to go!”

His little sisters Rimee and Lala Ruu were being especially noisy. Though his older sisters Vina and Reina Ruu had their eyes open wide in surprise, they both patiently waited for Ludo Ruu to continue talking.

“It’s not unfair. Our old man just asked me to go deliver a message there. Anyway, Darmu was the same as always.”

“That’s not enough info! Is he doing alright?”

“People from town sneaked into the northern settlement, right? Darmu wasn’t in danger, was he?”

“Geez, you two are noisy. Do you seriously think anyone from town could actually do anything to him?” Ludo Ruu replied while tossing a chunk of giba sparerib meat coated in red tarapa sauce into his mouth. “Besides, Darmu was inside the house watching the criminals, so he didn’t even see anyone. Though apparently someone definitely did approach nearby.”

“It’s no trivial matter, having townsfolk sneak into the forest’s edge. Honestly, it’s quite unsettling,” Mia Lea Ruu calmly chimed in, as if rebuking her noisy daughters. Meanwhile, the older Tito Min and Jiba Ruu just quietly watched over the exchange.

It was then that Jiza Ruu's wife Sati Lea Ruu returned and asked with a smile, "Oh, my. Is something the matter?"

Her baby Kota Ruu had been crying for milk, and so she had moved to another room. But now, the child was once more sleeping in a woven basket, even letting out a content burble.

"Ludo said he went to see Darmu. It's no fair that he's the only one!" Lala Ruu protested.

"My," Sati Lea Ruu said with another smile. "Totos certainly are convenient at times like this. So, how was Darmu?"

"He pretty much just had the same sour look on his face as always. Ah, but there was one thing that seemed a bit different..."

"What the heck?! You just said he was the same as always!"

"What was different about Darmu?"

His little sisters instantly pressured him, but Ludo Ruu was left at a bit of a loss. After all, it wasn't exactly an easy change to explain.

His older brother Darmu Ruu had seemed like he was seriously brooding about something. However, it didn't seem like a bad change, but more that he was desperately searching for some sort of answer.

Darmu's had a lot happen with him lately, after all, Ludo Ruu thought to himself. But he felt like it'd be a pain to explain that to his sisters, so he looked towards Sati Lea Ruu instead.

"At any rate, Darmu seemed to be doing well. But he did complain that the food was gross, though."

"Oh, Darmu said something like that?" Tito Min Ruu interjected.

"Yeah," Ludo Ruu answered with a nod. "That's because they don't bloodlet their giba meat in the north, so of course it's bad. And they don't have any skilled chefs like Reina around, either."

"I don't think any chef could make bloody meat like that taste good, no matter how skilled. You can tell at least that much, can't you, Ludo?" Reina Ruu replied with a smile seemingly meant to hide her embarrassment. Well, even if

that was the reason for her grin, she really did look happy too. For a while now, she seemed to be unusually fired up about manning the stove.

Darmu's not the only one who's changed, Ludo thought, and then he turned to face his other brother, who had remained silent this whole time.

"Hey Jiza, do you still think of Asuta as nothing but a nuisance?"

As he sipped the soup broth, the eldest Ruu son stared back at his little brother.

He kept his eyes narrowed, such that it was impossible to tell what he was thinking.

Ludo Ruu feared that he may have upset his brother, and so he added, "It was a long while back, but you once said Asuta should live in town, didn't you? Do you still feel the same way?"

"Huh? Jiza said something like that?" Lala Ruu questioned, turning towards Jiza Ruu in shock. Rimee Ruu's eyes had also gone wide with surprise.

However, Jiza Ruu just kept on silently eating.

"I think it was on the morning of Gazraan Rutim's wedding. A whole lot has happened since then, so do you still think that, Jiza?"

Still no response.

"Back then Asuta was just darting about the settlement, but now he does business in the post town and even helped crush the Suun back at the clan head meeting. He's really been working hard, right? And it seems like over half the other clans approve of the Fa's actions by this point, but what do you think?"

"The ones who approve of the Fa's actions are all heads of small clans... The Zaza continue to stand in opposition, while the Sauti remain neutral," Jiza finally stated.

However, those words weren't enough to satisfy Ludo Ruu.

"I don't really care what other houses think. How do you personally feel, Jiza? Do you still not care for Asuta and Ai Fa?"

Again, nothing.

“Besides, as of right now the Ruu acknowledge the Fa clan’s actions. We’re helping out with their business in the post town, and even put Asuta in charge of cooking for the festival of the hunt.”

With that, Donda Ruu, who had been chugging down fruit wine, let out an annoyed, “That’s enough, Ludo.”

“Hey, this is an important thing to discuss, isn’t it? You’re one of the leading clan heads now, and Jiza’s your heir. If someone in your position and your successor feel and think differently, it could cause trouble down the line, yeah?”

“But Jiza needs time to think, too,” Mia Lea Ruu now chimed in. “Can’t you just leave the troubling stuff to him and our clan head, and focus on carrying out your own work?”

“This is an issue for the whole Ruu clan, though, isn’t it? Asuta and Ai Fa are important to me too, so that’s even more reason I can’t just leave things be.”

At this point, the elder Jiba Ruu finally joined the discussion.

“I’m certainly glad to hear you say so, Ludo... But since we’re talking about such important people and matters, doesn’t that make Mia Lea’s comment about needing to take the proper amount of time even more true...?”

“Maybe. But you care a lot about them too, don’t you, Granny Jiba?”

“Of course I do... Ai Fa has been my friend for quite some time, and I owe Asuta greatly for once again reminding me of the joys of being alive... But Donda and Jiza need to consider the future of the whole of the forest’s edge... Asuta and Ai Fa are struggling hard to carry out a great task, but it will take quite some time to say for certain whether or not the path they’ve chosen is the right one...”

Ludo Ruu just didn’t get it.

But still, Jiba Ruu cared about Asuta and Ai Fa just as much as he did, if not more. So with her rebuking him, he figured he really might have been acting rashly.

Tch. No matter how I look at it they’re working hard for the sake of our people, so why not just say they’re doing the right thing already?

Ludo Ruu went ahead and gulped down those frustrated words along with his soup that had been flavored with tau oil.

After that, the family finished their dinner without mentioning the Fa clan's actions again.

◇

A while after that, Rimee and Lala Ruu visited Ludo Ruu as he was lying alone in his room.

"What is it? Is something the matter?"

"No, we just wanted to hear more about Darmu," Lala Ruu answered with an angry look, while Rimee Ruu's eyes were sparkling with expectation.

Darmu Ruu had been staying at the Suun settlement since the clan head meeting, and then he finally returned for the festival of the hunt, only to turn around and end up heading even further north to help keep watch. He had only been home for a few of the past 20 days, which had left his sisters seriously missing him.

Hunters of the forest's edge spent most of their day out in the forest to begin with. And so being in a period of rest meant a happy chance to spend time with your family... and yet Darmu Ruu was away from home even so. Perhaps it was no surprise that his youngest sisters would end up feeling lonely as a result.

"This room sure does feel big when Darmu's not around, huh?" Rimee Ruu said as she plopped down next to her brother and looked around. Ever since getting married, Jiza Ruu had moved out of this room, leaving Ludo Ruu as the only one using it at the moment.

"So, what's up with Darmu? Did something happen at the northern settlement?"

"I don't know. But it didn't seem like it had anything to do with those folks from the north. He was just thinking about something."

"But the Zaza and Dom and Jeen all used to serve under the Suun clan, didn't they? And I heard Dad got along with them real poorly even before he became the clan head."

Apparently that was what had his younger sisters most concerned.

Plus, the Zaza clan head Gulaf Zaza had visited the Ruu house quite a bit lately. Thanks to that, the girls had seen firsthand that man with beastly, blazing eyes who wore a giba pelt with the head still attached. And the ferocious intensity he gave off would come across to anyone, not just hunters.

“Darmu headed north because the Zaza came and asked for help, right? So why would they go picking a fight with him?”

“Yeah, but...”

“Besides, we were only enemies with the northern clans when they did anything and everything the Suun told them. But now that they’ve realized the Suun clan had been deceiving them all that time, there shouldn’t be any reason for us to quarrel. Otherwise, our old man never would have included them among the leading clan heads,” Ludo Ruu answered while stifling a yawn. “So whatever Darmu’s worrying about is something different. But with all the stuff that’s happened with the Fa clan, worrying a bit makes sense, right?”

“Ah, yeah... And Darmu really doesn’t seem to get along well with the Fa clan...” Lala Ruu listlessly replied while cradling her knees.

Donda Ruu had once asked to have Ai Fa marry Darmu Ruu. However, Ai Fa turned down that offer and chose to live as a hunter. And then after that she brought Asuta to the Ruu clan and all sorts of stuff happened, until finally Darmu Ruu lost to her at the festival of the hunt in a contest of strength.

In such contests, while winning brought pride, there was supposed to be no shame in losing... but he certainly may have found it humiliating to lose to someone he once tried to take as a bride. Plus Darmu Ruu had insisted a woman couldn’t be a hunter up till that point, so he certainly had to feel some shame from that loss.

“Darmu seemed like he was acting a bit strange both at the festival of the hunt and when he was heading out for the northern settlement. Does he, you know... still want to take Ai Fa as his bride...?” Lala Ruu questioned.

“I don’t know,” Ludo Ruu replied. “Well, if he does, then I’d imagine he’s feeling even less pleased with the way things are at the Fa clan. I mean, I can’t

imagine Ai Fa ever marrying anyone but Asuta.”

“Yeah, me neither... But still, Ai Fa’s so pretty, and I really love her too. I think a wife who would quietly cuddle up with him would be better for Darmu, though!”

“I told you, I don’t know anything about all that. And it’s down to the clan head and the person himself when it comes to choosing a partner.”

“That’s true, but still... Tch, it’d be better if he’d look somewhere closer instead...” Lala Ruu grumbled.

Ludo Ruu got what his sister was saying, but he just didn’t feel it was his place to meddle.

“Darmu’s not a kid anymore, and he’ll find the path forward that’s best for him without needing us to worry about it. Anyway, I wanna get to sleep already...”

“Yeah, I’m sorta sleepy too,” Rimee Ruu said with a cute little yawn, clinging to Ludo Ruu’s chest. “Hey Ludo! Can I sleep with you? We haven’t for a while.”

“Huh? Why?”

“I mean, Darmu’s not around, so I’m lonely...”

“What, so I’m his replacement?” Ludo Ruu retorted, sticking out his tongue and turning away.

“Come on, why not?!” Rimee Ruu shot back, swaying back and forth. “I’m still just eight, so why can’t I sleep together with men from my family? And in two more years, we won’t be able to anymore.”

“Two years is a good while off, still... But well, I guess I don’t really care where you sleep.”

Rimee Ruu gave an excited, “Hooray!” upon hearing that, while Lala Ruu gave an annoyed, “Hey! If you do that, then I’m going to be left all alone! And I’m 13, so I can’t exactly go sleeping with my brother, right?”

“Then why not sleep with Vina and Reina? The three of you could sleep together.”

With that, Lala Ruu exited the room with an angry “Geez!”

“Hehehe,” Rimee Ruu giggled, then laid down next to Ludo Ruu. “Hey Ludo, you sleep without anything on top of you?”

“Yeah. I’m not especially cold or anything, after all.”

“Oh yeah? But if we snuggle together it’ll be all warm!” Rimee Ruu cheerfully exclaimed, pressing her head up against her brother’s chest. As she did so, her fluffy reddish brown hair tickled Ludo Ruu’s nose, so he gave it a light tussle with one hand.

“Hey, is Darmu really alright...?”

“Yeah. Just trust in him, okay?”

“Yup! If you say so, then I will!” Rimee Ruu replied, burying her face in Ludo Ruu’s chest and snoring peacefully away before long.

As Ludo Ruu cradled that small head and enjoyed the soft sensation of her hair, he also went ahead and closed his eyes.

◇

When Ludo Ruu awoke the following morning, Rimee Ruu was nowhere to be seen. The women had work that needed to be taken care of early, so she must have left at the break of dawn. And after giving a big stretch, Ludo Ruu also headed out for a stroll.

When he exited the house, though, he found the sun was higher in the sky than he had expected, and so he gave up on the outing and moved towards the kitchen instead. After all, there was already a nice enough smell coming from there to make his stomach grumble.

The totos Ruuruu was tied up behind the house, and as always he wore a goofy look on his face as he innocently pecked the leaves off of nearby branches. After greeting the large bird with a pat on the rear, Ludo Ruu peered into the kitchen.

Sure enough, there were women working away inside: his four sisters and Sheera Ruu from the branch houses. Recently Asuta had tasked them with doing prep work for the meals they sold in the post town.

“Ah, good morning, Ludo! You’re up late today, huh?” Rimee Ruu called out with a smile as she cooked up one small poitan after another. Meanwhile, Lala Ruu looked a bit angry again as she stood there next to her little sister.

“I see you’re burning up plenty of firewood first thing in the morning, as always. Still, didn’t Asuta only ask for three of you to take care of that...?”

“I’m done with my other work, so I’m helping out. It helps me train at manning the stove!” Rimee Ruu energetically replied, puffing up her cheeks. “Besides, I’m the only one who’s not allowed to help out in the post town! I want to get to work with everyone already, too!”

“You’ve just gotta be patient until this feud with the nobles is settled. Then I’m certain you’ll get your chance to work with us,” Reina Ruu said with a smile, trying to soothe her younger sister. She really had been looking fulfilled since it was decided she would work in the post town every other day, after Vina Ruu got injured.

On the other hand, Vina Ruu had been looking a bit depressed. In her case though, rather than having anything to do with business in the post town, it was probably her thoughts racing about that easterner who had departed from Genos. He had suddenly asked to marry her and then gave her half a year to think about it, and she was stuck ruminating on it until then.

Well, she’s been the one leading men about up till now, so maybe it’s a good thing for her to worry about that, Ludo Ruu thought, and then he gave another look around the kitchen.

It was busy enough that it was almost as if they were preparing for a banquet or something. Reina and Sheera Ruu were grilling up the meat for one giba burger after another, then tossing them into a pot. That pot had boiling tarapa sauce in it, and it was Vina Ruu’s task to keep on stirring it while occasionally sighing.

Meanwhile, the baked poitan were already piling up next to Rimee and Lala Ruu. Asuta sold 150 meals each day, so even taking on half of the work involved in preparing that much food resulted in this much commotion.

“Hey, the smell of meat grilling is making me seriously hungry. Will I get chewed out if I take one?”

“Of course you will! In fact, I’ll get mad with you myself if you try it!”

It seemed that jokes didn’t really work on Reina Ruu when it came to cooking and business. And so, Ludo Ruu slumped his shoulders and retreated.

By the time he made it back to Ruuruu, a familiar youth came into view: Sheera Ruu’s younger brother, the head of his house.

“Hey there. You’re pretty early, Shin Ruu.”

“Hey, Ludo Ruu. I thought I should clean myself while I had the chance.”

The washing place for the Ruu settlement sat behind the main house. And sure enough, Shin Ruu was holding a cloth to wipe himself down with and a change of clothes.

“In that case, I’ll join you. I’ll go get some clothes to change into, so could you wait a bit?”

“Right, got it.”

With that, Ludo Ruu passed by Shin Ruu as he headed back to the house. But as he was doing so, he suddenly stopped and stared at the boy’s face.

“The bruise on your face is showing a lot less. Does it still hurt or anything?”

“It was never an especially painful wound.”

Shin Ruu had not only been sent flying by that Jeeda boy, but he had also been kicked in the face. And the traces of that abuse still faintly remained on his slender visage.

“You’re a fine hunter who brings no shame to the Ruu name, Shin Ruu. Your opponent was just that skilled, but it’s nothing to feel ashamed over.”

The youth offered no response.

“So, you were training with Rau Lea yesterday? I know you looked seriously exhausted on the way back, but I didn’t really hear the details...”

“That training will definitely be a help. I’m truly grateful to Rau Lea, and to Ai Fa for bringing it about.”

“I see. Well, there are definitely folks who are good for you to train with and others who aren’t. So I’m glad to hear that you and Rau Lea are working out

well," Ludo Ruu said with a grin.

Shin Ruu just nodded back and said, "Yeah."

He had always been quiet to start with, but he really seemed to be fretting over having let Jeeda slip away.

Well, with something like this he's just gotta get stronger till he feels satisfied.

Shin Ruu was already one of the strongest hunters among the branch houses. And considering he was just 16, that was certainly something.

However, he couldn't measure up to any of the hunters of the main house. Even though Ludo Ruu was a year younger than him, Shin Ruu had never beaten him in a contest of strength.

That's because I'm aiming for my old man and my big brothers.

Ludo Ruu was confident that he was at least as strong as Darmu Ruu by this point. And on a good day, he might even be able to knock Jiza Ruu down into the dirt. However, he knew he couldn't put up a proper fight against Donda Ruu or Dan Rutim at all, and he had lost to Mida at the last festival of the hunt, too. Neither Ludo Ruu nor his brothers were satisfied with the present state of things, and so they were all chasing after their father's back.

Shin Ruu should make at least a bit of a fuss at how frustrated he's feeling about his lack of strength. If he did, it'd probably help make him feel better.

Still, stuff like that varied from person to person. And since it wasn't exactly easy for someone to go and change their whole personality, all Ludo Ruu could do was shoot his childhood friend a smile.

"Anyway, just wait here. I'll go get a change of clothes, so—"

"Ludo Ruu," a voice called out from behind.

Turning around, he found Sheera Ruu standing there even though she was supposed to still be in the kitchen. She jogged on over, a calm look in her eyes that resembled that of her younger brother.

"Oh, I see Shin's with you too. Um, there's something I wanted to discuss with you, Ludo Ruu..."

“Yeah? What’s up?”

“You went to the northern settlement yesterday, didn’t you...? Lala Ruu told me so.”

With that, Ludo Ruu got what was going on and answered, “Yeah,” with a nod. “If you’re asking about Darmu, he seemed to be doing fine. He was brooding about something, but he wasn’t any more listless than usual or anything.”

“Ah, I see...” Sheera Ruu murmured with a sigh of relief.

It seemed she had been worrying about Darmu Ruu in her own way, different from that of his immediate family. When he considered the relationship between Lala and Shin Ruu, Ludo Ruu couldn’t help but find that quite interesting.

Honestly, Ai Fa and Darmu seem like they’d be fighting each and every day. But someone as gentle as Sheera Ruu might suit him well.

And Sheera Ruu had sort of a different feel about her lately, too.

She used to seem all timid and lacking in self confidence. That appeared to be because she was a bit lacking in strength, and had trouble with stuff like carrying water jugs. And Ludo Ruu didn’t remember this, since he was younger, but apparently her weak body led to her being prone to illness when she was little.

The people of the forest’s edge tended to value being able-bodied above all else. That of course went for the men who acted as hunters, but the women also needed to work hard all day, and eventually be able to carry out the important task of birthing children, so that was only natural. In fact, the reason Ai Fa had proven so attractive to the men wasn’t just her appearance, but also because she was so robust and full of life.

“Still, Sheera Ruu’s looks aren’t half bad, either...”

“Huh? Wh-What is it?”

“Ah, it’s nothing. It’s just that you’re every bit as skilled at manning the stove as Reina, so I don’t think any man would be troubled in the least by a marriage

proposal from you.”

Instantly, Sheera Ruu’s face went bright red.

“W-Why are you saying something like that all of a sudden, Ludo Ruu? Did... did Asuta say something to you?”

“Hmm? What are you bringing Asuta up for?”

“Ah, no, if that wasn’t the case, then never mind.”

Ludo Ruu didn’t fully get it, but since Asuta was always working so hard in the kitchen, maybe he was good at picking up on women’s concerns and discussing stuff like that with them.

Plus, Asuta was frail and gentle like a woman, too. And yet the really strange thing about him was that he could also occasionally show a hunter’s look in his eyes and get every bit as intense as Ludo Ruu, his brothers, and even his dad.

“At any rate, Darmu was doing well. He may not exactly be able to come back home till everything’s settled with the nobles, but there’s nothing to worry about. And also... they don’t bloodlet their meat at the northern settlement, so I’m sure he’s really itching to eat your cooking.”

“B-But making food for him is a task for the main house, isn’t it?”

“You’re just as skilled as Reina, though, so I’m sure he’d enjoy something you made.”

As her face went ever redder, Sheera Ruu mumbled, “I-I’ve still got work to take care of...” and took off running.

“Hehe,” Ludo Ruu chuckled, while Shin Ruu looked more than a little dumbfounded.

“What had Sheera so flustered? And what did she even want in the first place?”

“Hmm? You don’t get it, Shin Ruu?”

“No, I haven’t a clue.”

Ludo Ruu laughed even harder and put an arm around Shin Ruu’s neck.

“You really are an interesting guy. It sure is fun having you two as relatives.”

“I suppose I’m glad to hear it, but I really don’t get what you mean.”

“Never mind that. You just stay the way you are, Shin Ruu.”

Somehow, Ludo Ruu just couldn’t help but feel like grinning.

Though everyone was being pulled this way and that by Ai Fa and Asuta, they were still finding their own ways forward. It was still vague, but that was the sense he got.

Sheera Ruu had changed thanks to receiving cooking lessons from Asuta. And Shin Ruu getting turned down when he asked Ai Fa to teach him sacrificial hunting techniques seemed like it had some sort of impact on the boy, too. Ai Fa was only 17, and a woman on top of that, but it was hard to imagine anyone criticizing the job she was doing as clan head or as a hunter. There was no way that Shin Ruu didn’t sense anything from her, either.

And Ludo Ruu’s family in the main house had formed even deeper bonds with the Fa. From what he heard, the Fa were also in the process of forming new connections with their neighboring clans. Since they had struggled against the Suun and come out on top, Ai Fa and Asuta were now finding a new place for themselves here at the forest’s edge.

I’m sure Jiza and Darmu and even those guys from the Zaza clan will have to acknowledge Asuta and Ai Fa eventually. I mean, they’re just so intriguing that how could you not?

Ludo Ruu took a shine to them the very first night that he ate Asuta’s cooking. That was what led to him handing over a tusk as a blessing and recommending that Asuta marry one of his older sisters. And so, he certainly felt glad to see the two of them getting more and more accepted by everyone at the forest’s edge.

“We’ve got to do a good job protecting them again today! No matter who’s planning what, we’ll keep any danger away from Asuta and Ai Fa, right?”

“Of course. I’ll never let myself suffer such shame again,” Shin Ruu earnestly replied, Ludo Ruu’s arm still around his neck. “By the way, I’d like to get to bathing soon...”

“Ah, right! Hold on just a bit!”

After giving Shin Ruu a little poke in the head, Ludo Ruu took off running towards the house.

And in his heart, he felt joy at being born to the Ruu clan, and at being able to call Asuta and Ai Fa friends... As well as a great pride at being a hunter of the forest’s edge.

Afterword

You have my deepest thanks for picking up this book, the tenth volume of *Cooking with Wild Game*.

With this, the series has finally built up to ten whole volumes. I really am honored to have been able to reach double digits. And it was all thanks to those of you who have stuck with me this far. It may sound cliche, but I really do thank you from the bottom of my heart.

As for the cover of this milestone volume, it ended up being adorned with the men of the Ruu clan. As the author, I was very much moved by seeing the wild father Donda Ruu get selected for the front of the book.

Fitting with that cover, I also went ahead and focused the bonus intermezzo on the Ruu clan too. It's from the point of view of the mischievous youngest son of the main house, Ludo Ruu, who is drawn quite adorably on the back cover. I certainly hope that you enjoy it.

This is a bit of a diversion, but it's been officially announced that Kadokawa Books will be publishing my work *Striking Girl*! This agreement really has gone far beyond what I ever expected, which I'm very much grateful for.

That work is set in modern Japan, and if I had to sum it up briefly I'd say it's focused on girls who devote themselves to martial arts. It's certainly different from Cooking with Wild Game, but it's also something that I very much wanted to write, so I hope that you'll enjoy it just as much.

Well then, since I only have two pages for this afterword, I've really needed to keep things brief.

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!

February 2017,

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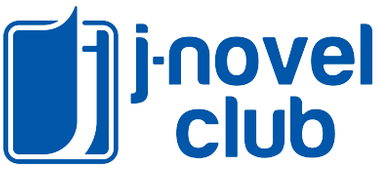
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Cooking with Wild Game: Volume 10

by EDA

Translated by Matthew Warner Edited by Adam Fogle

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