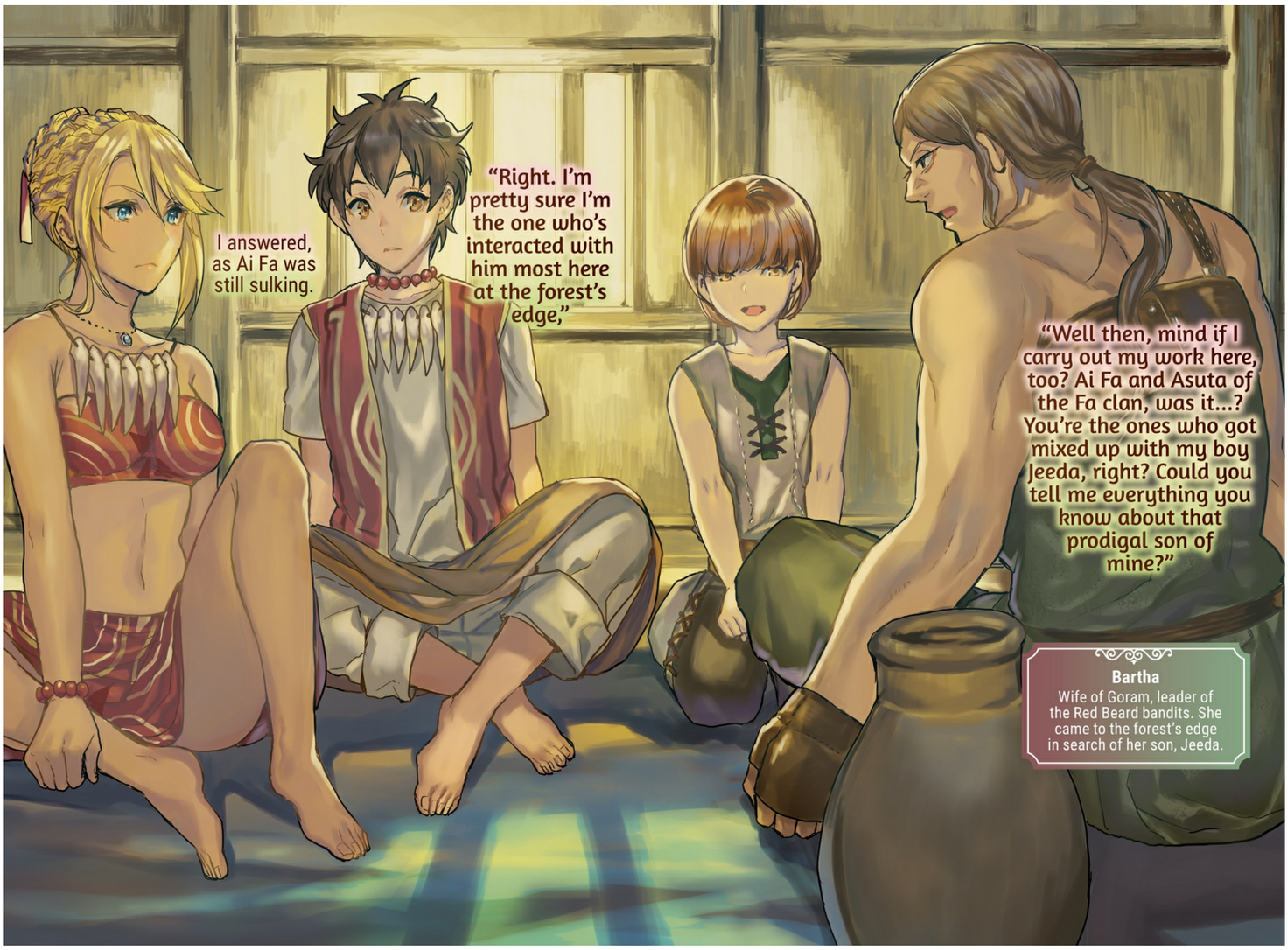
COOKING WITH WILD GAME

VOLUME 12

Author:
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COOKING WITH WILD GAME
VOLUME 12
"Revolution...? That certainly escalated quickly."


I answered, as Ai Fa was still sulking.
"Right. I'm pretty sure I'm the one who's interacted with him most here at the forest's edge,"
"Well then, mind if I carry out my work here, too? Ai Fa and Asuta of the Fa clan, was it...? You're the ones who got mixed up with my boy Jeeda, right? Could you tell me everything you know about that prodigal son of mine?"
Bartha
Wife of Goram, leader of the Red Beard bandits. She came to the forest's edge in search of her son, Jeeda.


"Asuta is a fellow person of the forest's edge! He thinks so himself, and we don't have any issue with it, so what business do you have butting in?!"
"Does that Cyclaeus noble have no shame in his wretched soul?"

MENU

Chapter 1: The Dearly Missed Post Town

Chapter 2: Reopening

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Chapter 1: The Dearly Missed Post Town

1

It was the tenth of the white month, the day after Ai Fa and everyone had managed to free me from the Turan manor in the castle town.

Having spent the night at the Ruu settlement, Ai Fa and I then got the leading clan head Donda Ruu's permission and headed out for the post town. For bodyguards we were accompanied by a group of five hunters, including the very familiar faces of Ludo and Shin Ruu.

Naturally we hadn't gotten permission yet to resume business, but instead we were to check out the state of the post town to prepare for doing so, as well as check in with our various acquaintances around town.

Since Reina Ruu and the rest had kept up with the stalls and inns, it would be easy enough for me to just join back in. However, Donda Ruu had determined it would be best not to act carelessly until they saw how Cyclaeus would explain himself to the leading clan heads today, once the sun hit its peak.



Cyclaeus had acted all modest yesterday, but it was hard to say just how exactly he would behave now that a new day had dawned. Had he really been unaware of the whole incident? Would Lefreya and her underlings be properly judged? With only five days left until the meeting that would determine how the Suun clan would be dealt with, the relationship between Cyclaeus and the people of the forest's edge had grown more strained than ever before.

"Now that I think about it, Gulaf Zaza must be awfully mad at all this trouble I stirred up, huh?" I asked as we were walking down the path.

With a rather intense look my way, Ai Fa replied, "Indeed," with a nod. "He really came after Donda Ruu and myself, saying we invited this by going and doing business in the post town of all things. But more than that, he seemed furious that you were kidnapped by those fiends."

"Huh? You don't mean he was worried about me, do you...?"

"Yes. Though you were born in another nation entirely, the fact that you were welcomed as one of our comrades means you must be treated as a person of the forest's edge. And anyone who points a blade at one of our number can never be forgiven... Blood is to be met with blood, and blades with blades."

"I see..."

"Donda Ruu was also enraged in his own way, and refused to budge from his firm assertion that Cyclaeus was behind this incident. If it weren't for Gazraan Rutim and Dari Sauti insisting we mustn't take up arms without any proof, all the hunters of the forest's edge could have ended up storming the castle gates."

There were roughly five hundred people of the forest's edge in total. Assuming half of them were men, and subtracting out children under the age of thirteen... there still had to be around two hundred hunters in total.

I didn't know how many soldiers there were in Genos, but regardless I couldn't imagine them managing to keep their cool when faced with that many hunters. If things went badly, it could even end up as a literal battle for survival between Genos and the forest's edge. Just imagining that was enough to send a chill running down my spine.

“Seriously, this time around we had to build up some real resolve, too. Plus, the whole thing was caused by us failing to protect you in the first place...” Ludo Ruu chimed in, the same sort of look in his eyes that Ai Fa had. “The Ruu clan had four whole hunters present, but just two thugs got the better of us. It was so shameful we were just about ready to smash our own heads open over it.”

“I seriously am sorry. I wasn’t anywhere near cautious enough, either.”

“That’s not true at all. It was our job to protect you, Asuta. Geez, my old man yelled at me, and Ai Fa was crying, and—”

“Ludo Ruu...” Ai Fa growled, cutting the youth off.

“Ah, no, I didn’t mean it like that. I’m not talking about some childish sobbing, y’know. She had a scary look in her eyes like my old man, and the tears just—”

“Ludo Ruu!”

“Alright, I get it. Anyway, we won’t go screwing up again. We’ll work like crazy and make sure we carry out our task.”

I was just about drowning in guilt as I listened to Ludo Ruu. From last night all the way up until now, no one from the forest’s edge had directed so much as a single word of blame my way.

Apparently, that was because everyone knew that a pathetic chef like me could never protect himself. So despite all the self-condemnation Ludo and Shin Ruu were awash in, I was getting a complete pass. And I found that incredibly painful to bear.

“Oh, we finally made it,” Ludo Ruu called out.

I looked up, and found we were already in the shadows of the town’s buildings.

The wagon was loaned out to Reina Ruu’s group, and we wouldn’t use Gilulu for a group this size, and so we had just been walking the path.

By this point, the sun had already nearly hit its peak. In other words, Cyclaeus and the leading clan heads would be starting their meeting at any moment. That was just how long it took us to swing by the Fa house and take care of the bare minimum chores we had to do after staying overnight at the Ruu

settlement.

“Sorry you’ve had to take multiple days in a row off from hunting, Ai Fa...” I whispered.

“Don’t say that,” Ai Fa replied with a bitter look. “I did it all of my own volition. You should feel no responsibility in the matter.”

“Oh, that’s right. Since it’s only the two of you in your house, hunting just one giba in five days would be enough work to keep you going just fine. And since Ai Fa’s been going and catching more than that left and right for a while now, nobody could possibly blame her for taking a bit of a break,” Ludo Ruu remarked.

With a gloomy look, Ai Fa replied, “Right...” with a nod. Even so, I figured Ai Fa’s pride wouldn’t accept putting her work as a hunter second even if the Ruu clan were asking for a skilled bodyguard.

By the way, in the past half month Ai Fa had kept on hunting down giba at a pace of one every two days rather than five. Including the money I had been making, the Fa clan was amassing more and more fortune that we didn’t know what to do with.

“More importantly, it’s time to finally cross over into the post town. I can’t imagine anyone here would be dumb enough to do this today of all days, but don’t let your guards down, alright?”

The young hunters of the branch houses surrounding me all nodded, piercing looks in their eyes.

As for me, well, I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t nervous. Thanks to that whole commotion surrounding me, it was possible a crucial fracture had occurred in the relationship between the people of the forest’s edge and the townsfolk, and I was about to find out firsthand.

Of course Reina Ruu and everyone had kept doing business, and from what I was told, sales remained steady, so perhaps there was no need to worry. And yet, I just couldn’t feel all that optimistic about matters.

“Alright, let’s get going,” Ludo Ruu commanded, and we slipped past the buildings and set foot on the stone highway.

The sun was already high in the sky, and so the street was packed with people.

As we walked further along, a southerner hurrying the other way went, “Huh?” and turned to face us. “Hey, if it isn’t the giba seller kid!”

I somehow recognized the man, so he must have come by the stalls numerous times. Since southerners were generally around the same stature and always had those disheveled dark brown mustaches, though, a lot of them tended to blend together in my mind.

“You really did make it back! I had heard rumors, but still! So you were kidnapped by some noble girl and trapped in the castle town?”

“Huh? People have already spread that around the post town?”

As I stood there shocked, Ai Fa glared at me out of the corner of her eye.

“I already told you that everyone tied to you was informed of last night’s happenings in advance, did I not? We only asked them to hold their tongues until sunset, and to actually spread the information after that point... By doing so, even if I was also captured after setting foot in the castle town, it would be possible to make further moves. Or at least, that was how Gazraan Rutim’s plan went.”

So in that case, the fact that Cyclaeus’s daughter Lefreya had her underlings Mussel and Sanjura kidnap me was already widely known throughout the post town?

“Of course, if it turned out that Jeeda boy was lying it would mean we had sullied Cyclaeus’s name without proof, but we had no time to worry about such niceties. After all, it had already been five days since you were kidnapped by that point...”

The southerner shot us a suspicious look as we whispered away, then adjusted the load on his shoulders and turned around.

“Well, at any rate, I’m glad things ended up alright. I’ll be looking forward to the day you’re open again for business, alright?”

“Ah, yes, thank you!”

With that, the man disappeared into the crowd.

Even after that, though, plenty of folks called out to us as we walked down the street.

Despite there being six hunters in our group including Ai Fa, around half of the passersby didn't seem concerned by that fact in the least. Did that mean the townsfolk really had built up a resistance to seeing hunters after sixty of them were coming into town for several days on end?

The easterners we passed had their faces hidden under their hoods and just gave small nods, while cheerful southerners called out stuff like, "Glad to see you got your buddy back," to Ludo and Shin Ruu, which surprised me.

On the other hand, it was true that some percentage of the crowd looked even more cautious and tried to distance themselves from us. That trend was strikingly more common among westerners in particular.

But the people of the forest's edge had been attracting more and more attention ever since the commotion with Tei Suun anyway. And while they were watching us so intently, trying to figure out just what kind of people we were, an incident like this happened.

Perhaps some of them saw a truly honorable people who did whatever it took for the sake of one of their comrades.

On the other hand, some probably saw a terrifying group that would bare their fangs and seek revenge in numbers against anyone who wronged one of them.

Honestly, neither was probably wrong.

On top of that, some must have seen the people of the forest's edge as dangerous now that it had become clear we had a strained relationship with the powerful noble Cyclaeus.

At this point, things were still far too up in the air to truly say whether or not this whole episode would turn out to be for the better or the worse in the end.

In terms of how it feels, it seems like the friendly folks have grown even more friendly, while the ones who already felt otherwise have gotten even more

distant.

We had decided to check out how things were doing with the stalls first, and so as that thought ran through my head, we found Dora in his usual spot.

“Hey there. So you really did stop by, huh, Asuta?” he called out with a grin.

Naturally, Tara was right there next to him, smiling away.

“Thank you again for coming out so late yesterday. And um, I’m sorry for worrying you so—”

“Don’t let that bother you! After all, you made it home safely in the end,” Dora replied with a bright smile, his easy-to-read eyes tearing up again. “You’re checking out the stalls, right? Business is already booming over that way. It seems those girls are no less skilled than you are.”

“Right. I really do think so, too.”

“Tch, you’re way too calm there! I wanted to tease you by saying they’d take over your business completely before long at this rate,” he said, once more grinning and showing the whites of his teeth.

After thanking him once again, I headed off north up the road.

Since the busiest time of day was already fast approaching, there was quite a crowd gathered around the stalls.

“Ah, Asuta!” Reina Ruu greeted me with a brilliant, shining smile as she made up giba burgers at the stall.

I went to grin back at her, only to notice someone utterly unexpected there next to her and freeze in place. The girl had a small body but a large head, dark brown hair pulled back in a way that made her look like an onion, and big, wide-open eyes. It was the former youngest daughter of the Suun main house, Tsuvai.

“Ah, Asuta of the Fa clan. So you really are back, huh? Not that you being gone was any real issue, though.”

“Ts-Tsuvai... Long time no see. So you’ve been helping out with the stalls these last few days?”

Tsuvai currently fell under the Rutim clan along with her mother, Oura. And so, it really wasn't all that strange for her to be assigned such a task... except that she was one of the people Cyclaeus was demanding we hand over. Even if Cyclaeus wouldn't recognize her, it still seemed kinda audacious to send her here.

"Hmph! No one else but me can seriously run calculations with coins, so there was no choice. So I can't see any reason for you to complain about me!" she snapped, her big eyes glaring at me in a way that made their whites stand out. "And what do you mean, 'helping out'? This is a proper job, resulting from a contract between the Ruu clan and that man from town. Make no mistake, I've got no intention of handing my pay over to the likes of you!"

"Now Tsuvai, before complaining don't you think you should polish up your skills first? You're still better with your mouth than your hands, after all," Reina Ruu chided with a giggle.

"Oh, shut up!" Tsuvai snapped back.

By the way, since Tsuvai was so short, she was standing atop a little log stand as she worked.

"Hey Asuta, you sure took your time getting here! Sheera Ruu, it's Asuta!"

"Ah, Asuta... I know I saw you just last night, but I'm still glad to once again find you doing well."

Lala and Sheera Ruu were over in the neighboring stall, hard at work.

Since they were limiting the menu to just giba burgers I thought for sure they would only be running the one stall, but it seemed I was mistaken.

"You see, when the giba burgers sell out it takes time to make a new batch, right? So when either stall is running low we consolidate everything in one pot and make up some more while those are selling," Reina Ruu explained with a smile.

She had been grinning away for quite a while now, actually.

"That certainly sounds efficient. Umm, and if I recall correctly, you've been preparing a hundred giba burgers each day, right?"

“Yes. And we’ve been selling out a bit after the sun has hit its peak. It would take a while to prepare more than that, and we were also helping to search for you, so that felt like the right amount to go with.”

“I see, thanks. I really hadn’t ever imagined all of you would keep on doing business without me...”

“That was because Sheera Ruu and I thought it was the proper thing to do. It must have been the guidance of the forest that led to us practicing hard enough to be able to prepare the food as needed,” Reina Ruu said with a really proud grin.

It was certainly true that it was a job that only they could handle. And as a result, they also displayed their own strength to the townsfolk.

“So, are you going to begin working again starting tomorrow, Asuta? We’ve had quite a few customers from the south craving that myamuu dish, after all.”

“Hmm, that’ll depend on the results of today’s meeting. If Cyclaeus goes back on his words from yesterday, it could end up as another serious mess,” I replied just as another group from the forest’s edge approached from the south.

It was Li Sudra, who was coming in to relieve them when the sun hit its peak. Since Reina Ruu and the others were continuing on with not just the stalls but also the inns, her help had been absolutely essential.

And additionally, Li Sudra was surrounded by six hunters. That meant it was an even bigger crowd than back when Zattsu and Tei Suun whipped the post town into a panic.

“Ah, so you came too, Asuta? I’m glad to see you doing alright,” the Sudra clan head’s wife said with a refreshing smile.

I had already seen her today, when we stopped by the Fa house in the morning. The other clans had heard of my return to the forest’s edge, and nearby ones including the Sudra had come to show their wholehearted thankfulness for the fact that I was okay.

“Well then, we’ll be leaving things to you while we’re away, Li Sudra. You’re heading to the inns after this too, aren’t you, Asuta? In that case, why not come with us?” Reina Ruu asked with a smile. Ultimately, it was her and Lala Ruu

embarking for the inns.

With that, the six men already on guard duty came out of the thicket. We had brought six guards, there were six protecting the stalls, and another six would be accompanying Reina and Lala Ruu to the inns. In other words, we had gathered eighteen guards together in total.

Up until now, young Ruu and Rutim hunters were selected for the job so as not to frighten the people of the post town, but that didn't exactly work out when we needed numbers like these. While my bodyguards were made up of youths from the Ruu branch houses, the other twelve were a mixed group of various ages from the Rutim, the Lea, and other clans like them.

"There were even more hunters in town up through yesterday. So there's no point in fixating on what we look like to them anymore. Besides... We know for sure now that they may pick a fight with us head on. In that case, we can't exactly go holding back," Ludo Ruu had stated.

As a result, we ended up heading out for The Sledgehammer in a huge group of fifteen... which led to something of a slight issue. Which is to say, a group of guards came running over from the other side of the street and stopped in front of us.

"Wh-What is all this commotion about? Your missing comrade is back in your care now, so there shouldn't be any further need for you people of the forest's edge to come to town en masse."

Standing at the head of the group was the little guard captain who had once questioned us in front of Dora's shop. He was only accompanied by a mere five guards, so perhaps that was why he had gone so completely and utterly pale.

"Oh, it's you. Thanks for your help up these last few days. Of course, nobles were behind it in the end so your efforts were for nothing, but you've still got my gratitude for all the work you did for Asuta," Ludo Ruu replied as the group representative, being the only man of the main Ruu house in the group.

"W-We're not here for idle chatter like that! We're asking why you're strolling through the post town in such a large group?! Upsetting public order is a legitimate crime, you know."

“Hmm? We’re just here to protect our weak and defenseless chefs. We simply happen to have two groups accompanying each other right now, but normally each group would have six guards. Since we now know four isn’t enough, there’s not really any helping that, right?”

“B-But...”

“In that case, how about we split here into groups of seven and eight? We wouldn’t have any issues doing that.”

The guard captain ended up just standing there, looking like he was at a loss.

With that, a familiar young guard stepped forwards.

“People of the forest’s edge, it’s true that we brushed aside your insistence that the culprit was a noble from the castle town, and forbid you from approaching the gates. However... We most certainly never intended to provide cover for criminals.”

“Yeah, I know all that. I just thanked you for your efforts, didn’t I? Besides, you aren’t even permitted to set foot in the castle town to begin with, right? So we’ve got no complaints.”

Even though Ludo Ruu’s tone most certainly wasn’t sarcastic, the young guard still bit his lip in frustration. Right before I was kidnapped, he had loudly proclaimed how just and broad-minded the nobles in the castle town were.

And the culprit behind this whole incident was Lefreya, the niece of their big boss, the militia commander Ciluel. His pride must have taken a beating, as he had been asserting how the nobles were in the right, with Ciluel as the foremost example.

“At any rate, we’ve got no intention of stirring people up. If this group is too unsettling, we’ll go ahead and split into two, so cut us a break for today, alright?”

That put an end to the questioning.

We let Reina Ruu’s group go first, and then once there were around ten meters or so between us, we started moving again.

“So even if they fall under the militia, it seems like Cyclaeus’s bad influence

doesn’t reach all the way to the guys on the ground level, huh...?” I whispered when we were sufficiently far enough away from the guards.

“I don’t know about that,” Ludo Ruu said with a shrug of his shoulders. “This time around the culprit was a mystery, so they just kept carrying on with their work as usual. Otherwise, don’t you figure they’d act in whatever way’s most convenient for the nobles?”

“You think so? That young guard for example didn’t seem like he’d be able to stand obeying unreasonable orders.”

“Even so, if the one giving commands to the group has a wicked heart, those under him will also be led astray,” Ai Fa quietly interjected. “Or have you forgotten? When that former second son of the Suun quarreled with us in the post town, the guards only paid any heed to his words. If they are ordered to do something, then they are not permitted to disobey.”

It really might have been just as she said.

On top of that, that young guard seemed to trust Ciluel, while we were questioning whether or not he was one of Cyclaeus’s co-conspirators.

As I held back a sigh, I brought up the other matter that was bugging me.

“By the way, has the number of guards patrolling town decreased compared to before? Up until I was abducted, there seemed to be a lot more of them about thanks to that whole commotion with the bandits.”

“Ah, they formed a special unit to wipe out those bandits, so they told us many times over the previous days that they could not spare too many people to assist in our search for you. I haven’t told you before, but plantations were attacked again by bandits dressed as people of the forest’s edge every other day after you were kidnapped.”

“Then did they decide it was finally time to dispatch soldiers to take the bandits down outside of Genos itself, too?”

“I haven’t heard such details, but that seems likely,” Ai Fa replied, her expression unsurprisingly intense.

Kamyua Yoshu had taken hunters from the Ruu branch houses and left Genos,

searching for the mysterious wife of the Red Beard leader Goram. And they still had yet to return.

Was Cyclaeus trying to pin these crimes on the three hunters? That was ultimately still just one possibility, but I couldn't help but feel like the situation was starting to grow seriously tense.

"Well, guess there's no point in worrying about those folks outside of town. We're talking about Kamyua and three Ruu clan hunters, so they should be able to manage somehow no matter what plots they face."

By that point in the conversation, we had reached The Sledgehammer.

After meeting up with Reina Ruu's group in front of the inn, we stepped inside together. Ai Fa and Shin Ruu plus two hunters from Reina Ruu's side joined us as guards, while the rest kept watch over the entrances.

"Ah, Asuta... And fellows of the Ruu clan as well, welcome," Nail greeted us from the reception desk, standing up straight.

He somehow managed to keep a flat expression, but the turbulent emotions in his eyes were not so well contained.

"I'm truly glad to be able to greet you once more, after something awful like that happened."

"Don't worry about it. I'm the one who brought that disaster to you."

"No, I am at fault for failing to see that the customers staying at my inn were such villains. If I had just been more careful, I could have prevented that whole incident."

"No, but..."

"Asuta. Would it be possible to continue fostering our bond even still?" Nail asked, his eyes now looking desperate.

"That's... I mean, I came out here to check whether or not you were done with me, you know."

"No, of course not. I cannot see any reason that I would reject you."

I couldn't help but think, *Really?*

I mean, his very life was put in danger, so I actually couldn't see any reason for him to be so fixated on me...

"Besides, I have many eastern customers here who think favorably of you and the people of the forest's edge. They feel angry at the outrageous actions of the nobles, and it certainly wouldn't do to have them avoid staying here. I most definitely do not want to lose the bond I've formed with the people of the forest's edge like this," Nail said, intertwining his fingers in front of his chest. "And the cooking made by Reina Ruu has been quite favorably received, but I have no end of customers requesting dishes made by you, Asuta. So I ask that you please continue working with me as you have up until now."

"Is it really alright? It was Cyclaeus's daughter behind what happened this time, but things have grown pretty complicated between the people of the forest's edge and the noble himself, you know."

"That is no issue. In fact, now that that fact has become known publicly, even the nobles shouldn't be able to act carelessly from here on out, correct?" Nail said, no hesitation at all in his eyes.

"Thank you," I replied with a bow. "However, the leading clan heads are scheduled to meet with Cyclaeus today, so please wait until we hear what happened there. After that, I'll have to discuss what my future plans are with them, I think."

"Understood. In that case, I will be eagerly awaiting the results."

After thanking Nail one last time, I turned to depart from The Sledgehammer. But then I remembered one more matter that caught my attention, so I went ahead and brought it up.

"By the way, Reina Ruu had been making her stew here with tau oil, right? I know that ingredient is a specialty of Jagar, but your customers from the east were fine with it?"

"Yes. My eastern customers are broad-minded, so they do not let such matters concern them. Folks from Jagar may avoid ingredients from Sym, though."

"Really? That's good to know, then."

“Chitt seeds also went well with Reina Ruu’s cooking. Adding too many ruins the taste, but finely dicing some and adding just a bit made my eastern customers quite happy.”

“Ah, I see.”

Giba soup prepared with tau oil was close to a Japanese tofu and vegetable chowder, so I could see the chili pepper-like chitt seeds pairing well with it.

“In that case, if I’m permitted to do business again, how about having me and Reina Ruu switch off who prepares the cooking each day?” I threw out there, though when I turned to face the girl herself I found her in a fluster. “Ah, sorry. I should have asked you first, Reina Ruu. Is asking you to prepare food for an inn too big of an additional burden on you and the Ruu clan?”

“No. As long as we can prepare enough personnel for the stalls, it should be no issue at all... But my cooking shouldn’t be needed anymore now that you’ve returned, right?” Reina Ruu asked, looking puzzled.

Lala Ruu was also dubiously furrowing her brow.

“I mean, I figure there’s real significance to having natural born people of the forest’s edge like you form bonds with the people of the post town rather than just a foreigner like me. Plus, this is a good chance to polish up your skills as a chef, isn’t it?”

“That’s true. I well understand what you’re saying, Asuta,” Nail chimed in with his agreement, having a great passion for cultural exchange.

After seeming to chew over my words for a bit while staring down at the floor, Reina Ruu finally said, “Understood. I’ll try discussing the matter with my father. Um, Asuta...” Reina Ruu visibly hesitated, but then she went and grabbed hold of my hand. “Thank you. I don’t know if I fully comprehend your thoughts and feelings, but... I feel very proud, now.”

I certainly didn’t think she was misunderstanding or distorting anything.

That was just how clear and bright of a smile she was wearing on her face.

I had once felt I didn’t even know how to handle Reina Ruu at all, but through cooking, our bonds had deepened, and I was now able to earnestly open up to

her.

In this way, we could keep on going, encouraging one another to further heights, right? It was with such thoughts running through my head that I ultimately left The Sledgehammer.

“Reina Ruu... She really does seem to have changed over the course of these past several days,” Ai Fa murmured as we headed toward our next destination, The Great Southern Tree. “Somehow, I can sense a great vitality from her, like a mizora flower in the process of blooming. And that strength... It seems to resemble yours in some way, Asuta.”

“Ah, Reina Ruu and I are both chefs, so I guess that makes sense,” I replied while feeling impressed by Ai Fa’s always-sharp powers of perception.

However, my clan head ended up frowning in response.

“I find it difficult to understand, the thought that other people like you exist... Though I don’t feel Reina Ruu is quite as foolish as you.”

“Hey, you didn’t need to go saying that. Anyway, you’re striving to get strong enough that you’ll be just as strong as any other hunter, right, Ai Fa? I figure that’s the same sort of way Reina Ruu feels about me.”

“You’re saying Reina Ruu wishes to defeat you...?” Ai Fa questioned, a light shining intently in her eyes.

With a strained grin, I shrugged my shoulders.

“I mean, that’s not such a bad thing, is it? You want to become a stronger hunter than even Dan Rutim or Donda Ruu, and there’s nothing wrong with feeling that way, right?”

Ai Fa didn’t respond.

“Besides, having folks like that out there pushes the one getting chased down to try even harder, too. I’m sure guys like Dan Rutim respect your overwhelming power, and are also motivated by the thought of not wanting to lose to you.”

“I see...” Ai Fa quietly whispered. “In that case I can somewhat understand, and it doesn’t seem so bad for you or Reina Ruu.”

“I’m glad, then.”

“However, I won’t tolerate you losing to Reina Ruu as a chef, you know.”

“I don’t know about that... If they keep building up their knowledge and experience, who knows how skilled Reina and Sheera Ruu could end up.”

“Stop acting so timid. I told you it won’t be tolerated, so that’s that,” Ai Fa declared, her pout returning and becoming its most pronounced.

Though we were surrounded by intimidating hunters acting as bodyguards, compared to the last few days, this afternoon stroll felt a lot more nice and peaceful. That was what I felt down to the bottom of my heart as we walked back to the chaotic main street of town.

2

Things went smoothly afterward at The Great Southern Tree, too.

I had more of a businesslike relationship with Naudis than Nail, so I was concerned he might have finally been fed up with me after all this. But fortunately, he ended up begging me far more passionately than I ever expected to keep on doing business with him.

“It’s true that my wife insisted it would be dangerous to get any closer to you people of the forest’s edge. And that picked up even more so when we learned it was the powerful Count Turan who you had such a rocky relationship with,” Naudis stated. “However! My inn’s name is on the rise for being the first place to offer your cooking. If I pull back now, I may well end up yielding that fame to The Sledgehammer!”

It seemed with his mixed blood from the south, Naudis might have felt even more competitive toward The Sledgehammer than I had imagined.

Still, even if I didn’t exactly welcome the animosity between the south and east, I felt business rivals competing fiercely with one another was only proper.

“Besides, your fame in the post town is reaching an all-time high. As a businessman, it would clearly be the wrong move to cut ties with you now.”

“Huh? What was that about my fame?”

“Naturally, I’m referring to the attention you’ve been getting for how the

famed gourmand Count Turan's daughter fell for your cooking skills. That information spread only just last night, but it's already caused quite a commotion around the inn."

"Right... But you were serving Reina Ruu's cooking here too, right? So those who've eaten both our dishes and compared should know she's no less skilled than I am, right? And the women have been selling their cooking at the stalls, too."

"Yes, yes. But my customers who have come here to Genos over the course of the last few days are still unaware of the taste of your cooking. Reina Ruu's skills may well be great, but that only further inflates their expectations as to just what your cooking must be like."

That was certainly quite a high hurdle that had been set for me. Even more so considering Reina Ruu had pulled ahead of me for a time when it came to making giba soup with tau oil.

"It's true that both of you seem quite comparable when it comes to soup dishes. However, I personally find your cubed giba meat stew the most delicious. Naturally your meat and chatchi stew also came out wonderfully too, but I couldn't stand to lose that dish."

At any rate, I was certainly glad to hear that Naudis wanted to keep doing business with me.

And after explaining to him the same conditions I had informed Nail of, I headed out for our final destination, The Kimyuus's Tail, feeling that I really couldn't afford to let my guard down. However, something awaited us there that you might say was an omen of future troubles.

"Hey, what's that about?" Ludo Ruu called out from the head of the group, being the first one to notice. And when I glanced over his shoulder up ahead, I gulped just a bit.

The Kimyuus's Tail was the inn that I was most familiar with. And next to that large building with its red roof sat a huge boxed carriage.

"A totos wagon, huh? That wasn't here when we passed by before, right?" Ludo Ruu narrowed his eyes, clearly on guard.

However, Ai Fa and I knew exactly what we were looking at.

After all, there was a showy crest right there on the side of the two-totos carriage. And just last night, Ai Fa and I had passed through the castle gates in one decorated with the same symbol.

“Hey, so you’re finally here,” a large figure called out from the shadow of the carriage.

At first Ludo Ruu reached toward his hip, but then he muttered, “Oh, it’s you, huh? I almost beat you up there, you know. What’re you doing dressed like that?”

“I’ve got all sorts of stuff happening on my end too. And I worry about my hide too, y’know.” The man standing there in a hooded leather cloak like someone from Sym with gray cloth wrapped around his mouth was none other than Zasshuma, the bodyguard. “If it got out that I helped connect the people of the forest’s edge with the house of Count Daleim, that’d definitely put me in danger. And since he’s got no intention of hiding himself, I had no choice but to make sure nobody could recognize me instead. Oh, and don’t call me by name in front of people, either.”

Zasshuma’s eyes were smiling from under his hood as he said all that.

After first thanking him for yesterday, I then went ahead and asked about the details of what was going on now.

“Lord Polarth headed out early. When we stopped by the stalls, we were told you were heading around to the inns, so we’ve been waiting here.”

“In that case, should we move locations? I don’t want to get the innkeeper wrapped up in things.”

“It’ll be fine. I mean, we’re going to be getting *everyone* in the post town involved in all this, so it shouldn’t be any more dangerous for him than anyone else. This is why I didn’t want to go relying on that guy till the Northern Whirlwind made it back...”

That was a seriously unsettling statement there.

Yet even so, Zasshuma’s eyes just kept on smiling.

“Still, the issue he wants to discuss is the thing the Northern Whirlwind was planning to do from the very start. Lord Melfried isn’t exactly flexible, so he alone isn’t going to be enough to oppose Cyclaeus. In that sense, we’re just speeding things up by a few days here. Actually, according to the plan, the Northern Whirlwind should have long since returned to Genos...”

“I’m just understanding all this less and less. Could you explain in a bit more detail?”

“Ask Lord Polarth directly instead. We’ll just be putting in double the effort for no real reason, otherwise.”

Having no other choice, we went ahead into The Kimyuus’s Tail.

And the first person we found awaiting us was Milano Mas, wearing a sour look.

“Ah, Milano Mas, umm...”

“So you’re finally here, eh? You’ve got a noble waiting for you in the dining hall... Ah, guess I shouldn’t run my mouth though, since that noble wants to rent out that hall till the second hour for three white coins,” the inn owner stated with a displeased look. “Can’t stand nobles myself, but this is just business. I’m only renting out the dining hall though, so get moving already.”

“Right, sorry about this.”

I owed Polarth my life, plus he had overturned my expectations when it came to nobles in a good way. But I still really didn’t know a lot about him, and I wasn’t fond of heavy handed methods like this.

At any rate, though, Ai Fa and Shin Ruu accompanied me in, while the remaining four stayed on guard outside.

Inside the dining hall, a wall had been set up to isolate a section further in. There was a soldier stationed at the barrier, and once we passed by him to go inside, we found a familiar plump face awaiting us at the farthest seat.

“Greetings! You look to be doing well, Sir Asuta, Lady Ai Fa. As for myself, I had grown rather tired of waiting.”

Polarth was seated at a table for six, waving his short yet thick arm. He had his

dark brown hair neatly combed down; bright, light brown eyes; and a milky-colored long robe around his plump figure, making him look just as he had yesterday.

And behind him stood an additional two soldiers. They were even better outfitted than the guards about town, so they must have fallen directly under the Daleim house.

“Now then, make yourselves at ease. Shall I have some fruit wine or the like prepared for you?”

“No, you don’t have to do that for us. Um... Did you have some sort of urgent message?”

I sat down at the wooden table right across from Polarth, while Ai Fa and Shin Ruu stood on either side of me. And, still wearing his mask, Zasshuma stared from the side like some sort of referee.

“Well, I suppose that I do! I hadn’t intended to hurry matters along quite this much, but when my father and brother returned this morning they scolded me thoroughly. ‘What were you thinking, defying Count Cyclaeus!’ ‘Are you trying to lead the house of Daleim to ruin?!’ and so on. Really, it’s quite unreasonable that I should be reprimanded as such for attempting to uphold the laws of Genos.” Whenever he spoke, the chair and table would creak. “Hmm, I don’t especially find establishments in the post town distasteful, but the seats in this place are a touch too narrow! The table is even up against my stomach.”

“Right... Um, why is someone of your status coming here to the post town so casually? I really didn’t expect this.”

“Hmm? Well, the house of Daleim isn’t quite so fixated on formalities. If it weren’t for circumstances, we wouldn’t have even gained nobility in the first place. And even now, the lords ruling over other towns likely don’t even see us as nobles at all,” Polarth said with a grin. “Originally the Genos house themselves only had the rank of count, and our families were initially nothing but knights serving them. But in these past hundred years the Genos house was raised to dukedom, while the Turan, Daleim, and Saturas houses were given the rank of count, though in name only. Were there some sort of auspicious occasion in the capital, Lord Genos would surely be the only one invited. After

all, we are nothing but upstart so-called nobles from the outskirts of the kingdom.”

“Right...”

“To put it another way, the only ones with fortune enough for anyone to envy are Duke Genos and Count Turan. Up until now, that is...” Polarth said, rubbing beneath his nose with his finger.

Zasshuma’s critique of Polarth that Ai Fa had told me about yesterday sprung to mind: “He’s calculating, that one.”

“That is why I went along with Sir Zasshuma’s plan... or Sir Kamyua’s, I should say. Duke Genos is one thing as the ruler of this land, but Count Turan should not be the only one allowed to line his pockets. It is only when all of its citizens live prosperous lives that Genos can brag to other domains of being a town of plenty. Do you not think so, Sir Asuta?”

“I definitely agree with that, but...”

It seemed like we were getting to the heart of the matter, even without me needing to pester him about it.

Polarth’s already round back rounded even further as he leaned in toward me.

“Well then, will you tell it to me? That secret of the poitan you hold, Sir Asuta.”

“What? What’s this about poitan?”

“Shh! Not so loud. If Lord Cyclaeus catches on before I can make my move, I truly will be ruined. You cannot carry out a revolution without caution layered upon caution, after all.”

“Revolution...? That certainly escalated quickly.”

“Worry not. The only one who shall be left out of sorts in the aftermath will be Lord Cyclaeus.” It was true that Polarth was still wearing a nice, relaxed grin. “Not long ago, I picked up a snack from your stalls on the way here. There’s no mistaking that white fuwano-like substance was poitan, correct?”

“Yes, that’s right. It’s not as if I was particularly trying to hide it from anyone.”

“It certainly is a surprise that you caused no commotion like that! According to my attendant who sampled it, the taste was in no way inferior to fuwano. Poitan is far cheaper than fuwano, so imagine how much of a profit could be made if we could use the former instead of the latter! How could no one have paid attention to that fact up until now?”

“H-Hold on a moment. Since poitan is cheaper than fuwano, if it becomes a staple food won’t the total earnings go down instead?”

“Not so. As it’s Count Turan that produces fuwano, his fortune will decrease, while that of the plantations that make poitan will rise. That is the sort of result we would be facing, wouldn’t you say?”

Those words stirred up my memories.

I had insisted I wasn’t hiding it from anyone, but I had also been warned that I should keep the technique secret as much as possible. And by Kamyua Yoshu himself, at that.

From what I could recall, it had been back when we were discussing jerky here in The Kimyuus’s Tail... A bit before Lala Ruu’s birthday, I believed. Kamyua Yoshu had said the more expensive fuwano were cultivated by folks from the castle, while townsfolk grew the cheaper poitan. And so carelessly spreading my poitan baking techniques would cause great losses to some noble and earn me their ire.

Back then, the identity of that noble had felt ambiguous. But later, after the second meeting between Cyclaeus and the leading clan heads of the forest’s edge, the answer became abundantly clear.

In the Turan lands to the north they produced the mamaria that was used in fruit wine, as well as the wheat-like fuwano. And so when negotiations with Banarm were advancing, that proved inconvenient for Cyclaeus as they specialized in the same sorts of produce, so he had used Zattsu Suun to interfere. That was what I had been told, as far as I could recall.

In other words, the noble who would lose out from poitan gaining in popularity was none other than Cyclaeus.

At the very least, though, I’d like you to keep in mind that that delicious way of

preparing poitan could act as a blade pointed toward the nobles, Kamyua Yoshu had once said. *In order to keep on living, sometimes you need a blade. But if you make a mistake about when to use it, you can end up wounding your allies, too. So you should be careful when it comes to handling it.*

As I remembered Kamyua Yoshu dropping that on me with his usual aloof grin, I gave a deep sigh.

Though I hadn't seen him for quite some time, it seemed I was still dancing on the palm of that guy's hand.

"I finally see what you're getting at, now. You mean to say that this new method of cooking poitan could act as a powerful weapon against Cyclaeus, right?"

"Yes, that's right. You heard as much from Sir Kamyua as well, didn't you?"

"Yeah, though in a really roundabout way... But even if we can deal a blow to Cyclaeus like that, only the plantations and townsfolk would benefit, wouldn't they? Do you not mind that you don't stand to benefit personally?"

"Ah, so you were not aware? Our Daleim house was granted control over the land to the south where the plantations are located. And so those farmers who work that land are my people."

At last, I was satisfied.

That was why this man was a last resort, as well as a blade against Cyclaeus.

"This is an unbelievable tale, isn't it? Flipping the connection between fuwano and poitan would do the same to the power difference between the Turan and Daleim houses! It's enough to make you tremble, is it not?"

As he was saying all that, Polarth wore the same unchanging grin.

"H-Hold on just a moment. That may be an effective strategy after all, but will things really be alright with the other nobles? If you overturn the state of the town market like that, won't you risk making an enemy of even Duke Genos himself?"

"Hmm? I don't see how Duke Genos stands to suffer any losses from this. Well, if Count Cyclaeus falls, it could have an impact on the castle town at first,

but if the Daleim house earns more in turn it should all be the same in the end.”

I didn’t get it at all.

Perhaps seeing my complexion, Polarth sat back up straight.

“Sir Asuta, it seems you still do not know anything at all about this land of Genos. Well, I do suppose this town has a rather unique form of government. Genos is of a moderate scale for a town, but I do not believe there are any other such examples of one being split into four, each ruled by a separate house.”

“Right...”

“I believe that is because the capital thought it would be dangerous to have a town so much more prosperous than its size would imply be governed by but a single house. Just as I explained before, roughly a hundred years in the past our three houses were granted counthood and tasked with ruling this land alongside Duke Genos. The true lord of this land is ultimately the duke himself, but the capital ordered that the Turan house was to govern the orchards to the north, the Daleim house the plantations to the south, and the Saturas house the post town. So as long as nothing impacts the prosperity of the castle town, we should earn none of Duke Genos’s displeasure.”

I really hadn’t ever imagined I would be learning of Genos’s inner structure in a place like this.

Stealing a glance out of the corner of my eye, I saw that Ai Fa and Shin Ruu were just expressionlessly listening to Polarth’s words.

“And even just a few dozen or so years back, there was no great disparity in wealth between our three houses. The Turan land had rich soil but not as much space, so they only grew fuwano and mamaria, while the Daleim land had poor soil but plenty of space, allowing us to produce a variety of vegetables. And the crops from both led to the post and castle towns flourishing alike. But when Lord Cyclaeus became the head of his house, the Turan fortune alone massively expanded.”

“You’re saying he used inhumane methods?”

“Inhumane, is it? Well, he bought a great number of slaves from the north

and had them work for him. Even now, I suppose the majority of the workers in his orchards are slaves. Thanks to that, a great many people lost their jobs and ended up moving to the post town or Daleim farm lands. As a result we yielded more in taxes, but the Turan fortune grew far more."

So slavery was involved there, huh? The conversation had certainly started to take a disquieting turn.

"I suppose your people would be more knowledgeable on the details beyond that. Like how he had the envoys from his business rivals in Banarm attacked, or installed his younger brother Sir Ciluel as the militia leader... He used a variety of other methods as well, and as a result Lord Cyclaeus's fortune and authority have grown vast. In a mere thirty years, Count Turan's power has swelled enough to rival even that of Duke Genos."

"Right..."

"And that is precisely why we need a revolution! No matter how one looks at it, it is the fuwano and mamaria propping up the Turan fortune. And since poitan are easier to grow and cheaper than fuwano, if they were to become a staple food here in Genos, his fortunes would be halved. And that difference would in turn be restored to not just the house of Daleim, but all of our people!" Polarth exclaimed, his eyes sparkling. "Of course, the ones to benefit most will be the farmers who grow the poitan and our house as the owners of that land. But as I've said again and again, poitan can be obtained incredibly cheaply. I believe it requires one and a half times as many coins to obtain the same weight of fuwano as it does poitan."

"Yeah, I think that's about right."

"Hmph! Of course, it is not as if fuwano itself is an especially expensive ingredient, so that would make only a slight difference each day. But every little bit helps, as they say. And if the people of Genos can spend those saved coins on other things, then they can all live more prosperous lives than they do now."

"But the people of Turan will become poorer in turn, won't they?"

"Yes. Yet the Turan orchards are run largely by slaves who do not receive compensation. And all the fortune earned from their efforts ends up directly in Lord Cyclaeus's hands. The non-slaves living in Turan lands engage in work

unrelated to the production of mamaria and fuwano, so it should not have that great of an impact on them, I would imagine."

At that moment, I thought of Mikel, who worked as a charcoal maker in Turan.

It was true that he didn't exactly look like he was any better off than the people of the post town.

"And with a plan of this scale, we should also be able to gain the support of the house of Saturas, who oversee the post town. Even my father and elder brother will be left at a loss for words! And of course, the same would be true of Lord Marstein Genos... Duke Genos is a true believer in meritocracy, so he should have no issue with us defeating Count Turan through our own strength."

"But will things really go that smoothly? Even if poitan isn't inferior at all in terms of taste or nutrition, I can't imagine it eliminating fuwano when that stuff has been a staple food for so many years..."

"There's no need for it to replace fuwano completely. At the very least, I would imagine the prideful citizens of the castle town will not make the change easily. But there is no reason for the people of the post town and plantations to avoid a cheaper foodstuff like that! From there, I suppose it just matters how we go about things."

I turned and looked at Zasshuma, only to find the man's eyes still smiling as he shrugged his shoulders.

So it's all according to Kamyua's plan still, huh...?

I gave a little sigh, which apparently didn't escape Polarth's notice.

"Are you uneasy? So am I! But even if we leave things be, Lord Cyclaeus will eventually learn you possess a method of making poitan taste delicious. And when that time comes, the people of the forest's edge alone will face his wrath. So why not spread that technique all throughout town and make it so he cannot focus his anger on any one point?"

"Right... I can definitely understand that logic."

"I will handle all the troublesome arrangements on my end! After all, I have

no interest in fearing assassins lurking in every shadow! So let us spread word of how wonderful poitan are throughout Genos before we capture Lord Cyclaeus's eye!" Polarth exclaimed with a hearty grin.

◇

"Things certainly seem to have taken an unbelievable turn..." I said to Ai Fa after Polarth left along with his three soldiers.

However, she replied, "Is that so?" with a tilt of her head. "I do not think it's an especially harmful idea from our end. Did you not say before that it is dangerous to be the only ones possessing a special technique such as that?"

"Yeah, you mean when we taught the Suun women back before the clan head meeting, right? But what we're talking about this time around is on a totally different scale."

"At any rate, we don't even know if it will work out. There is no point in worrying about it now."

As he watched over us with crossed arms, Zasshuma chuckled and agreed, "That's right. And at any rate, the showdown with Cyclaeus is in just five days. Such a short period of time isn't enough to do anything that big, so for now just shaking the other side up would be plenty."

"Hmm, I get the feeling it'll have too much of an impact on the town in comparison, though."

"There's no helping that. The essential point is that we may make allies of some other nobles in the process. But unless we show them Cyclaeus's fortunes may not last forever, they won't take the risk, right?" Zasshuma said, rubbing his cheeks through his mask. "Our banner falls under Lord Melfried, ultimately. But that man is just too inflexible. It's difficult for someone who believes laws are absolute to take down someone working to undermine them."

"Right..."

"That was why we had no choice but to rely on Lord Polarth yesterday. I somehow managed to get news of what happened to Lord Melfried in the castle and he promised to investigate Cyclaeus's manor, but by following official procedures that probably would have taken until when the sun hit its peak

today.”

It was hard to say what would have become of me in that case.

Regardless, I certainly felt Zasshuma had made a wise decision.

“At any rate, I’ll handle the troublesome stuff. There’s probably all sorts of things we’ll still need you for, but until then just keep working hard like you have been so far.”

With that, Zasshuma left the dining hall.

And in his place, Milano Mas barged on in.

“It’s almost the agreed upon time. If a customer shows up, I’ll be letting them come on in.”

“Ah, right. Sorry about the trouble.”

“You’re always apologizing, aren’t you? If you really feel that way, then try living a life that doesn’t lead to you needing to say sorry all the time.”

I really couldn’t think of anything to say to that.

Since yesterday, Milano Mas had constantly been going around in a huff.

“So? Are you going to be heading back for the day already?”

“Yes. The leading clan heads should be returning from the Turan domain soon, and I intend to ask them how things went.”

Honestly though, I had left The Kimyuus’s Tail for last precisely because I had wanted to take my time talking to Milano Mas. And so, full of deeply apologetic feelings inside, I went ahead and voiced what I felt took the maximum priority.

“Um, whether or not I work in the post town again depends on the results of that meeting, but if things go well, would it be alright to keep doing business with you like I have been up till now?”

“I’m still renting stalls to you people of the forest’s edge even now, so why would I go and turn down your request...?”

“No, but I mean I was also in the middle giving you cooking lessons.”

“Wasn’t that just a service you were offering without getting anything out of

it?”

“But my plan was to have you hopefully eventually handle giba meat too, so I considered it a proper part of my business.”

Milano Mas removed his cylindrical hat and scratched roughly at his dark brown hair. “It was nobles behind that whole incident, so there’s nothing to blame you over. You’ve been helping me out a lot lately, so how exactly am I supposed to react when you act all modest like that...?”

“Ah, if I’m bothering you, then I apologize.”

“I’m telling you, stop bowing all over the place like that...”

Despite how long I had known Milano Mas, we still seemed to have an awful lot of awkward moments like this.

Was that down to my own inexperience, or a mere matter of chemistry...? At any rate, I still found this stubborn, bad-mouthed guy just as precious to me as Dora, who was always so open and kind.

“Regardless, my place hasn’t suffered any damages at all on your account. So rather than getting weirdly worried about stuff like that, think more on how to protect yourself.”

“Right. Thank you.”

In spite of everything, it seemed that Milano Mas had no intention of giving up on me.

As I gave a stealthy sigh, I went ahead and moved on to the next topic.

“Well then, there was something I wanted to tell you about the dish I was thinking of...”

I told Milano Mas about how a dip made with pickled and dried kiki — a plum-like fruit — might go best with the kimyuus meatballs.

As he put his hat back on, the innkeeper raised a single eyebrow.

“Dried kiki fruit, huh? Plenty of customers want it as a snack to go with their drinks, but still... that’s one heck of a wild combination.”

“I’d give it a pretty firm recommendation, myself. Just mashing kiki fruit and

dressing the kimyuus with it would be plenty, so please go ahead and give it a try.”

At last, I was finally getting a chance to put the experience I gained in the castle town to use.

But as that thought was running through my head, Ai Fa went and tugged on the sleeve of my t-shirt.

“By the way, Asuta, what exactly was that dish I ate last night?”

“Hmm? Ah, that was fried kimyuus.”

“It had a wondrous taste... Would it be possible to make that dish with giba meat?”

“Well, I’d like to change the method a bit for giba and make giba cutlets.”

“Giba cutlets...”

With that, I turned back toward Milano Mas.

“Um, is it possible to get a hold of reten oil here in the post town?”

“Reten oil? I’ve only ever heard the name of that stuff. I mean, it’d be way too expensive for guys like us to afford, anyway.”

“Is that so? Then what about karon milk and kimyuus eggs? Are those expensive ingredients too?”

“The kimyuus dealers will sell you as many eggs as you want. I eat them a lot in the mornings, myself.”

“Huh? Then why aren’t there any in your kitchen?”

“Eggs are used in place of meat. Only a seriously cheap inn would go serving that stuff to customers.”

“Umm... So what you’re saying is that eggs are cheaper than meat but it would cost too much to serve both, and eggs alone would be too meager of an offering?”

“Hmph. Well, I guess you’re not too far off the mark, there. Some poor folks eat nothing but eggs, after all. Even for dinner.”

“Well then, exactly how much are we talking in terms of price?”

Apparently you could buy four for a single red coin. Strangely enough, that was the same cost as poitan. In that case, it seemed like I could manage to squeeze them in as an ingredient.

“And the other one was karon milk? At the very least, I would say there isn’t anyone eccentric enough to try to stock the stuff here in the post town. Dabagg’s the only place in the area that raises them, and it’d go bad on the way here, wouldn’t it?”

“But Dabagg is half a day’s distance from Genos, right? Apparently karon milk lasts two to three days, so I don’t think it should spoil that quickly.”

But it really might have been true that people avoided karon milk because it kept so poorly. Though it was different for nobles, who didn’t see any issue with just throwing it out if it went bad.

“I don’t even know how you use the stuff. And I can’t imagine it’d be any cheaper than fruit wine.”

That was because the fruit wine sold in the post town was so cheap to begin with. You could get around one liter for a single red coin, which was quite a reasonable price.

If you converted a red coin to 200 yen, then poitan and kimyuus eggs would be 50 yen each, aria 40 yen, giba burgers 400 yen, and karon leg meat 74 yen per hundred grams at the dealer’s rate (or 160 yen for the general public).

So if fruit wine and karon milk were both 200 yen per liter, I would say the fruit wine was priced rather cheaply, while the karon milk was a bit pricey. Like, if red wine and cow’s milk were the same price, I’d say the wine was way too cheap.

Oh, and based on these calculations, a liter of tau oil would be 2,000 yen and a bit under a kilo of gyama dried milk 4,000 yen, which went to show just how expensive imported goods were.

Going even further, the vegetable knife I bought from Shumiral would be 36,000 yen, and the meat cutting knife from Diel 24,000 yen. Considering the wagon we had Gilulu pull only cost ten times as much as the meat cutting knife,

it really was clear how pricey metal was, too.

“If it’s possible to get karon milk for not so different a price than fruit wine, then I’d like to try doing so eventually. I guess for that I should try talking to a meat trader from Dabagg?”

“I’ve got no clue, but probably. This time of year, they generally show up around once every three days.”

“I see. Thank you.”

That left figuring out if we could make our own dried milk and milk fat, as well as how to use skim milk. For that, I would just have to get my information from a merchant from Dabagg.

“Ah, also, where should I go to get a hold of some fuwano flour? Do I need to go all the way to Turan land for that?”

“No, there are fuwano sellers here in the post town. Not among the stalls though, but around here where the inns are. You all use poitan, though, so what do you want with fuwano at this point...?”

“Well, I get the feeling that fuwano has its own unique uses. So I’d like to try out all sorts of stuff.”

I figured it wouldn’t be smart to get overly greedy, so I decided to stop there for today. If I could get eggs and fuwano flour from the kimyuus and fuwano sellers, that alone would add plenty of variations to my giba cooking.

Surprisingly enough, I may actually complete the giba cutlets first, I thought as I stole a glance over at Ai Fa.

Just the thought that I would get to feed her new dishes was enough to fill my heart with delight.

It was a sensation I couldn’t savor back in that brick manor, and it made me feel like there was a lump forming in my throat.

At last, I would be able to have my precious clan head taste those dishes I had worked so hard to create. And now, it really sank in just how great a thing it was that I managed to reclaim this joyous feeling.

3

And so, we returned to the settlement at the forest's edge.

Unfortunately it seemed the owner of The Westerly Wind hadn't taken too kindly to me missing out on our agreement, so last night Yumi told me I should give him a few days as a cooling-off period. And regardless of the circumstances involved, I did break my word to him, so I didn't exactly have any ground to stand on there.

Anyway, we arrived back at the Ruu settlement around when Reina Ruu and the others would be wrapping up business for the day. And when we got there, two totos that weren't Gilulu, each with a roofless wagon, were awaiting us. They belonged to the Zaza and Sauti clans. The leading clan heads had made it back even sooner than we had, and were currently here at the Ruu settlement.

After a short break to catch my breath, I headed on over to the main Ruu house with Ai Fa and everyone else.

"We're back, Dad," Ludo Ruu called out as he opened the door. And I felt even more tense as I stepped into the house and saw just what I expected.

Donda Ruu was there, and so was Jiza Ruu. And Gazraan Rutim, too.

Gulaf Zaza and Dari Sauti were also there with men accompanying each of them.

And lastly, there were the Fou and Beim clan heads, making for nine men in total, all sitting there in a circle wearing serious expressions.

"Hello, Asuta of the Fa clan. I'm just glad to see you doing well," Dari Sauti called out. He was the youngest of the three leading clan heads and the first to speak up.

His square face, larger than either Jiza Ruu's or Gazraan Rutim's, bore a gentle expression. He took a fairly friendly position toward the Fa clan, and had been assertive about trying to obtain bloodletting and cooking techniques for his people.

"It's been some time. Um, I'm sorry for all the trouble I caused everyone with _"

“Voicing apologies won’t change anything. If you feel responsibility for what happened, then hurry up and sit already,” Gulaf Zaza grumbled, cutting me off.

The Zaza clan head wore a giba cloak with the head still attached, and was a man in the prime of his life. His eyes had the sharp glare of some wild beast, no less ferocious than Donda Ruu’s, and even in a place with so many experienced hunters gathered, he was still the most muscular and intimidating.

Even though he was also a fellow person of the forest’s edge, he stood opposed to the Fa clan’s business dealings, so he wasn’t exactly someone Ai Fa and I could let our guards down around.

In any case, at the direction of the members of the Ruu clan, Ai Fa and I sat down next to the Fou clan head.

Shin Ruu and the four youths on guard duty left at this point, while Ludo Ruu moved to his father’s left-hand side.

“The discussion with Cyclaeus ended safely, at least for now,” Gazraan Rutim announced, speaking for the group. “What sort of punishment the criminals will be met with is to be decided at a later hearing. And the conclusion we reached was that it should be alright to accept that Cyclaeus himself had no personal involvement with this incident with Asuta.”

“I see... So Lefreya is also going to be judged for her crimes, after all?”

“Of course. It was her underlings who actually kidnapped you, though, and they were ultimately the ones who chose to employ such unlawful methods... But she refused when you asked to be allowed to return home, and confined you there in that manor. Melfried attended the meeting as well, and he said in the worst case she may even face imprisonment.”

So she’d be locked up in some sort of jail...?

Even if she was the mastermind, she was still just a young girl of ten or so. I was crushed by an even more oppressive feeling than I had felt when I thought about it before.

“And it seems those criminals Mussel and Sanjura are to be whipped. Cyclaeus begged for a pardon for them, and so they may at least be spared banishment from Genos.”

“It really is ridiculous. We couldn’t see any logic in the idea of begging for a pardon and paying coins to lessen a punishment,” Dari Sauti interjected with a shrug of his shoulders. “And I also can’t accept the idea of the one responsible facing a lesser punishment. If she knew of her underlings’ crimes and permitted them, then there shouldn’t be any difference in how their guilt is weighed.”

“Of course... At any rate, according to the laws of Genos, the criminals will be facing such punishments.”

I had absolute trust that Melfried would uphold the law if nothing else, so if he said as much then we just had to accept it as true.

Still, while a resident of the castle town like Mussel was one thing, it seemed everyone was still on edge at the thought of an elusive man like Sanjura being released sooner or later.

“So, um... Did you also touch on the thing about Sanjura being Cyclaeus’s son?”

“Yes. However, Cyclaeus denied it. According to him, Sanjura was nothing but a man he hired to investigate the state of the post town and outside of Genos. And he also said he only had the man keep an eye on your stalls because the reputation you had gained sparked his curiosity.”

“I see...”

Silence fell over the room for a bit.

However, Gulaf Zaza soon spoke up as if he had been just waiting for that.

“So, what do you intend to do from here on out, Fa clan head and chef?”

Ai Fa was seated cross-legged with one knee up like everyone else, and turned to face him with an intense light shining in her eyes.

“Naturally, assuming we have the permission of the three leading clan heads, we would like to continue with business as we have up until now. Do you not think that is the proper path forward for we people of the forest’s edge, not just to live more prosperous lives, but also to forge bonds with the people of the post town?”

“I am in agreement with Ai Fa. This incident only made it all the more clear

that we should treat the post and castle towns as entirely different from one another," Gazraan Rutim chimed in, lending support to my clan head. "It seems that just like us, the people of the post town cannot set foot in the castle town without passes. And considering it is the nobles of the castle town who rule over Genos... Isn't it only natural to think that the townsfolk are closer to us than to them?"

"You say the townsfolk are similar to us...?"

"Yes. Perhaps it would be easier to understand if I instead say they are in a position close to our own. I just can't believe the way we people of the forest's edge and the townsfolk avoid one another is the way things should be. As I have gone to town and interacted with them again and again over the past several days, those thoughts only grew stronger in me." Though Gazraan Rutim was just as calm as always, the look in his eyes was every bit as intense as the one in Ai Fa's. "Also, we ended up earning the hatred of the townsfolk by failing to pass judgment on the crimes of the former leading clan head, Zattsu Suun. Our relationship had grown twisted in that way, but I believe Ai Fa, Asuta, and those helping them have been setting it straight. And that is why I believe the Fa clan should continue doing business in the post town as they have up till now."

"But don't go forgetting that the Ruu clan can only go providing bodyguards for a few more days..." Jiza Ruu interjected from beside his father.

He had just as many doubts about the Fa clan as Gulaf Zaza, if not more. And so, I naturally held my breath.

"As of today, it has been exactly half a month since the Ruu and our related clans entered a break period. The fruits of the forest have not yet fully recovered, but there will be starving giba around soon. At the very least, we cannot remove ourselves from guard duty until the 15th day of the white month, but we cannot keep putting our work as hunters second any longer."

"Of course not. Everybody who has their hands free is going to start preparing to hunt again tomorrow, right?" Ludo Ruu chimed in, and Jiza Ruu nodded.

"If the leading clan heads acknowledge the Fa clan's actions as proper, then I shall abide by that decision. But I cannot go so far as to neglect my work as a hunter in order to assist. What exactly do you have to say on that matter?"

“That’s... It’s of course just as you say, Jiza Ruu. If we do not expose that Cyclaeus man’s true nature by the meeting on the 15th day... It will likely be difficult to continue on with business as we have so far,” Ai Fa replied, sounding a bit pained.

Jiza Ruu obviously had a sound argument in this case.

When we were preparing for an attack by Zattsu and Tei Suun, Cyclaeus had ordered us to continue doing business, so they had no choice but to give priority to acting as bodyguards over their work as hunters.

But now, we were continuing to do business of our own volition. And so, we couldn’t exactly go relying on the Ruu clan any further once their break period was over.

Additionally, either Cyclaeus would have to fall from power or we would need to find out this was all a mistake on our part before we could keep doing business without bodyguards. If the meeting on the 15th of the white month didn’t settle things and everything was pushed further down the road again, we wouldn’t have any means to keep on working in the post town.

Jiza Ruu’s narrowed eyes that always looked like they were smiling glanced at me and Ai Fa, seeming satisfied. And then, the Fou clan head spoke up from beside us.

“In that case, why not have hunters from other clans lend you their aid when they’re on their break? In another month, the Fou, Ran, and Sudra should be entering such a period, so you would just have to wait till then.”

Taken completely off guard, I turned to face the man. The Fou clan head looked a bit overly skinny compared to the other fierce warriors present, but he stared back at me with a firm gaze.

“Currently, you’re having six men in the morning and six more in the afternoon act as bodyguards, right? The Fou, Ran, and Sudra should be able to gather up that many.”

“B-But... Sorry if this is rude, but the Fou and Ran shouldn’t have as many people they can spare as the Ruu, right? Even without hunting work, won’t you need to help out the women in your clans?”

“The remaining men can handle that. We were unable to respond to your request when you asked to have help from our women. So nothing could make us happier than being able to assist you now.”

“Is it really alright to go making such promises before checking with the Ran and Sudra clan heads...?” the Beim clan head interjected.

Comparatively, this man was actually short but firmly built, and looked to be in his prime. He was here at this gathering as representative for the small clans opposed to the actions of the Fa.

“That is no issue. The Ran fall under the Fou, while the Sudra want even more than we do to be of help to the Fa clan. And once enough time passes, the Gaaz and Ratsu will also enter their break period. By passing off bodyguard duties in that way, we could make certain the Fa clan can continue on with its business, just needing short breaks in between.”

“So Asuta and his team need to keep on bringing bodyguards with them forever while doing business? I respect your spirit there, but I can’t quite accept that,” Ludo Ruu cheerfully chimed in. The boy had looked so serious all day, but now he wore a lively smile again for the first time in a while. “I wanna take that corrupt noble Cyclaeus down in the next meeting instead. And then, even if you’ll be losing your shot at helping out the Fa clan, in exchange they won’t be in danger anymore, so that’s what’s best, right?”

“Of course. Nothing would be better than for the danger to pass.”

“However, there is no proof so far that Cyclaeus committed any crimes. As long as Kamyua Yoshu and the others fail to get a hold of that evidence, we cannot take the man to task as a criminal,” Gazraan Rutim cautiously stated.

No matter how much his bonds to the Fa clan deepened, he always felt impartial and just.

“And regardless of that Cyclaeus noble’s true nature, we still need to decide on how to deal with the members of the Suun clan,” Gulaf Zaza stated in a grave tone. “Until we have an answer for that, we have no room to worry about business or the town. And we’re not gonna settle things by just droning on and on... So why not firmly decide here and now to handle things with the Suun like we discussed earlier?”

“Huh? You already decided what to do with them?” I asked in my shock without thinking, earning me a glare from Gulaf Zaza.

The one to reply wasn’t him, though, but rather Dari Sauti, who was seated across from him.

“Unsurprisingly, our conclusion remains unchanged. Diga and Doddo are one matter since they committed the additional crime of running away, but Mida, Yamiru, Oura, and Tsuvai have already had their clan names taken from them, so no further punishment should be necessary.”

“I see. In that case...”

“But if the lord of Genos were to seek punishment on top of that, we couldn’t make light of his orders. Therefore, during the next meeting we intend to bring along not only Zuuro Suun, but all seven members of the former main Suun house, and have them explain themselves personally.”

“Huh...? You’re going to bring Mida and Yamiru Lea and everyone along? Isn’t that far too dangerous? If Cyclaeus decides to try to take them by force...”

“If he tries to do such a thing without proper reason, then there is no way we could ever obey him, Asuta of the Fa clan,” Dari Sauti replied in a perfectly calm voice. “However, the lord of this land who rules over us is Duke Genos, and Cyclaeus is acting as his proxy. If that man insists the Suun clan must face a heavier punishment, then all we can do is have him listen to their words and judge the weight of their crimes.”

“B-But that’s just Cyclaeus’s outward stance. It could just as easily be a ploy to put the Suun clan back in charge of the forest’s edge, right?”

“That’s nothing but a guess on Yamiru Lea’s part. We have no path left to us but to determine the true intentions of the lord of Genos and Cyclaeus. But if we judge those intentions to be in conflict with our own, we have no intention of just obeying.”

Even though Dari Sauti was already large, he somehow looked even bigger than usual. Actually, it wasn’t just him. Nearly everyone present was giving off the bloodlust of a hunter facing their long-time enemy.

“Asuta of the Fa clan. We may be fast approaching our limit.”

“Y-Your limit?”

“Yeah, that’s right. I just can’t see how that Cyclaeus noble is a proper ruler. I believe I said as much here in this Ruu settlement before, but those feelings have not softened, only grown stronger day by day. At this rate, I will be utterly unable to bear that man acting as representative for the lord of Genos.”

Even so, Dari Sauti’s expression remained perfectly calm.

“And word of Cyclaeus’s actions must have reached Duke Marstein’s ears by way of that Melfried man. But if the lord of the land will not make a move even so, does it not mean that he accepts what Cyclaeus has done?”

“Y-Yeah... Whether or not he accepts Cyclaeus’s actions as proper, he’s at least fine with leaving everything up to the man.”

“In that case, we must determine Duke Genos’s true feelings in regards to Cyclaeus’s actions. And if Cyclaeus tries to take Zuuro Suun and the others unjustly, then I suppose we’ll have to take up blades against him.”

“You’ll turn your blades on Genos...?”

“If Duke Genos determines Cyclaeus is still in the right even so, then that will be the result,” Dari Sauti said with a relaxed nod. “We have lived here at the Morga forest’s edge for eighty years now. To those of us who do not remember our time in the black forest of the south, this is our one and only home. But we cannot respect and serve a lord who we feel is unqualified for the title... Fortunately, we all agree on that point if nothing else.”

“I see...”

Before, Gulaf Zaza had been saying they would have to abandon Genos while Dari Sauti rebuked him. Only a mere ten days had passed since then, but in that time the leading clan heads had met twice with Cyclaeus. And in the last meeting in particular, Cyclaeus had attacked them while acting all evasive, which seemingly left them with a firm distrust of the man.

“Of course, it’s not as if we wish to abandon our home, Asuta. But if we don’t show at least this much resolve, we won’t ever be able to determine Cyclaeus’s true intentions,” Gazraan Rutim calmly stated. “How will Cyclaeus react when we bring along the former members of the main Suun house and have them

speak? Just what will he say? And how will Melfried, a man so married to the laws of Genos, act in turn? We have decided we will determine our path forward after seeing all that through. But as long as Cyclaeus does not have blades drawn on us, ours shall also remain sheathed."

"But won't your blades be taken from you before you enter the meeting place?"

"Yes. Which is why we'll have dozens of men standing by outside of the manor. If they hear our grass whistle signal, they are to charge inside."

So they had already hashed out the details that far?

Without even thinking, I gulped.

"The mere act of us bringing along that many men should show our resolve clearly to Cyclaeus. And so, they won't be able to draw their blades lightly. And we don't wish to shed blood unnecessarily, either."

"Right..."

"And though we haven't come to a decision on this point yet, I believe we should spread word of these happenings throughout the post town."

"Huh? The post town?"

"Yes. Asuta, I believe you've already opened up to inn owners from town in regards to our confrontation concerning the handling of the Suun clan. And we suspect Zattsu and Tei Suun committed countless crimes under Cyclaeus, which is also information that should be openly spread in the post town."

"I'm still not convinced on that idea. What purpose is there to doing something like that?" Gulaf Zaza retorted, sounding quite doubtful.

Gazraan Rutim, meanwhile, just calmly turned his way.

"There are two reasons for doing so. Firstly, I believe the townsfolk have a right to know. And secondly, I don't believe we should turn our blades on Genos before doing so."

"I heard you say all that before. But I'm asking *why* you think that."

"Right. Well, for the first reason, many of the townsfolk suffered directly

under the tyranny of the Suun clan, so they have the right to know those facts. Especially considering there are those who lost family as a result, that much should be obvious, right?”

Milano Mas and Leito immediately came to mind.

They should have both already heard the truth of the matter by way of Kamyua Yoshu. However, Zattsu Suun and his associates murdered a whole merchant caravan of around thirty people. And their families all had a right to know everything.

“And in regards to my other point, even if we end up facing off with Cyclaeus as enemies, I believe those details should be properly conveyed to the people of Genos. Then, they can decide whether we people of the forest’s edge or that wicked noble are in the right... And if they choose Cyclaeus, then there will truly be no place left for us here in this land, correct?”

“Shouldn’t we just continue down the path we think is right, no matter what anyone else thinks...?”

“Is that truly the case, though? Even we are citizens of Genos living here in this land. We risk our lives to hunt giba, and purchase the produce grown in the fields we protect in order to fill our stomachs. This lifestyle of ours requires the people of the forest’s edge and the townsfolk both. So even though our bloodlines may differ, wouldn’t you say that all of us living here in Genos are most definitely comrades?”

Gulaf Zaza didn’t respond.

“However, we have spent eighty years now avoiding one another. Even if we were utterly incompatible, we would still have to live without interfering with each other, and yet for these past ten years our relationships have only worsened, and that is undoubtedly due to Zattsu Suun and his ilk. In order to determine if we truly *are* incompatible, though, we must first clear up any discord and misunderstandings remaining from that period, wouldn’t you say?”

I understood Gazraan Rutim’s assertion so much it almost hurt.

From very early on, I had thought the people of the forest’s edge were far too indifferent to what others thought of them and the misconceptions they might

hold. Still, just how many of those present got what he was saying? From what I could figure, only two of them understood the gist: Dari Sauti and Ai Fa.

“Well, at the very least, I see no reason to strongly oppose Gazraan Rutim’s opinion there. Even if Cyclaeus turns out to be completely guiltless, all that would happen is we’d be seen as fools who were suspicious of an innocent man. And my suspicions of him run deep, so I don’t fear that in the least. Rather, if it turns out I’m mistaken, I’d prefer to be called a fool and repent instead of simply letting that fact go unknown,” Dari Sauti stated.

“This is making my head hurt. More importantly, wouldn’t this all go smoother with allies among the townsfolk? I mean, we opened up about our plan to them just yesterday, right?” Ludo Ruu piped up.

Hearing that, Gazraan Rutim smiled and replied, “Naturally, I think so as well.”

“Then I’m in agreement with Gazraan Rutim. There’s nothing wrong with having more allies.”

“Will the people of the post town really ally themselves with us? Regardless of who was behind it, the ones actually doing harm about town were the members of the Suun clan,” the Fou clan head said with a doubtful look.

However, Ludo Ruu just grinned and said, “That’s why we should tell them absolutely everything, that part included, right? It’s not enough to have just the lord of Genos determine whether or not it’s Cyclaeus or us who are in the right. The folks from the post town are the ones who actually suffered, so they have a right to judge that too.”

“Hmm...”

“As long as it’s fair, what’s the issue? Besides, it’s a fact that we left Zattsu Suun and his followers to do as they please. It seems like that Jeeda guy’s dropped his grudge against the people of the forest’s edge, but there may be other folks out there who think like him. And some of them may keep on hating us even so. I figure we’d have a better time accepting their decisions if they at least knew everything before coming to that conclusion.”

“You certainly are chatty there, Ludo...” Donda Ruu chimed in, finally speaking up for the first time.

Ludo Ruu turned his way and grinned again.

“And you’ve been awful quiet, Dad. I thought for sure you were taking a nap or something.”

“Quiet, you. At any rate, we’re walking the path forward that we believe in. And I’ve got no intention of concealing that from anyone. If this is what Gazraan Rutim wants to do, then why not let him?”

“I’m fine with that,” Dari Sauti added, while Gulaf Zaza remained silent, effectively giving his begrudging approval in the process.

The one to ultimately raise a slight doubt was instead the Beim clan head. “But it’s still possible that Cyclaeus noble is innocent, isn’t it? Even though I don’t trust that mundt of a man in the slightest.”

Donda Ruu grunted, “Hmph, everyone here feels the same. On the off chance it’s proven that man didn’t commit a single crime... Then I suppose it’ll mean we’re not qualified to lead our people, right, Gulaf Zaza, Dari Sauti?”

“Yes. After all, here we are thinking it may be unavoidable to cross blades with the lord of this land. If we have led our people down the wrong path, then we should take responsibility for that by stepping down from our posts as leading clan heads... Of course, depending on the circumstances we may have to offer up our necks to Genos for the great crime of treason,” Dari Sauti readily admitted.

The Beim clan head’s eyes narrowed with doubt. “I definitely believe such a fate isn’t awaiting us, but still... If we lose all of you, then who would we even have serve as the leading clan heads? You’re of course not saying we should reinstate the Suun clan, are you?”

“That can be decided at the clan head meeting. Actually, you or the Fou clan head here could be chosen, you know.”

“Th-That’s completely ridi—”

“We were chosen because we were the strongest clans after the Suun. However, there’s nothing to say that’s absolutely the right way of doing things. It’s your job to drag us down from this post like we did Zuuro Suun if I, Dari Sauti, or Gulaf Zaza stray from the proper path,” Donda Ruu interjected,

breaking out in a wild, beastly grin for the first time in a while. “If we don’t have at least enough resolve to do that, we people of the forest’s edge will go repeating the same mistakes over and over again. It’s the job of each and every one of our people to determine whether or not their leading clan heads are qualified.”

“That’s absolutely right. As we failed to stop the Suun clan’s tyranny, we must embrace that failure and keep walking onwards,” Dari Sauti said as he corrected his posture. “Well then, shall we bring this discussion to a conclusion? If possible, I would like to inform the clans under me of our decisions while it’s still bright out.”

“Ah, there’s one more thing I’d like to say first. That Polarth noble visited me again today.”

With that, I gave the drawn-out explanation, and the reaction didn’t look especially favorable.

Was it just not clicking for these hunters of the forest’s edge why anyone would care about poitan cooking methods? Regardless, the only one of the group leaning forward with interest was, unsurprisingly, Gazraan Rutim.

“So Kamyua Yoshu had a scheme like that in mind, did he? He really is an unfathomable man, isn’t he?”

“I still don’t get it at all, but you’re pretty much saying the source of Cyclaeus’s strength is his fortune, so we’ll weaken him if we can take that from him?” Dari Sauti asked while scratching his head.

“That’s right,” I replied.

“At any rate, it would have been difficult to save you without the assistance of that Polarth noble, so why not let him do as he pleases? As long as it’s nothing against the laws of the forest’s edge, then I have no objections.”

Donda Ruu and Gulaf Zaza both seemed to be in agreement with Dari Sauti on that front.

“Alright, now we’ll finally bring this talk to a close. We’ll leave informing the other clans to the Fou and Beim as we have so—” Dari Sauti started to say, only for there to be a knock on the door.

“Who is it?” Donda Ruu questioned.

“Shin Ruu, from the branch houses,” a voice replied. “Some folks from town have come to visit the Ruu settlement. And they say they wish to meet with the leading clan heads about an urgent matter.”

“Someone from town...?”

The crowd in the room started to stir.

“Who exactly is it? Actually, it’ll be quicker to just see them. Ludo, open the door.”

Ludo Ruu nodded, holding his sword as he ran over to the entrance. Everyone not belonging to the Ruu clan had handed over their blades already.

As we were seated farthest from the head of the group, we were naturally positioned close to the door, so Ai Fa cautiously got up on her knees and covered me. And so, I ended up looking at the visitors through the space between Ai Fa’s elegant side and her arm.

One visitor was large, while the other was small. I wasn’t familiar with the bigger one, but the little one was someone I was well acquainted with.

“My apologies for our late return, good people of the forest’s edge.”

“Oh, it’s you, Leito?!” I called out, unthinkingly moving to rise.

His flaxen hair had a soft look to it, and his light brown eyes shone brightly. This smiling young lad, his slender form covered by a traveler’s cloak, was Kamyua Yoshu’s disciple, Leito.

Was the person next to him a bodyguard or something, though? His blackish-brown hair was pulled back, and his face and robust physique looked every bit as intimidating as a hunter of the forest’s edge. Yeah, this big guy looked to be in his prime, and sure seemed strong.

He had on the same sort of traveler’s cloak as Leito, as well as a worn leather breastplate and bracers, plus I could see a crescent-shaped scabbard dangling at his hip.

“Kamyua Yoshu’s follower, huh...? So if you’re here, does that mean he finally accomplished what he was setting out to do?” Donda Ruu questioned.

“Yes,” Leito answered with a nod. He really did have guts, seeing how he still maintained his usual grin even when faced with this many hunters.

Meanwhile, the big man next to him had a cautious and suspicious expression on his lion-like face as he looked over the group.

“So, what about your master? And did those guys from the branch houses make it back safely too?”

“Kamyua and the members of the Ruu clan haven’t returned yet. The militia has set up camp to the north of Genos, and that gave us a serious feeling of danger, so the two of us stealthily took a roundabout path back on our own.”

“Hmph. So that bandit leader’s wife or whatever is still outside of Genos?”

That question was answered with, “No. It’s possible Kamyua and the others may not make it back by the 15th of the white month. And so, we returned on our own. My apologies, but would it be possible to have you shelter this valuable witness until the day of the meeting?”

“A woman from town, here in this settlement? I doubt the woman could bear that.”

“Really? I believe she’d be fine...” Leito responded, still smiling as he looked up at the large man next to him.

“Hmph,” the man snorted. “As if the wife of Goram Redbeard would be that frail. I don’t know anything about the people of the forest’s edge, but I doubt they’re more brutal than a gaaje leopard.”

Gaaje leopards were beasts that lived on Mount Masara, which Goram Redbeard’s son Jeeda hunted. Did that mean Jeeda’s mother hunted them too, just like her son?

Still, that big guy’s voice sure was raspy and weirdly difficult to make out. But it still had plenty of force behind it, and would probably be just as intense as Donda Ruu’s thundering roar if he were to shout.

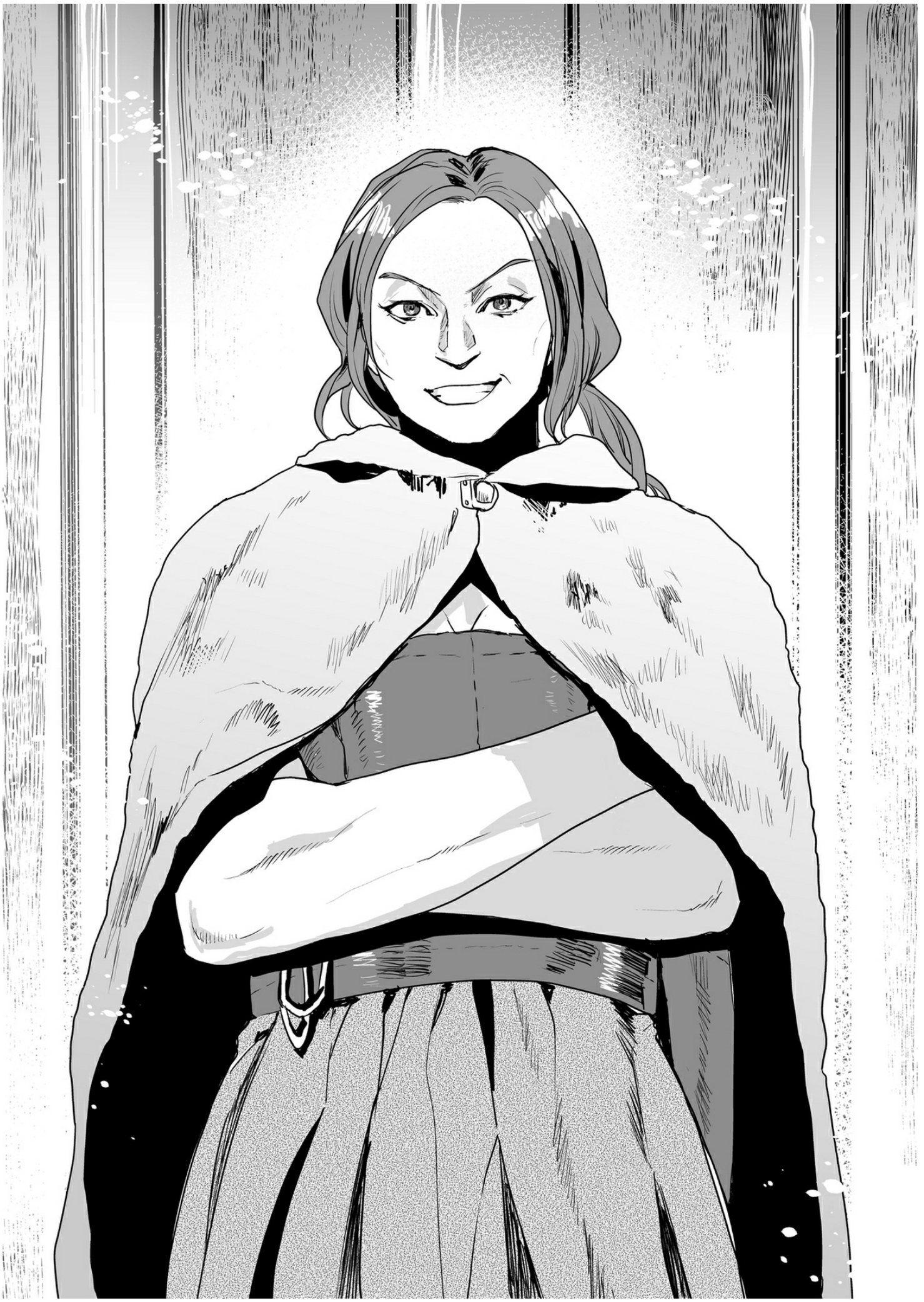
“Well then, could we make this request of you? I don’t believe Cyclaeus has learned of our return yet, so you shouldn’t need to worry about staying on your guard, and she shouldn’t make trouble for you.”

“Before you go droning on like that, bring that woman here. I’ll give you my response after seeing her.”

“Of course... Then allow me to introduce you,” Leito said with a perfectly innocent smile, gesturing toward the large man next to him. “This is the bandit leader Goram Redbeard’s wife, Bartha of Masara. I ask that you please watch over her for these next five days.”

“Yeah, here’s to us getting along just fine. Ah, should I be bowing my head, too...?” the large man... er, Goram Redbeard’s wife Bartha said in an intimidating, booming voice with a cynical-looking grin.

Naturally, I wasn’t the only one present shocked into silence.



4

It was now night.

Ai Fa and I once again found ourselves sitting in the vacant house at the Ruu settlement.

My clan head had been insistent that tonight we would finally be returning to the Fa house, but Donda Ruu had declared that it would be safer to simply remain here until the 15th of the white month.

“The Fa house is removed from any other homes, isn’t it? Are you really saying you could protect your clan member all on your own, even if the place was surrounded by dozens of enemies?”

When faced with that comment, even Ai Fa couldn’t do anything more than bite her lip in frustration.

And currently, those lips were pouting just about as much as they possibly could. As she sat there leaned up against the wall while cradling one knee and turning away in a sulk, I was sad to say that she looked more like an adorable child rather than a dignified clan head.

However, there was one more big cause for Ai Fa’s bad mood. Which is to say, there were four other people here with us in the vacant house: Ludo and Shin Ruu, Bartha, and Leito. We were not only ordered to stay here in the Ruu settlement, but also to spend the night under the same roof as this group.

“Man, wouldn’t it be better if you two just stayed at the main house? Even my old man said it’d be safer that way. After all, we’re already in charge of keeping an eye on this pair,” Ludo Ruu said, but of course Ai Fa didn’t agree. I was pretty sure her mood only worsened in proportion to how many people she had to share a house with.

Well, at any rate, I was honestly uneasy too.

“Hmph. Still, this sure is a gathering of adorable faces. Were you trying to give a warm welcome to this young widow, or something?” Bartha said with a hearty laugh from her position in the center of the room, then she took a swig of fruit

wine. I had a few hours by this point to grow accustomed to her appearance, but I still couldn't believe I was looking at a woman.

Everybody criticized me back when I had mistaken Diel for a boy, but this time around I figured nobody would blame me.

Anyway, to start with she was just plain big. She had to be over 180 centimeters tall, her shoulders were wide, her torso was thick, and her arms and shoulders showed small mountains of muscle. She had a robust enough build to be a match for even Jiza Ruu and Gazraan Rutim.

Since she had a leather breastplate over her shabby clothing, I couldn't spy any womanly points in that way, either. She looked just like some ruffian from the post town who failed as a mercenary or something as she sat there cross-legged and looked us over fearlessly while chugging down her fruit wine.

"You seem like you're pretty skilled yourself. But take care not to do anything stupid, alright? You may be a guest or whatever, but if you start acting suspiciously I won't show you any mercy," Ludo Ruu harshly chided, seemingly annoyed at having his appearance remarked on there.

"Ooh, you sure are one scary brat," Bartha retorted with a shrug of her shoulders. "I'm painfully aware that you lot aren't the sort of cute little kids you look like. I'm honestly honored you're this on guard over just little old me."

Though Ai Fa and the other hunters all had their swords, she had to entrust her crescent-shaped blade to the main house.

Additionally, when I whispered to Ai Fa about her earlier, my clan head replied, "She's not as skilled as her son."

But even so, it seemed it wasn't in her nature to fear hunters of the forest's edge, as the whole time from when we met her up till now she acted undaunted, and at times even arrogant.

And now, those intensely shining dark eyes of hers were pointed toward me and Ai Fa.

"Well then, mind if I carry out my work here, too? Ai Fa and Asuta of the Fa clan, was it...? You're the ones who got mixed up with my boy Jeeda, right? Could you tell me everything you know about that prodigal son of mine?"

“Right. I’m pretty sure I’m the one who’s interacted with him most here at the forest’s edge,” I answered, as Ai Fa was still sulking.

Apparently Bartha’s reason for coming all the way here to Genos was to hunt down her son’s whereabouts.

“I’m not exactly thinking of getting revenge for my husband at this point,” Bartha had said earlier in the day. “We were a group of bandits. People may have praised us as noble outlaws or whatever, but it doesn’t change the fact that we were breaking the law. Even if they were executed for the wrong reason, it wasn’t like they could’ve avoided that fate anyway. Once those soldiers got hold of him, Goram’s fate was sealed.”

And so, having lost her husband and comrades, she took the only important person left to her, her young son, and started a secluded life at the base of Mount Masara. Of course, it was pretty amazing to choose being a hunter on a mountain full of dangerous predators for a life of seclusion, but that was how her story went.

“Still, I wanted my son to live a life of pride. That was why I raised him with stories of what his old man Goram was like in place of lullabies, but that ended up coming back to bite me.”

Once Jeeda had gained the strength of a full-fledged hunter, he arrived at the conclusion that he should avenge his father who was executed falsely for crimes he didn’t commit, but his mother didn’t accept that. And so he left their home at the base of the mountain to go live as a hunter up on Mount Masara, and didn’t show himself again to his mother.

She had just kept on living as she had up till now, figuring eventually he would cool his head and come back. But once Jeeda had built up even further strength over the course of a year, he took off for Genos all on his own. He had heard tell from a merchant that his revenge targets, the people of the forest’s edge, had started doing business in the post town. And that was what ultimately triggered his reckless actions.

“So, you’re the person of the forest’s edge in question who started doing business, eh...?” Bartha had replied after hearing everything, drawing in close to my face.

Her skin had been tanned so thoroughly it had the texture of leather to it. Her big eyes were staring straight at me, while her eyebrows were almost entirely worn down. And her nose and mouth were big too, plus her jaw looked sturdy enough to chew through bone. As for her age, I figured she was probably somewhere in her mid-thirties. At any rate, it was a seriously rugged face that reminded me of a lion.

“The people of the forest’s edge who laid their crimes on the Red Beards were famed as a gathering of brutes more frightening than any bandits. And since they’re ostracized even among the people of Genos, if you just leave them be the folks from the castle will eventually execute them too. That was the sort of stuff I told Jeeda.”

“Right.”

“And yet you people of the forest’s edge were doing business in the post town, and earning quite a reputation at that. Thanks to that, my idiot son went and got all hotheaded. After all, it was looking like the people of the forest’s edge would be permitted to commit any crime they pleased.”

Jeeda himself had said something similar.

That was exactly why he had set my stalls in his sights right off the bat.

“Still, I heard about everything going on behind the scenes here in Genos from Kamyua Yoshu on the way, so I’m not gonna go coming after you now. And y’know, it makes sense there’d be rumors when your cooking’s that delicious... I never imagined I’d get to eat such tasty food out here in the forest.”

I had helped to prepare dinner for today. Bartha had chowed down every bit as much as Donda Ruu, and thinking back on it made her break out in a hearty grin before returning to a more serious expression.

“The one pulling the strings turning out to be a noble’s real troublesome, though. Even Jeeda wouldn’t make it out safely after making an enemy of a guy like that.”

“Right. But Jeeda said he would wait to see whether or not we could really expose Cyclaeus’s crimes before making a move. So we’ve got to do something about him for your son’s sake, too.”

“Ooh, for Jeeda’s sake?”

“Yes. If we people of the forest’s edge can legitimately bring Cyclaeus to justice, then Jeeda won’t have to go dirtying his hands.”

“Hmph, you lot sure have an awful strong sense of duty there.”

“I don’t know if I’d say that... I mean, even if Cyclaeus was the one pulling the strings, it was the Suun clan who actually did all that awful stuff, and they’re people of the forest’s edge. So I figure it’s only natural for us to feel responsibility for that.”

My focus naturally turned from Bartha to Leito, who was sitting there next to her. He was a victim of Zattsu Suun’s vile crimes, as the orphaned child of the leader of the merchant caravan that fiend wiped out.

Noticing my gaze, Leito smiled back.

“I believe the people of the forest’s edge finished their atonement when Zattsu and Tei Suun’s crimes came to light. The rest of you all are simply victims betrayed by their leading clan head.”

“I don’t agree there. I mean, we failed to even notice everything Zattsu Suun had done up until that Kamyua guy made a move,” Ludo Ruu retorted with a pout, but Leito’s smile remained unchanged.

“But you all dragged the Suun down from their position as the leading clan before Kamyua did anything, didn’t you? If the Suun had still been the leaders of the forest’s edge at that point, your people would be in an even worse position now, wouldn’t you?”

“So you don’t hate us...?”

“My father was killed by Zattsu Suun and his cronies, but that happened back before I was even born. My mother followed soon after, and while Milano Mas raised me, he didn’t talk about criminals from the forest’s edge in front of me. So I didn’t really grow up thinking of myself as a victim.”

And yet, when Zattsu Suun was captured his cheeks were also wet with tears.

Had Ludo Ruu seen that, too? At any rate, the youth was rustling his yellowish-brown hair as he glared at Leito, who was just innocently smiling

away.

“Don’t you get tired, living like that?”

“I wouldn’t say I’m old enough to feel that sort of tiredness just yet.”

I couldn’t help but wonder how many kids of ten or so could give an answer like that.

“That sure is a difficult topic you’re discussing there,” Bartha said, furrowing her brow. “So getting back on track, is there a chance Jeeda will suddenly show up somewhere around this settlement?”

“I’m not really sure. When we last talked, it was like he was giving me a final farewell. He still didn’t seem all that fond of the people of the forest’s edge, though, so I’m kind of doubtful.”

“But he went out of his way to show himself when that noble was holding you, right? It’s not exactly anything to brag about, but it’s really hard for me to imagine him putting himself at risk for someone he’s not even related to like that,” Bartha said, slowly looking me over. “Seems to me that he’s quite taken by you... Or maybe he just feels guilty over directing his hatred at the wrong person?”

“Right. It seemed like quite a blow to him when he learned the criminals of the forest’s edge were ultimately just underlings being manipulated.”

I could still remember Jeeda’s face from that time in front of the Fa house, and how he looked like he was on the verge of tears.

If all the criminals are already dead... Then who should I even be swinging my blade at...? Jeeda had said.

I didn’t believe in the idea of seeking revenge.

But Jeeda, Bartha, Leito, and Milano Mas had all lost family to a cruel plot solely driven by greed.

Zattsu Suun and his underlings had paid for those crimes with their lives over the course of these past ten years, but if anyone involved was still alive and unjudged, then they couldn’t simply be left alone.

“Still, I can’t imagine dragging out someone like me would be all you need to

cross blades with a noble," Bartha said with a wild swig of fruit wine. "It's true that I know better than anyone that the Red Beards never killed anybody. But I was one of them up until my son was born, and I can't imagine folks from the castle listening to the testimony of someone who used to be a bandit."

"But you've had contact with someone from the castle before, haven't you? I believe that's ultimately why Kamyua believes you can prove Cyclaeus's guilt."

That was a new fact we had only just learned of today.

Apparently, Cyclaeus's underling had approached the Red Beards before they were falsely charged.

"I don't even know if they were really from the castle town, though. They just dressed like they were well-off."

"But that person tried to incite you to attack the envoys from Banarm, right? Cyclaeus probably plotted to use the Red Beards as pawns before going to Zattsu Suun instead... Or at least, that's what Kamyua said."

The matter had already been discussed in front of the leading clan heads during the day.

Cyclaeus had initially plotted to bring the Red Beards under him, and when that failed, he hastily moved to eliminate them.

Perhaps he always intended to make use of both of them, or maybe he decided to rely on a troublesome man like Zattsu Suun because he failed to win over the Red Beards... Naturally, none of that was clear to me, but it at least appeared the Red Beards had been placed in such a situation.

"Still, there's one thing left that doesn't make sense to me," I said, deciding to voice the doubt that had been lingering over me since earlier in the day. "Those circumstances are something that only the members of the Red Beards and maybe some people in Cyclaeus's camp should know about. And yet Kamyua was full of confidence that you were going to be the deciding factor right from the start. How exactly did he go about getting a hold of confidential information like that?"

"It wasn't 'confidential' or anything like that. Goram and I were acquaintances with Kamyua Yoshu right from the start."

“Come again...?”

“It’s been more than ten years now since that shady man came to us with his questionable story. Back when that guy was just getting started as a bodyguard, he ran into my Goram at a bar and they really hit it off. If things had gone just a bit differently, that blond haired kid could’ve ended up joining the Red Beards, even.”

I felt like I was on the verge of collapsing to the floor when I heard that.

Seriously, just how much was that guy going to jerk people around before he’d feel satisfied?

And as he saw me in that state, Leito just smiled again.

“Kamyua has wandered about the western kingdom for over ten years now, after all. And he’s formed bonds with all sorts of people in all sorts of places, to the point that it even surprises me. I’m certain Kamyua’s reason for living lies in weaving those countless strings he’s tied to others into a picture that’s to his liking.”

“Right... So this wasn’t a coincidence, but an inevitability?”

“Yes. From his hundreds of bonds, Kamyua has chosen the Red Beards, myself, Milano Mas, the lord of Genos, and the like to weave a portrait of Cyclaeus’s defeat. That is how I look at it.”

“That sure is something else. It’s like he’s some sort of god, toying around with the fate of us mortals, eh?” Bartha chimed in, sounding rather displeased.

Leito, meanwhile, just adorably tilted his head in response. “Even so, Kamyua seems to think of himself as just another thread in the tapestry. And so he’s always grinning and saying if you don’t work your hardest, you’ll never achieve the result you desire.”

“I’m sure that blond boy won’t be meeting with a pleasant death. Not that I have room to talk, with the way I’ve lived my life, though.” With that, Bartha’s firm gaze looked over everyone present. “At any rate, it’s reckless opposing a noble head on here in the western kingdom. You don’t have the slightest chance of winning like that. That’s exactly why my husband formed a bandit group, to fight back against them bit by bit. But in the end, he still got

executed...”

“Yes. But Kamyua has formed a bond with Duke Marstein Genos, and also successfully made allies of nobles such as Melfried and Polarth. At this rate, even Count Saturas, the ruler of the post town, may get involved. And if that happens, it might be possible to leave Cyclaeus truly isolated,” Leito said, then he turned my way. “Still, even Kamyua hadn’t predicted that the people of the forest’s edge would already have ties with Polarth. Since Kamyua can’t return to Genos just yet, the plan was actually for me to make contact with Polarth in his place tomorrow.”

“Yeah, like I said earlier, since I was careless, we had no choice but to rely on him.”

“It certainly does sound like you’ve had it rough. Kamyua never guessed Cyclaeus’s daughter would do such a thing. But it seems there’s more and more criticism of Cyclaeus throughout the post town now, so it looks like something good came of your troubles, at least.”

Still, I wasn’t exactly in a position to say, “Glad to hear it!” to that. And Ludo Ruu was also making a rather displeased face, too.

Despite all that, Leito maintained a cheery smile as he continued on, “These circumstances may be similar to when Kamyua was attempting to entrap Zattsu and Tei Suun. Kamyua had set up all sorts of plans in advance in both cases, only for the people of the forest’s edge to move things in a better direction of their own volition first, before he could execute any of them. Perhaps it’s strange to say when we’re both up against the same foe, but it really does feel like the winds of fate are blowing your way now.”

“Hey kid, you said you were Kamyua Yoshu’s disciple, right? But there’s no need to go mimicking your master’s way of life so exactly, y’know,” Bartha chided Leito in an intimidating tone. “Everybody’s got their own thoughts and feelings. If you forget that and go toying with everyone’s fates as you please, you really could meet with a terrible end.”

“I don’t really think I’m toying with anyone’s fate. I simply believe you might not be able to live a joyful life even if you accept the fate given to you by the gods as is.”

“I’m telling you, it’s not good to go around saying stuff like that...” Bartha said with a frown. She traced what looked like a pentagram with her finger in front of her chest, then mumbled something in her mouth. Maybe it was a prayer begging forgiveness from the western god Selva for Leito’s disrespect.

“At any rate, the die has already been cast. Kamyua will definitely keep on working to expose Cyclaeus’s old crimes.”

“But it doesn’t seem like he’ll make it back in time for the meeting, does it? Isn’t Kamyua worried about leaving everything up to Zasshuma and Melfried?” I interjected.

“Hmm,” Leito murmured as he shifted into a cute thinking pose. “It certainly wouldn’t hurt if Kamyua made it back in person. But if that militia group deployed to the north was assembled to capture thieves dressed as people of the forest’s edge... It could prove a bit difficult to break through.”

“So Cyclaeus really does intend to frame Kamyua and those men from the Ruu clan as bandits?”

“I don’t know anything for certain. But rumors of those bandits had reached all the way to Banarm when we were resting there, so Kamyua must have been able to predict that much.”

So that guy was still plotting away with his usual aloof grin, even when he was traveling distant lands, huh?

A sort of lethargic silence fell over the room, only to be broken by Bartha’s booming voice.

“You guys sure stuck your necks into some troublesome stuff too, eh? If you hunters had just kept to the mountain where you belonged, you never would’ve gotten tangled up in this mess, y’know.”

“Yes, but the people of the forest’s edge ended up having bad blood between us and Cyclaeus anyway, completely unrelated to Kamyua Yoshu’s actions. I figure there was probably no way of avoiding the current situation...”

“Hmph, what a waste. It’s not often you see a mountain with hundreds of fine hunters like this.”

With that, Ludo Ruu's expression shifted a bit more toward his usual one as he leaned forward.

"That reminds me, you're a hunter too, right? This is my first time seeing a woman hunter other than Ai Fa."

"Yeah, since I was born on Masara to start with. Of course, I ran away once I hit eighteen, and then I met Goram... And in the end I lost that new life of mine too, and had to head back home, where I didn't even have any family left."

"Hmm... But you're not wearing the garb of a hunter. Even though that Jeeda kid had a cloak made from the pelt of some sort of leopard..."

"A gaaje leopard pelt, you mean. I'd seriously stand out if I wore something like that around here, now wouldn't I? So I left it at home."

We covered such weighty topics all throughout the day, so maybe it was about time that everyone got sick of talking about Cyclaeus.

Well, we had already more or less covered all the essential information. Donda Ruu and everyone else seemed to trust Bartha enough to allow her to stay in the settlement at least, so that meant all we had to do was just wait till the 15th of the white month.

As those thoughts ran through my head, the tension drained from my shoulders, but then I saw Ai Fa suddenly open her mouth after staying silent for so long, causing me to snap back to attention.

"Bartha of Masara... Are you saying you were born into a line of hunters, then?"

As she scratched her rugged chin, Bartha turned toward Ai Fa.

"It's nothing that grandiose. Just that when you're born at the foot of Masara, all you can do for a living is hunt barobaro birds. If I recall correctly, I was fifteen when I first took down a gaaje leopard and was recognized as a full-fledged adult."

"I was also fifteen when I was first able to take down a giba on my own..."

"Ooh, giba are supposed to be just as tough as gaaje leopards, right? That sure is something, with those frail little arms you've got," Bartha said with a

bright grin. It was a manly and fierce smile, but also quite charming at the same time. “Still, it’s true that you’ve got the fine gaze of a hunter, too. There aren’t that many female hunters even back on Masara. When you’re born as big as me it’s no trouble, but running around the forest is tough for your average woman.”

“You...”

“Hmm? What is it?”

“It’s just... You were a hunter, and yet you had a child?”

I gulped.

However, Bartha’s smile remained unchanged.

“I mentioned it before, didn’t I? I had Jeeda after I left Masara. My family was all killed by gaaje leopards and nobody was gonna have me marry into their house, so I left home for a while. And then on account of my strength I was accepted into the Red Beards. Less than two years later I was blessed with Jeeda. Not long after that, I lost my husband and all our comrades, so I decided to live as a hunter again.”

“I see...”

For some reason, my heart skipped a beat.

Actually, if I’m being honest, I knew the reason right from the start. Just like Ludo Ruu had said, she was the first female hunter I had met other than Ai Fa. I must have not paid attention to that point till now because I was focused on Cyclaeus instead... Plus, I suppose there was the fact that Bartha looked manlier than plenty of men out there.

“The female hunters of Masara generally quit the job after having kids. Since you can’t go up onto the mountain for years after having one, you tend to lose quite a bit of your skill and strength.”

“I see.”

“But, well, I was as strong as most guys to begin with. And I didn’t have any other way of earning coins, so I worked like crazy to build my strength back up.”

“Right...”

“Honestly, I probably wouldn’t have been able to push myself that hard if Jeeda hadn’t been around. But because of him, I couldn’t exactly give up on life.”

Ai Fa remained silent, no expression whatsoever showing on her face.

However, her blue eyes made it look like she was seriously worrying about something.

I found that a little hard to bear, and so I glanced around at everyone else.

Leito was just smiling away as he listened to the two of them talk.

Shin Ruu had been even quieter than Ai Fa, and he was staring out the window, seemingly keeping attentive watch.

As for Ludo Ruu... His gaze met mine, and he shot me a playful wink.

Without thinking, I turned away, then gave a small sigh. My heart hadn’t slowed its pounding in the least.

“By the way, I’ve gotta hole up here in this settlement till the 15th of the white month, don’t I?” Bartha asked, turning toward Ludo Ruu since Ai Fa had gone silent. “I know I was told not to head to town, but you’re not planning on telling me I can’t take a single step out of this house, are you?”

“Couldn’t say. Those nobles can’t exactly have their underlings sneak in during the middle of the day. But still, just staying in the house *would* be safest.”

“This ain’t no joke, kid. If I can’t so much as step outside for four whole days, I’ll end up dying of boredom.”

“You should be telling stuff like that to my old man, not me. But, well, if you’re bored then why not chop firewood or something...?”

I figured Ludo Ruu had just meant that as a joke, but when he said it Bartha’s eyes seriously lit up.

“Yeah, if you give me something to do that keeps me moving like that, then I’ll have no complaints. But I just feel restless at the thought of having nothing to do, aside from sleeping and getting fed. Could you ask your dad to do something so I don’t end up bored to death, kid?”

“My name’s not ‘kid.’ It’s Ludo Ruu.”

“Ah, guess I was being rude there, treating such a fine hunter as just some kid. Anyway, I’m counting on you, Ludo Ruu.”

With that, Ludo Ruu also broke out in a bit of an amused grin.

“You’re a strange one, y’know. It feels like you’re more like us than the average townsfolk.”

“That’s because I’m a hunter too, more or less. Though I’ve abandoned my old home once before, so I can’t exactly say I’ve devoted my soul to Masara or anything... But at any rate, I feel more at ease out on a mountain than in an overly busy town.”

It was true that Bartha wasn’t quite fully either a townsperson or a hunter, which gave her a bit of an unusual feel.

While she didn’t seem to possess the same sort of rustic honesty as the people of the forest’s edge, I could sense that she was a real free spirit, somehow. With the way she acted, it seemed less like she was afraid of the nobles, and more like she just thought it was stupid to go getting involved with guys like that.

And I suppose the way she thought of having lost her beloved husband was not that different from the way it was treated when hunters died out in the forest. At any rate, the reason she acted so frank and unaffected seemed to be less because she was unfeeling, and more because she was just plain tough.

“Well, let’s save talking about tomorrow for when it comes. It’s already gotten awfully late, so it’s time to call it a day,” Ludo Ruu said as he grabbed his blade and stood. “You and the kid can have the inner room. Shin Ruu and I will be keeping watch just in case, so don’t go making any questionable moves.”

“Yup, I expect I’ll be sleeping like a baby soon.”

Everyone else started following Ludo’s example and rising to their feet.

Ai Fa and I had no need to do so, though, so Ludo Ruu ended up staring down at us.

“Asuta, Ai Fa, you two are going to sleep in the main hall like always? That’s a

weird thing to do, when there are plenty of rooms to go around."

"The Fa house only has rooms for storage, so I've always slept in the main hall for quite some time now."

"I see. Well, do as you like. And you don't need to worry about us," Ludo Ruu said in a tone that made it sound like he was about to whistle or something, then he headed off with the other three.

There was a hallway at the far end of the main hall, and Bartha and Leito headed to a room back there to sleep. Since Donda Ruu didn't fully trust Kamyua Yoshu, Ludo and Shin Ruu took turns keeping watch over the pair.

And in the meantime, we remained in the main hall.

The silence lingering in the air felt almost heavy, somehow.

"Ah... Should we get to sleep, too?"

"Right," Ai Fa replied, but she didn't move. Her blonde hair also remained done up, too.

Figuring there was nothing else I could do, I went ahead and laid down first.

And then, I thought to myself. *Even if women were permitted to be hunters on Masara, and Bartha kept on hunting after having a child, that has nothing to do with us...*

I certainly wasn't prepared to go marrying anyone here in this world.

And as for Ai Fa, she was firmly ready to die out in the forest as a hunter.

It was only right for us to keep on going as we had up till now... At least, probably.

But is that really true...?

Only Ai Fa knew how she really felt. And as for my own feelings, they were a mystery even to me.

I was someone who could eventually just up and disappear from this world. In fact, I didn't even know by what logic I was here in this world to begin with. And so I didn't think it was right for me to take a bride and have kids without the proper resolve.

But what did I even mean when I thought about resolve?

After all, even if I could disappear someday, what made that different from anyone else not knowing when they might die?

Up until yesterday, I had spent a number of days without Ai Fa. It had felt like I wasn't even living, and it caused me more suffering than I had ever imagined. If I had never been able to see Ai Fa again after that, would I really not have had any regrets?

The way that I truly didn't want to lose Ai Fa, but held myself back from crossing that final line out of some sense of decorum or ethics... Would I truly not regret that?

As that thought passed through my mind, I felt a warmth on my back.

Still, I had figured that may happen, so I wasn't especially shocked. My heartbeat still definitely picked up the pace, though.

"Don't say a thing," Ai Fa whispered from right behind my neck.

She was snuggled up close along my back, her fingers gripping firmly around my shoulders.

"I truly am blessed, being with you like this," Ai Fa quietly stated. "I have no complaints about my current life with you. I'm already perfectly content. That's how I truly feel..."

I feel exactly the same way, I replied in my heart.

Did I have the resolve needed to tread further past this current happiness?

And did Ai Fa want anything further, too?

It ended up being the sort of night where such questions kept on piercing deep into my chest.

Chapter 2: Reopening

1

It was now the following day, the 11th of the white month.

Just as we had planned, it was the day I once again started doing business in the stalls. And since Lefreya had me kidnapped on the fifth of the white month, it was my first time working them in six whole days.

I went ahead and left the giba burgers up to Reina Ruu's group as I had up till now, while I took charge of the myamuu giba stall. Ultimately, both stalls prepared a hundred meals in total.

We settled on that number because it had worked for us last time we reopened for business. And from tomorrow on, we were going to adjust based on how things went.

"Man, things really do pick up when it's been a while! I don't think we've had this many customers since the days we closed down for the clan head meeting, right?" Lala Ruu questioned from beside me with a grin. For today, she was the one assisting over in my stall.

By the time the morning rush had passed, we had already sold forty myamuu giba. At this rate, we could be confident that there was no need to worry about having significant leftovers, which was a relief.

Since this was the first time in days we were selling myamuu giba, the customers from the south in particular seemed especially overjoyed. Just seeing their smiles alone was enough to fill my heart with glee, too.

It wasn't like preparing food for the inns didn't feel meaningful or anything, but there really was a special sort of fulfillment that only came from running the stalls and seeing my customers' smiles up close and personal.



And it was with such satisfaction filling me up inside that I glanced over at Reina Ruu, who was currently taking a break in the neighboring stall.

“Reina Ruu, how did things go on your end?”

“Well, we sold around thirty or so meals, which is pretty much the same as yesterday.”

“It was twenty-eight, not thirty. Yesterday was thirty-four and the day before that was thirty-seven, so there definitely appears to have been an impact on sales,” Tsuvai chimed in using a provocative tone.

Reina Ruu, however, just stared down at the girl with a puzzled look.

“Tsuvai, you seem to have some sort of issue with Asuta, but you’re only able to do this job in the first place because you received his cooking lessons, right?”

“I know all that! And it’s not like I’m actually complaining or anything, you know!” Tsuvai shrilly objected. She really was the same as always.

Still, I was honestly rather fond of that girl with her unusually strong economic sense for a person of the forest’s edge, and I figured her level of twistedness was forgivable considering she was raised under the messed up environment of the main Suun house.

At any rate, she was now working with us too since Reina Ruu and the others had run both stalls while I was away.

Lala Ruu and I manned the myamuu giba stall. Meanwhile, Reina and Sheera Ruu plus Tsuvai were still running two giba burger stalls. And when the sun hit its peak, Reina Ruu and I would be leaving the stalls, so Li Sudra and Ama Min Rutim were set to come help out in our place.

The Rutim had previously been shorthanded on women and unable to spare any to help out with the stalls, but thanks to them welcoming Tsuvai and her mother Oura into their number, they gained a little bit of leeway to work with.

And officially, the only ones the Fa clan was actually employing were Lala Ruu and Li Sudra. The rest of the women were here to do business on behalf of the Ruu clan itself.

With their own judgment and skill, they formed a contract with Milano Mas,

prepared their meals, and sold them. And Tsuvai didn't need to worry, as all of the profits were the property of the Ruu clan. That meant the Fa clan's income had decreased, but naturally neither I nor Ai Fa were upset by that fact.

"How does it feel, working again for the first time in a while, Asuta?" Ai Fa quietly asked as she stood on guard.

Shin Ruu, meanwhile, was stationed over by the giba burger stalls.

The six guards today also included Ludo Ruu. He and the other three were all hanging out in the thicket to the rear as they fulfilled their duty.

"Hmm, no surprise, but I'm really glad to be back. I just hope this incident can be wrapped up smoothly so we can keep on doing business here in the post town."

As Ai Fa glanced over at my face, she broke out in a smile, unable to hold it back.

"You truly do seem happy..."

"Yeah, thanks."

By the time we woke today, Ai Fa had fully returned to normal. Bartha's presence definitely caused ripples in not only my heart, but Ai Fa's too... Of course, Ai Fa wasn't the sort to let that show in front of others. Still, her smile now was incredibly gentle, and I found it extremely heartening.

And Lala Ruu seemingly noticed, as she leaned in and whispered into my ear, "Hey, Ai Fa's been showing a lot more emotion lately, hasn't she? Every once in a while, she even gets into a shouting match with Ludo."

"Yeah. I'd say she's been opening up to everyone, in her own unique way," I replied in a whisper, thinking all the while that Ai Fa had shown me so much more of herself than what you could see on her face now.

At that, Lala Ruu broke out in a cheery grin.

"It isn't rare to see men who are all untalkative like Ai Fa. Thinking about it that way, it just means she's more like a hunter, not that she's particularly unfriendly or anything."

"That's kinda mean. You seriously thought of Ai Fa like that, Lala Ruu?"

“Hmph! I mean, she really *did* act all coldly toward us, so I can’t see any reason for you to go complaining, especially when you two are so showy about how close you are.”

“Calling us ‘showy’ is pretty mean, too...”

It was then that Ai Fa called out, “Asuta,” again.

I shrugged my shoulders, figuring she had overheard my secret conversation there with Lala Ruu, but apparently that wasn’t the case. Instead, it turned out there was a familiar figure approaching from the north.

The westerner was well into middle age with gray streaks in his hair, and his firm build was wrapped in shabby clothing coated in soot. In other words, it was Mikel of Turan.

“Ah, Mikel...”

I called out to the older man, only to get cut off by a blunt, “So you really did make it back after all. That takes some impressive dumb luck, escaping after being captured by a noble like that. And with the way you’ve started doing business again without a care in the world, you must be seriously nuts.”

The man seemed to be just as obstinate and grouchy as always. And his face that looked like it was carved into an oak was no different, either. Still, it made me really glad to see how he hadn’t changed in the least.

“Sorry, I know I caused a lot of trouble...”

“That’s for sure. This is what happens when you ignore people’s warnings, kid. Now, luck might have saved you this time around, but you won’t get off lightly if you go around making enemies of nobles.”

It was then that Ai Fa stepped forwards and greeted him, “Mikel of Turan.”

I suddenly felt dread for a moment, but contrary to my expectations, Ai Fa was just nodding Mikel’s way.

“It is in part thanks to your efforts that Asuta returned to us safely. As the clan head of the Fa, I wish to give you my thanks.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about... All that happened was some unfamiliar red-headed kid asked me where Count Turan’s manor was, and I told

him.”

“And that saved Asuta. Even after warning him again and again not to get involved with nobles, you still lent him your aid, which we will never forget.”

At that, Mikel fell sullenly silent.

And after giving one more nod, Ai Fa withdrew.

“At any rate, I’ve got no interest in getting involved in any quarrels with nobles. I just came here to buy a snack because I was feeling hungry,” Mikel said, slapping down his red coins.

“Right, thanks for your continued business. Um... Jeeda hasn’t shown himself to you since then, has he?”

“Of course he hasn’t. That kid’s a criminal wanted throughout the post town, right? I’ve got no business with criminals, either.”

I wanted to offer an explanation on Jeeda’s behalf, but it wasn’t the sort of thing to be discussed with so many people around, so I just prepared the myamuu giba instead.

When Mikel bit into it, I saw his eyes clearly sparkle from underneath his prominent eyebrows.

“This tastes different... Did you use tau oil?”

“Yes. There’s no fooling your tongue, is there?”

I had been eager to try adding tau oil to the marinade for the myamuu giba for a while now. But I didn’t want to go thoughtlessly changing up a popular recipe, so I was waiting for a good opportunity to try it out, and now that I was coming back from a five-day break, this seemed like the perfect chance.

I had only used a small amount so that it wouldn’t have a significant impact on the ingredient costs, but I still believed it had improved the flavor. The initial idea for my myamuu giba dish came from pork fried with ginger, so if it were possible I would have even liked to have tau oil form the base of the flavor.

“You can get a hold of such first-rate seasoning out here in the post town, too? It’s only natural that’d improve the dish’s taste.”

“Right. Apparently anyone with ties to Jagar can buy some, even here. Of course it costs a fair bit, so I can’t go using it haphazardly.”

“Hmph...” Mikel snorted as he slowly worked away at his myamuu giba.

As I watched him, I went ahead and threw out the question that came to mind.

“Umm, do you know someone named Roy, Mikel?”

“Roy? Never heard of him.”

“I see. He’s a chef employed at the manor where I was being held. And he acted as if he knew you.”

Perhaps I shouldn’t have been touching on his personal history so much, but Mikel didn’t seem especially annoyed... Or it might be more accurate to say his mouth had been twitching and grimacing in annoyance from the get go.

But then, his jaw suddenly stopped.

“Now that I think about it... Back when I worked at The Maiden in White, I think there was some kid apprenticing there with a name like that...”

“Ah, he mentioned that shop, too. His hair was dark brown and kinda curly, and he was about my height. And I believe he said he was nineteen.”

“Ooh, so that kid got invited to that manor so young? That sure is something.” Mikel didn’t seem all that interested though, as he soon resumed eating. “Still, once you’re summoned to that place, you either have to spend your whole life cooking for the master of the manor, or have all honor stripped from you as you’re driven out. And the chefs who get thrown out of there can never work in the castle town again, so that really is a fatal blow.”

“What sort of ridiculous rule is that...? It’s just plain awful.”

“If you’ve got a problem with that, then you can get on out of Genos. The nobles are the ones who make the laws for this town, so commoners trying to oppose them are only making fools of themselves.”

“Then why...” I started, meaning to ask, “Why didn’t you leave Genos?” but I stopped myself. I figured it wasn’t right to get all nosy and pry any further into Mikel’s painful past than I already had.

However, Mikel firmly glared at me and said, “It was because I had family here, too. And until they could live on their own, I couldn’t go running away or dying or anything. You can’t leave Genos either because you’ve got something tying you to this place, right?”

“Yes...”

“In that case, you should learn some restraint so you don’t go about causing trouble for your family,” Mikel stated, then he suddenly leaned in. “More importantly, did the owner of that manor eat your cooking? Around town, they’re saying his daughter was the culprit, but still...”

“I don’t believe her father had so much as a bite.”

“I see. In that case, don’t go forgetting my warning. If he learns of your skills, you’ll never make it back outside those stone walls.”

He would do whatever it took to take control of chefs he favored, and if they refused he would make certain they had no future cooking. On top of that, any chefs who didn’t meet his expectations were driven from the castle town... Those methods were completely and utterly beyond reason.

“Why is that man so obsessed with delicious food, anyway? From what you’ve said, his fixation is way beyond what anyone could call normal.”

“Hmph... Everyone’s scared of dying, so it shouldn’t be any surprise to find out how brightly someone’s passions burn. And when that someone is as rich as he is, that just makes them all the more fixated on ruling here in this life as long as possible.”

I really didn’t get what he was saying at all.

But as I tried to process that comment, Mikel glared right at me again.

“Didn’t you see him face to face? The man is riddled with disease. It’s the sort of illness of the organs only suffered by nobles living lives of luxury. His elaborate dining caused that sickness in the first place, but he’s trying to overcome it with even more luxurious cuisine...”

I was at a loss for words.

I had thought Cyclaeus’s complexion made him look ill, but he really *was*

sick...

Then with how pale his face was... Could it be his kidneys? Or maybe his liver?

Either way, it would be difficult to recover once those organs were ailing.

“They had you working the kitchen in that manor, right...? Then you must have seen a mountain of herbs ordered from Sym and dried gyama entrails and the like used for medicinal cooking, right?”

“N-No, I only worked in a small kitchen meant for preparing meals for the servants. There were a lot of unusual ingredients like sugar, honey, and oil, but I don’t believe there was anything quite that specialized.”

“Hmph. That man values his kitchen as much as his treasure vault, so I guess it makes sense you wouldn’t be allowed to set foot in there. And honestly, you’re lucky you weren’t.” Mikel half closed his eyes as he stared off into space. “His illness was caused by luxurious dining, so it would be wisest to just cut all that out. But that man with his excess of wealth went and chose the opposite. He started gathering all sorts of ingredients from the whole continent, trying to find some sort of meal that would cure him. I’m sure that’s because he couldn’t stand the thought of having to spend the rest of his life sipping down nothing but bitter broth made from medicinal herbs.”

“B-But in that case, he shouldn’t have any need for stuff like tau oil, sugar, and milk fat, right? I don’t know exactly what sort of illness he has, but if luxurious dining was the cause, then he really should be refraining when it comes to things like salt, sugar, and oils.”

“The fact that he can’t accept that thought is exactly why he’s taken to having herbs and the like to counteract all the junk incorporated into his meals. Because he couldn’t discard his desire to eat delicious food, even when suffering from illness.” With a firm shake of his head, Mikel grabbed the fingers on his right hand with his left. Because he had turned down one of Cyclaeus’s requests, the tendons in his arm had been severed, leaving him unable to move them properly.

“There was no way he could ever overcome his illness like that. And I had no interest in spending my life continuing to cook food that would wreck a man’s body. Well... I guess his life would’ve run out before mine in that case, though.”

With that, Mikel returned to his usual displeased expression and glared at me again. “I’ve been running my mouth way too much... At any rate, if you want to live as a proper chef, you shouldn’t have anything to do with that guy.”

“Right,” I nodded as Roy suddenly came to mind.

Had that young chef known the truth? If he did and was continuing to experiment with cooking techniques, well, in that case I would have to say it was not my problem... But if he didn’t, he had a dangerous fate ahead of him.

“So you’re saying that noble won’t have long left even if we simply leave him be...?” Ai Fa suddenly interjected.

Mikel glared her way out of the corner of his eye.

“There’s no way I could tell. If the medicine in his meals works more than the stuff poisoning him, then maybe he could make it five or even ten years... Besides, it seems that man’s convictions have been firmly inherited by his daughter, right?” Mikel replied as he looked over me and Ai Fa. “Even if that man does up and die, his daughter will take over as the next head of his house. And when that happens, you may just end up with another troublesome enemy on your hands again.”

Cyclaeus’s daughter, Lefreya. Was that girl also utterly obsessed with delicious food?

I had been told so many things at once that I was having trouble getting my thoughts and feelings straight.

“If you can, then you should leave this town. But, well, if you can’t, then I’ll keep coming to buy your cooking till you end up abducted behind those stone walls again...”

With those words, Mikel promptly departed.

◇

The sun had hit its peak.

After handing off the stall work to Li Sudra and Ama Min Rutim, Reina Ruu and I headed off for The Sledgehammer with our group of six bodyguards, including Ai Fa.

But ultimately, Reina Ruu was the one in charge for today. I was just taking over the cooking assistant position previously held by Vina and Lala Ruu.

It would be possible for me to resume my work there as soon as tomorrow, but I still didn't know what would happen after the 15th of the white month. And so I had come along today in order to explain those complicated circumstances.

"But if you do end up working with the inns again, who exactly will assist you? Currently, only Lala and Li Sudra are helping out the Fa clan, right?" Reina Ruu asked, causing me to think for a moment.

"In that case... I guess I'll have to have Lala Ruu come around to the inns with me, and have Ama Min Rutim work for the Fa clan."

"I see. So you plan to have Lala accompany you instead of me or Sheera Ruu..."

"Yeah, since you two are in charge of the Ruu clan's stalls now. I can't go treating you two like assistants anymore, now can I?"

With that, Reina Ruu's face took on a clearly saddened expression.

"Huh? Is there some sort of issue with that?"

"Yes. Sheera Ruu and I both still need your instruction. As things stand, it will be difficult for us to improve on dishes other than giba burgers and soup... I'd really like you to consider taking one of us with you on days when you're working at the inns, instead of Lala..."

"Ah, I see. If that's how you two feel, then I'll try not to be too fixated on who's in charge of what."

By the way, for today after I slipped out, Lala and Sheera Ruu swapped positions. That was because Sheera Ruu and I were the only ones capable of properly cooking up myamuu giba at present.

On days like this where I left the stalls, I had no choice but to rely on Sheera Ruu, so I had figured it wouldn't be right to take away Reina Ruu as a cooking assistant when she was the other one in charge... But to be honest, I wanted to let both of them build up a lot more experience.

“Hmm, right... I think pretty soon Li Sudra will be at the point where we can leave the myamuu giba entirely up to her. In that case, I guess it would be possible to have Sheera Ruu come around to the inns, too.”

“Right... I still haven’t learned how to prepare that dish, though, so I find it a bit frustrating.”

Reina Ruu still hadn’t mastered how exactly to cook the myamuu giba recipe we sold, which used somewhat heavier seasoning. But she hadn’t worked the stalls for that long yet and specialized in taking charge of the giba burgers, plus she had taken on the work of heading around to the inns after the sun hit its peak. So really, there was no helping that.

“In that case, I’d like to have you practice creating myamuu giba with the proper flavor. And then, if Sheera Ruu can also make giba soup for the inns, I figure that would give us quite a bit more flexibility.” With Reina and Sheera Ruu, they would probably be able to pick up the recipes within just a couple of days. “Also, I’d like to head to The Kimyuus’s Tail each day. If I’m always around for business with the inns and either you or Sheera Ruu work with me in turns, that may help smooth things over. Just like how you all were in charge today and I was the assistant, there could also be times like that where I’m leading things and you’re helping out.”

“Right. Sheera Ruu and I would both be very happy if we could do so,” Reina Ruu said as her previously gloomy expression instantly burst into a bright smile. “But if the meeting with that noble doesn’t go well, all this decision making will be for nothing...”

“Yeah. Donda Ruu, Kamyua Yoshu and so many others are striving hard to make sure that doesn’t happen, but I’ve honestly got no clue how it’ll all play out.”

“Even if it takes time to settle everything, as long as we can stay at the Morga forest’s edge like we have up till now in order to someday start doing business again, then that will be enough for me. The dangers now feel a lot less worrying compared to all that time when we didn’t even know where you were,” Reina Ruu said with an innocent smile. It was so worry-free that she was reminding me of her little sister, Rimee Ruu.

And so, I earnestly replied, “Thanks,” with a nod.

It was then that I thought I felt a gaze on the back of my neck, so I turned around to look. However, I didn’t see anybody looking my way. And yet, Ai Fa was frowning and looking over the passersby with a piercing glare. Had she just now averted her eyes from me with her hunter’s instincts before I could turn around to see her looking?

“Is something the matter?” Reina Ruu questioned.

“No, it’s nothing,” I answered with a shake of my head.

Even Ai Fa would be glad if Reina Ruu and I formed a healthy relationship through our cooking and business, right...? Probably...

As all that was happening, we arrived at The Sledgehammer.

And yet, I felt like I wanted to sigh.

That was because along that narrow road through the residential district with its little houses sat the huge totos-drawn carriage belonging to the house of Count Daleim.

“Ah, we’ve been awaiting you, Sir Asuta. Let us hurry and bring this discussion to a conclusion.”

After Nail led me into the dining hall I found Polarth awaiting me along with three guards and one other man, a thin guy who looked to be well into middle age.

After letting out another sigh, I sat down right across from Polarth.

“What is it today, exactly? I believe I should have already told you everything you needed yesterday...”

“Indeed. We were able to bake up poitan splendidly by following your instructions! Currently, we are in the midst of confirming how long the baked poitan and the uncooked poitan dough will last for. It would certainly be quite helpful if the poitan in that boiled and dried form can be preserved for at least as long as ground fuwano, but I suppose we shall see.”

I was rather taken aback to find he had already taken things that far. And actually, how long powdered poitan would last was something I had wanted to

check for a while now, myself.

“And so, I believe first we must spread knowledge of how delicious baked poitan is throughout the post town, in order to sell its flour and in turn raise the profits of the plantations! Right now we’re in the midst of garnering Count Saturas’s support and searching for inns and stalls that will choose to handle poitan in place of fuwano, but aside from that, we’re also forming a plan to sell our own cuisine.”

“Your own? You mean opening a stall or something?”

“That’s right! At any rate, there’s nothing for catching attention quite like selling delicious food! It seems the meals you people of the forest’s edge sell have built up quite a reputation here in the post town, but regrettably, there are surely still many westerners who want nothing to do with giba meat. Similarly, I have yet to work up the nerve to taste such dishes myself.”

“Right...”

“And so, I had been thinking of using the great many ingredients that can be obtained in the castle town in order to come up with a dish that seems like it will sell. There is no need to turn a profit from the endeavor, so I figured selling an elaborate dish would be just fine. And yet, my head chef chided me, saying such a thing would not be proper.”

It seemed the older man sitting there quietly next to Polarth was the head chef in question.

He looked rather intimidated being in the presence of hunters from the forest’s edge like Ai Fa and Shin Ruu, but he suddenly sat up straight.

“This is the man in question, the head chef in charge of the Daleim house’s kitchen, Yang. Yang, could you repeat what you said to me once more?”

“Yes... My apologies for saying so, but it’s only natural that a dish using higher-quality ingredients will be improved. But if you earn a reputation that way, the poitan will end up being overshadowed. So if you’re selling a dish in the post town, I believe it would be best to stick to ingredients usually handled there.”

“There you have it. And so, we have been waiting here as you see, to hear

your opinion as one who has already found success here in the post town."

"Got it, that makes sense. But in my case, I had giba meat itself to seriously help me out. It's a very fatty meat, which I believe makes it a higher-quality ingredient than either karon legs or kimyuus legs with the skin still attached."

"Ah, skinless kimyuus meat is quite wretched. And I cannot say that I've ever eaten karon leg meat..."

"Karon legs are sold to the post town, while the rest of the meat goes to the castle town. It's been that way for many years," Yang explained in a rather stiff tone.

That thin man couldn't have weighed more than half of what Polarth did, but there seemed to be some sort of pride or willfulness or something to his skinny face.

"To start with, Yang here has animosity toward expensive ingredients, despite living in the castle town. It seems his belief is that such things are all bought up by chefs working for Count Cyclaeus, yet the taste of a dish isn't decided by the cost of its ingredients."

"I see. I'd have to say that I'm in agreement, there," I earnestly replied.

Honestly, I felt shocked to find there was a chef with that much of a backbone living in the castle town.

"But that may make it difficult to create a dish that would earn a reputation. I mean, you cannot obtain reten oil, mamaria vinegar, or Jagar-made sugar in the post town, can you? I simply cannot see how you could produce proper cooking like that," the old man opined.

"Ah, hold on a moment. I've been experimenting with dishes using not just giba meat, but karon and kimyuus too lately. And my first step had been trying to figure out if I could use karon milk here in the post town... Is it difficult to make dried milk and milk fat from the stuff, though?"

"To manufacture dried milk, you would need the proper equipment first. But milk fat wouldn't be all that difficult..." the head chef replied, only for his eyes to suddenly light up with understanding. "But from what I know, karon leg meat and skinless kimyuus meat are lacking in fat. So I can't see how one could

produce anything but a mediocre dish from them without using reten oil. But if you used milk fat... That alone would probably be enough to improve the quality of the dish."

"So you can produce milk fat on your own?"

"As long as you have the hands needed, it's entirely possible. First you leave the karon milk to sit overnight, then scoop off the fat that floats to the top, and finally seal it in a leather bag and beat it."

"Ah, that way you further separate the liquid from the fat, right?" I replied, somehow starting to feel excited myself for some reason. "So, what about the price? I've heard you can buy a bottle of karon milk for a single red coin or so, but you can only extract a tiny amount of fat from that, right?"

"That's true. But the amount of milk fat used in a single meal is hardly anything. If people learn we're using both baked poitan and milk fat, it should be possible to earn quite a bit of attention throughout the post town, wouldn't you say?"

"How wonderful. I feel as though I can see the light of hope shining bright," Polarth chimed in with a great big smile. "Would it be possible to also employ sugar from Jagar and tau oil? That way, would it not be possible to produce a far more competent dish?"

"I get a hold of tau oil through an inn owner I know, but from what I hear you can only get sugar in the castle town."

"Is that so? Is sugar truly that expensive?"

"No," the head chef answered Polarth with a shake of his head. "Compared to tau oil, sugar isn't all that pricey, of course. The issue is Count Cyclaeus always hurriedly buying it up. And at present, the people living in the castle town scramble to purchase any that is leftover once he's done."

"I see. That only makes it all the more necessary that we take down Lord Cyclaeus," Polarth stated, his expression perfectly calm despite how threatening his statement was. "Still, I suppose the karon milk must come first. Lord Cyclaeus hasn't been purchasing all of that, now has he?"

"That's right. After all, the merchants from Dabagg also see karon milk as

something that can only be sold in nearby towns. So they only portion out what's necessary and sell that."

"In that case, it should be possible to buy karon milk in the post town and use it to make milk fat, right?" I excitedly chimed in, only for the head chef to shoot me an intense look for some reason.

"You're called Sir Asuta of the Fa clan, correct? Are you really alright with that...?"

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"Using milk fat, it should be possible to make a first-rate dish even using ingredients like karon leg meat. In that case, wouldn't your giba meat cooking lose the advantage it gains from having plenty of fat?"

I wasn't worried about that in the least.

"The giba meat itself is also delicious. At the very least, I don't believe it's in any way inferior to kimyuus with the skin still attached. If giba meat stopped selling just because there was milk fat around, that would mean it was never worth selling to begin with."

"It would seem that you have quite a bit of confidence."

"Yes. Not in my cooking skills, but in how delicious giba meat is."

The head chef fell into incredulous silence, and so Polarth chuckled and spoke up in his place.

"So modest, Sir Asuta! Though I myself was only granted the honor of tasting your cooking just once, that fried kimyuus dish was simply exquisite! Despite your youth, your skills are truly excellent. That is precisely why I wished to consult with you as such."

"Ah... I'm honored, but you're giving me more praise than I deserve," I replied, and then suddenly remembered a question I had. "By the way, there's something I wanted to know, too. How long does baked fuwano last, exactly? And does drying it out alter the texture?"

"Baked fuwano grows dry and hard overnight. Naturally, it is best to eat it freshly baked."

“Even so, it won’t go bad for a few days... I’ve heard that many travelers will dry fuwano out and boil it up in a soup made with water and vegetables for short journeys. But most travelers still seek out poitan instead as it’s cheaper and doesn’t taste any worse,” the head chef explained, which was enough to satisfy me.

“Thank you. The truth is, I was wondering if I could create a dish where I made a fried coating using finely-ground dried fuwano. And so I was planning on buying fuwano as soon as today and letting it dry out overnight.”

Fuwano very closely resembled wheat, so if I dried out baked fuwano and then dry fried it, then it would likely create a suitable panko substitute. At the very least, I had to figure it would work out at least as well as substitutes like crushed rice crackers or peanuts.

“Drying out baked fuwano, and then grinding it again? What a truly unusual trick. Can you make delicious dishes like that, then?”

“Yes. I think I could make something at least on the level of that fried kimyuus you had the other day.”

And if I could get a hold of eggs too, then I could also take a crack at stuff like cutlets and croquettes.

Of course, those required quite a bit of giba lard, so it would probably be tricky to work them into my business in the post town... But just picturing how Ai Fa and everyone else would react was enough to cause my heart to soar.

It was then that I suddenly recalled Mikel’s words. An illness of the internal organs, caused by extravagant dining...

Fried foods are like the poster child for high calorie dishes...

If that was the only issue, it wouldn’t likely be a big concern as the people of the forest’s edge could just work those calories off through the intense manual labor involved in their day-to-day lives. But I really couldn’t help worrying about the fact that on top of that, those dishes would also be a whole lot more fatty than anything I had made for them before.

In that case, what if I prepared a lot of vegetables to go with it...? The important things are the dietary fiber and citric acid, so maybe tino, tarapa, and

gigo? I could probably make something that tastes pretty similar to Worcestershire sauce by adapting tau oil, but maybe it'd be better to give the people of the forest's edge a refreshing flavor using sheel juice or something...

Like Mikel said, I too had absolutely no interest in making meals that would make a mess of people's bodies.

While such thoughts were still racing through my head, Polarth suddenly energetically proclaimed, "Very well, then! Let us hurry and send an envoy to Dabagg! As long as we give them some coins, they could bring karon milk back as soon as tomorrow. Yang, prepare to open the shop by the day after tomorrow."

"Huh? You're opening for business that soon?"

"Indeed. To be honest, I would prefer to open tomorrow instead. But at any rate, we must make our move before Lord Cyclaeus catches on regardless, and it would be best to shake him up by providing results before your meeting with him on the 15th of the white month, yes? Sir Zasshuma informed me as such."

"Well, you're not wrong, but..."

But the 15th was just four days from now.

Would such a rushed endeavor seriously produce results?

"It will be fine. This is a critical moment for me too, in which I could easily be abandoned by my father as a result. And so I shall give my utmost to ensure a bright future for the house of Daleim, the people of the forest's edge, and all living here in Genos. So to start with, look forward to what we shall have to show two days from now!" Polarth stated, smiling away all the while.

2

After saying farewell to Polarth, we were fortunately able to wrap up our day's business without any more disturbances worth mentioning.

At The Sledgehammer and The Great Southern Tree, Reina Ruu made her giba soup and we dropped off some raw giba meat, then at The Kimyuus's Tail, I experimented with karon meat. Meanwhile, Sheera Ruu and her group were

carrying out their work at the stalls.

It was also worth noting that both stalls managed to sell all one hundred meals they had prepared. There was no way to know whether or not that momentum would continue, though, so for now the plan was to prepare the same amount for tomorrow and see how things went.

On another note, as of last night, Milano Mas finally took the plunge and started selling the kimyuus meatballs. Once he tried it with the dip made from dried kiki, which was like pickled plums, he apparently decided there wouldn't be any issues offering it. "Thanks to that, I've only had karon meat left unsold," Milano Mas had informed me.

And so, he ended up deciding that tonight he'd also offer the fried karon strips I had tried out before. That dish involved first beating the tough karon leg meat in order to pulverize the fibers, then cutting it as thinly as possible, and finally frying it along with aria, tino, and pula. Then for flavoring, it used fruit wine and pico leaves, which you had to pay for in the post town.

It might have been possible to further improve the flavor using tau oil, but Milano Mas would never agree to purchasing some from his business rival, Naudis.

"Just using fruit wine and pico leaves is already plenty extravagant. I can't imagine any customers complaining about a dish like this," Milano Mas had said.

If this ended up doing even a little to overturn The Kimyuus's Tail's reputation of having lacking food, then I would certainly be glad to hear it.

"In that case, let's work on a soup or stew starting tomorrow. Since karon meat is apparently more suited to that anyway, I'm sure it'll turn out well."

"Still, it'll be tough if we can't use tau oil... How about something more like a stew, using tarapa?" Reina Ruu proposed, causing me to clap my hands together.

"Tarapa, huh? That could be good! As long as you boil them slowly you should be able to get a stock out of karon and kimyuus, and if we add as many different vegetables as costs allow, that sounds like it would turn out pretty good."

“Hey, did you two go and forget your original objective here...?” Milano Mas interjected, furrowing his brow. “You’re giving these lessons in the hopes that I’ll buy giba meat from you, right? That won’t really work out if you make fantastic dishes with the kimyuus and karon I’ve already got.”

“You think? Still, I don’t see any harm in preparing a new soup dish, right?”

“If you fill up my menu that much, there won’t be any room left for your giba meat.”

“I’m sure it’ll be fine. It’s not like you haven’t tried giba meat to see how incredible it is,” I said, pointedly being sarcastic with him.

Milano Mas, meanwhile, just looked annoyed as he fell silent.

“At any rate, let’s do everything we can before the 15th of the white month. I mean, just like we discussed before, right now we don’t know how long we’ll be able to keep doing business, after all.”

If we were unable to expose Cyclaeus’s true nature, then we’d be facing a long break from work.

That was because it would be roughly a month until the Fou, Ran, and Sudra would be able to take the Ruu clan’s place and act as bodyguards. When I told Nail and Naudis I might need to take that long off, they looked so overcome with sorrow that it made me want to curl up into a little ball.

“But the Ruu clan said they could still use the wagon to bring fresh giba meat during that period. And in that case, it may be possible for me to cook meals at home and have them bring that too,” I had told them, to which Nail and Naudis both enthusiastically replied, “Please do so!”

And when I informed Yumi that I wouldn’t be able to continue to continue discussing doing business with The Westerly Wind until after the 15th of the white month, she gave a hearty sigh.

“Ugh, I wish I had you bond with my dad before all this happened... Are we just fated to not work together or something?”

“I’m sure that’s not how it is. If it turns out we’re able to keep doing business, then I’ll absolutely want to speak with your father.”

“You mean it? I mean, he was furious, saying he couldn’t trust a man who went back on his word once already.”

“Hmm... Wouldn’t it be best for me to give a proper apology in person, too?”

“Ah, you better not for now. If you don’t give him a bit longer to cool off, it really could end in bloodshed... Anyway, just give it your all so you can keep on doing business in the post town!”

“Right, thanks.”

That covered all of my personal interactions.

However, there was one more matter that couldn’t be overlooked, which I learned about on the way back to the forest’s edge. It related to Gazraan Rutim. Having received permission from the leading clan heads, he had headed alone to the post town and gained an audience with Zasshuma, where he informed the man of the decisions that were made yesterday.

The people of the forest’s edge suspected Cyclaeus manipulated the criminal known as Zattsu Suun. And so, the people of the forest’s edge intended to use the meeting on the 15th of the white month in order to clear up those doubts while also discussing how the Suun clan would be handled. However, if they were not satisfied with Cyclaeus’s words, then they would refuse to hand over the Suun clan, even if it meant taking up blades.

And Gazraan Rutim also asked Zasshuma to spread that information throughout the post town.

“Hmph... Well, people are gonna talk regardless. So I suppose handing out accurate information before half-baked rumors can spread may be wise,” Zasshuma had apparently replied. “Alright, got it. I’ve got no clue how much effect it’ll have with just four days left, but I’ll use whatever sources I’ve got to spread it around.”

Things really were progressing steadily.

But just what sort of days awaited us from tomorrow onwards? With that question held firmly in my heart, we returned to the Ruu settlement.

◇

“Ah, good work, everyone,” Bartha of all people called out as we pulled the wagon around the back of the main house to find her chopping firewood.

I was even more surprised to see that there were also two men beside her working away at the same task.

“Ryada Ruu and Mida... What in the world are you two doing here?”

It was Shin and Sheera Ruu’s father Ryada Ruu as well as Mida, who currently fell under the Ruu clan.

“This guest here is every bit as strong as a hunter of the forest’s edge. As such, we were told that if we were to lend her a blade, we should have men keep watch over her,” Ryada Ruu replied just as calmly as always. He really was so slender that it made it easy to forget he was Donda Ruu’s younger brother. The blackish brown hair of this sombre man in his prime fell smoothly behind his head, and he also had a well-maintained mustache.

“But today, the other men started preparing to begin hunting again. Mida and I cannot partake in such work, though, so the task of watching over her fell to us.”

Ryada Ruu had retired from hunting when he injured his leg, while Mida was still building up stamina so that he wouldn’t be a burden.

The choice of personnel made sense when I thought about it, but seeing the trio together still left an odd sense of incongruity.

“Asuta... Did you sell lots of food?” Mida questioned, looking down at me while holding chopped firewood under his thick arms.

Though he seemed to have shed some excess fat, Mida’s huge frame still made him look like a sort of fleshy balloon.

“Yeah, since it was our first time selling myamuu giba in a while. We prepared a lot, but we still sold all of them.”

“Hmm...” Mida murmured, but he didn’t move. His little piglet-like eyes just kept on staring at me.

It was the same way he had stared at me the night before last, when I returned after days of absence.

From what I was told, Mida had been in a daze ever since he heard that someone had abducted me. Though he did finish all his work each day, he had been even less talkative than normal, and when he had free time he just sat there like a little mountain as he stared off into space.

Once I returned, Dan Rutim showed up and things got as rowdy as a banquet. That was around when Mida sluggishly came over to the main house and said, “I didn’t cry...”

That brief statement was enough to make *me* feel like sobbing.

Yamiru Lea had once said Mida’s heart was lacking some crucial piece, but it was obvious to me that he was capable of thinking of others.

Was he able to avoid growing twisted like the rest of his family despite living with Zattsu Suun due to the fact that he was oblivious to greed, or because he was strong...? There was no way I would find an answer to that question no matter how much I thought about it, but at any rate, I had no doubt at all that a pure soul fitting for a person of the forest’s edge dwelled inside his massive frame.

“Still, this sure is a ton. Have you been chopping firewood all day?” Ludo Ruu asked, peeking out from behind me.

“No...” Mida replied with a shake of his head. It didn’t move all that far, though, because his fatty cheeks and shoulders and the like got in the way. “We carried water jugs, and skinned pelts... We did all sorts of stuff today...”

“I see. Good work, there. And I’d say you’ve already chopped plenty of firewood, right? So go ahead and rest up till dinner.”

“Actually, if you’re done with your work, would you mind training with me instead, Mida?” Shin Ruu interjected.

Apparently, Shin Ruu had also practiced with Mida for contests of strength yesterday after his guard work.

The youth must have deeply regretted the fact that he was unable to protect me from Sanjura. Anyway, as Ludo Ruu watched the other boy out of the corner of his eye, he rustled his hair and said, “Shin Ruu, you’ve been working as a bodyguard day and night, too. It’s important to get your rest when you can, you

know.”

“That’s no problem. I just want to get stronger.”

“Hmm, it’s alright with me, but... Is it alright if I stop chopping wood, Ryada Ruu...?”

As Ryada Ruu stared calmly at his son’s anxious expression, he nodded back, “Alright.”

With that, Mida and Shin Ruu took off along with the other hunters acting as bodyguards. And so, the only hunters left were Ai Fa and Ludo Ruu.

“Huh? Hold on, where’d the kid get to?” Ludo Ruu asked.

“That Leito child headed off to the post town, from what I hear. He plans to carry out his own work there for the time being,” Ryada Ruu answered.

“Hmm...” Ludo Ruu murmured while furrowing his brow. He still seemed a bit uncertain about how exactly to handle Leito. It seemed less that he was worried about trusting him, and more that he was uneasy about the way the boy acted just as aloof as his master, Kamyua Yoshu, to the point that it put him off. And I was definitely of the same opinion there.

“Well then, how about we get to work too? If it’s alright, I’d like to help out with dinner again tonight, but where’s Mia Lea Ruu so I can ask?”

“Isn’t our mom in the kitchen? She should be on duty there for today.”

I nodded in response to Lala Ruu, then readjusted my grip on Gilulu’s reins.

Instantly, Bartha chimed in, “Preparing dinner, is it? If you don’t mind, could I watch? I’ve been wondering since yesterday just how exactly you made that delicious food.”

“Umm, I think you’d need permission from Mia Lea Ruu for that, since she’s in charge of the women.”

And so, our whole group headed on over to the kitchen. But when I went to peek into the open door, Vina Ruu suddenly appeared.

“My... I see you’ve all returned...”

“Yeah. Is Mom around? Asuta said he wants to help prepare dinner again.”

“Hmm... Mother should be here soon. You’re helping again today, Asuta...?”

“Yes, as long as I won’t be a hindrance.”

“I can’t imagine anyone here in this settlement would ever think of you as a hindrance...” Vina Ruu replied with an absentminded smile. Her appearance was just so seductive that my heart unwittingly skipped a beat.

Vina Ruu dripping with sex appeal certainly wasn’t anything new. In fact, it happened often enough to make me wonder if something in her body had gone out of control when it came to giving off pheromones.

But somehow, it felt like she had grown even sexier lately when I saw her. And something felt different about her lately... Her expression was always heavily anguished, and she seemed listless in a way that made it appear her mind was elsewhere.



She was clearly speaking less, and I pretty much never saw her give a carefree smile anymore. It was as if even when people were standing in front of her, her focus was far off into the distance instead. That was the state she was in, and yet she had never looked more beautiful and bewitching.

Isn't half a year a bit long to think things over...?

It had only been ten days now since Shumiral had departed from Genos, saying that he wanted to marry into the Ruu clan. What sort of work was he undertaking now, and where?

As I pondered those questions, Mia Lea Ruu suddenly appeared from the shadow of the building.

"My, so you want to help out with dinner preparations again today? I'm certainly grateful to hear it," she said with a cheerful smile. "Naturally, we welcome your help. Still, I can't help but feel awkward about having you help out day after day like this..."

"I mean, I couldn't help but worry I'd be breaking some custom of the forest's edge by asking so lightly to help man the stove, myself."

"You don't need to worry about that. With how close the Ruu and Fa are, you don't need to act so distant."

With that said, dinner was a sacred event to the people of the forest's edge, in which they partook of the living energy they needed for the day. And considering how Jiza Ruu felt about the Fa clan's actions, for example, it didn't feel right to go acting so rashly in that regard.

But as long as we were staying here in the Ruu settlement, if I didn't help make dinner then there wouldn't be any chance for me to feed Ai Fa my cooking. And considering my clan head already wanted to return to her own house but couldn't, I at least wanted to make dinner for her if nothing else.

"Help out to your heart's content! We'll take charge of the poitan and soup."

"Thank you. I'll try my hardest to satisfy everybody."

But first came the preparations for tomorrow.

Reina, Sheera, and Lala Ruu started making the hamburger patties, while I set

about chopping up the meat for the myamuu giba. Around then, Ryada Ruu returned to his own house, leaving only Ai Fa and Ludo Ruu to keep an eye on Bartha.

“Hmm, so that’s giba meat? The color sure does make it look tasty,” Bartha cheerfully called out from the corner, where she was standing so she didn’t get in our way. “I’ve got to say, I’m jealous of how you can eat the same prey you risk your life to hunt down. Gaaje leopards are man-eaters, so their only value’s in their pelt and fangs.”

“Ah, so you don’t eat carnivorous beasts on Masara either?”

Here in Genos, it was taboo to try to make a meal of the carrion-eating mundt or giiz.

“Of course we don’t. But in order to hunt barobaro birds, there’s no choice but to set foot in gaaje leopard territory. So ultimately, you need the strength to take down a gaaje leopard in order to be a hunter on Masara.”

“I see. I suppose each mountain has its own hardships, huh?” I replied to Bartha as I cut up the giba sirloin using my knife from Jagar.

By the way, Ai Fa had brought this meat over from the Fa house in the morning. She had continued to do her work as effectively as ever, even while I was kidnapped, so for the time being we would still be able to use our own meat in the business.

“So what shall we be eating tonight?” Ai Fa asked when I finished cutting the meat.

“I was thinking of going with roast giba. We haven’t had that for a while. And I was planning on using diced aria and tau oil as a base to prepare what’s known as Japanese-style sauce.”

“I see...”

Her eyes were clearly saying, “So not hamburger steak?”

If I went with a soup-and-hamburger meal, I probably wouldn’t get any complaints from Donda Ruu or any of the others who were difficult to please, but it didn’t seem like something they would especially welcome, either. And

so, I shot Ai Fa back a look that said, “We’re freeloaders here, so we can’t be selfish with what we serve.”

However, my clan head just turned away in a huff. There were four days left until the 15th of the white month. Would Ai Fa be able to hold out that long, though...? And would we even be able to return to the Fa house at that point, anyway? If our stay got extended, it would be difficult to maintain the peace in the Fa clan if I couldn’t find a way to get hamburger steak on the menu.

And as she made those hamburger patties Ai Fa so craved, Reina Ruu was staring down at my hands.

“Asuta, is that powder for tonight’s dinner too?”

Atop my work station, I had spread out the fuwano flour I had purchased on the way back from a dealer Milano Mas told me about.

“Yeah. I’m just using a bit today, though. Umm... Sorry, Mia Lea Ruu, but could I help prepare dinner tomorrow night, too?”

“Like I said, you have nothing to apologize for. As long as it’s not a burden for you, please go ahead and help out every day.”

“Thank you. In that case, I’d like to go ahead and handle the preparations for tomorrow, too.”

After borrowing a large wooden plate, I mixed together some fuwano flour and water. Then, for the first time in two days now, I kneaded it into a fuwano dough.

“So that’s the fuwano that the townsfolk eat? It certainly does seem different from poitan, doesn’t it?” Sheera Ruu chimed in. Though she didn’t let much emotion show on her face, she was just as passionate when it came to cooking as Reina Ruu.

“Right. The biggest difference is that with poitan you want it in a semi-liquid state before cooking, while fuwano should be solid before you heat it.”

There was no reason to fixate on form, so I went with the simplest flat ball shape for cooking the fuwano.

Once it was done, it came out with the same texture as poitan, and was even

whiter. Lala and Mia Lea Ruu and everyone also watched over me with great interest as I worked.

“So, what do you do with that? Once it’s cooked, it doesn’t seem all that different from poitan.”

“Now I leave it to dry out. And if it turns hard and dry by tomorrow like I’m expecting, I’m planning to use that to try out a new dish.”

I recalled Sheera Ruu or someone telling me before that baked poitan didn’t change all that much over the course of a night. But at any rate, Polarth was supposed to be experimenting with poitan, while I was shifting my sights to fuwano in an attempt to make a panko substitute.

Even if things go according to Polarth’s plan and poitan becomes the new staple food in Genos, that doesn’t mean there won’t be any use left for fuwano.

Poitan wasn’t as close to wheat flour as fuwano. So for stuff like making sweets or preparing the roux for a stew, fuwano was still preferable.

Poitan and fuwano were the only grains I had encountered up till now, and so I wanted to employ the strong points of each of them as much as possible.

“Alright, let’s go ahead and get started preparing tonight’s dinner,” I declared.

However, Reina Ruu let out an odd, “A-Ah,” then said, “C-Could you hold on a little longer, Asuta?! We’ll be finished with our work before long!”

“Oh, you’re manning the stove today too, Reina Ruu?”

“No, Lala Ruu is on for today, but I don’t have any urgent business to take care of, so I would love to receive instruction from you if that’s alright.”

“Could I be instructed, too...?” Sheera Ruu added.

“I don’t mind at all, but don’t you have work to take care of for your own house, Sheera Ruu?”

There was still some time left till the sun would set, but the only women in her house were her and her mother. So once she was done preparing for business, she was supposed to head back home to help make dinner.

Currently, Sheera Ruu had finished making patties and was putting together

tarapa sauce, and she now shot me a pained look.

“But... Since you’re manning the stove and everything, I wanted to receive instruction from you. If I don’t, then I’ll end up being a hindrance for Reina Ruu in the future...”

“What are you saying, Sheera Ruu? When it comes to the dishes we sell, you already have more techniques down than I do, don’t you?”

“No, I’m still not as skilled at making soup as you are, and you were better at manning the stove from the very start, weren’t you?”

“I don’t think that’s true at all. You started helping Asuta out with work far earlier than I did, so you have more knowledge and experience than I do.”

Reina Ruu was as brilliant as the sun while Sheera Ruu felt as radiant as the moon, and as they had this little argument, their hands kept on working away without so much as a single mistake.

Of course, in spite of their rivalry, they also had firm ties of blood. Aside from the fact that the older Sheera Ruu always made sure to use a polite tone, they seemed like close sisters openly sharing their opinions, which I found heartening.

“In that case, what if I traded work with you, Sheera Ruu? It’d be tough on Tari Ruu to have to do everything on her own, so I’ll go help her out,” Lala Ruu, who had been tending the stove’s flame, suddenly called out.

Sheera Ruu turned the girl’s way with a questioning look.

“I certainly would appreciate that, but when you man a house’s stove, that means you must eat there, doesn’t it?”

“Huh...? Yeah, but it’d be fine if I just eat at your house while you eat here, right? Stuff like that can be fun, every now and again,” Lala Ruu said, her cheeks growing visibly red.

As he saw that, Ludo Ruu loudly proclaimed, “So that’s it, huh? That’s pretty sneaky, how you act like you’re only thinking of Sheera Ruu, there! You just want to go visit Shin Ruu’s house, don’t you?”

“I never said anything like that! Don’t go around shouting nonsense like that,

stupid Ludo!”

“I mean, I can’t see it any other way. But, well, it’d probably make Shin Ruu happy too, so I guess it’s fine.”

Lala Ruu grabbed one of the pieces of firewood at hand and threw it at her brother as hard as she could.



The boy just caught it right in front of his face though, and gave an amused chuckle.

“Vina and Reina still haven’t found husbands yet, but it’s looking like you may be the first one to awaken to your womanly desires, even though you’re just thirteen! You could be the first one to get married out of— Gah, what the?!”

More chunks of firewood had come flying at Ludo Ruu, this time from three directions. It had been a perfect attack in waves from the three sisters. In a panic, Ludo Ruu grabbed a hold of some nearby firewood and started smacking down the incoming projectiles.

“If you want to start roughhousing, then do it outside. You’re going to get wood chips in the cooking,” Mia Lea Ruu scolded with a chuckle.

“Aah...” Bartha chimed in. “Family sure is a wonderful thing to have. I sure do want to hurry up and catch that prodigal son of mine.”

When I turned around and looked, I found Bartha with a shockingly calm smile on her leonine face.

And Mia Lea Ruu was looking that way with a smile, too.

“That son of yours is your only family? I’ll be praying to the forest that you can reunite as soon as possible.”

“You’ve got my thanks. Honestly, I was worried about whether or not I should get on that wagon of Kamyua Yoshu’s, since I had always thought of you people of the forest’s edge as the ones behind my husband’s death. But now, I can’t help but feel it really was worth coming all the way here from Masara.”

Mia Lea Ruu had birthed seven children and also took charge when it came to housework, while Bartha had resolved to keep living the harsh life of a hunter for the sake of her young son. Secretly, I was feeling deeply impressed by the meeting of these two indomitable mothers.

And before I noticed it, my gaze had turned toward Ai Fa. She was expressionless other than an ever so light smile showing in her eyes as she looked over the pair.

Then, she noticed my gaze and quietly turned my way.

Family sure is a wonderful thing...

What sort of feelings had to be bubbling up in Ai Fa's chest at the moment?

Regardless, even though we had both lost our families, we each now had a precious, irreplaceable presence in our lives once again.

And with such thoughts running through my head, the sun gently set on the day.

The showdown that would determine whether or not we could keep on having such peaceful days was creeping ever closer.

3

"Ah, Asuta, you finally showed up!"

It was now the following day, the 12th of the white month.

I was met with that unusual tone calling out to me after we had picked up the stalls at The Kimyuus's Tail and went to stop by Dora's place to purchase the vegetables we needed.

"Wh-Why do you say that? Did something happen again or—"

"Never mind! Just hurry on over here! There's something I need to discuss with you!"

I was pulled under the roof, still having no clue what was going on.

Tara looked seriously uneasy down there at her father's feet, too.

"Asuta, are the rumors that the people of the forest's edge may leave Genos really true?"

Dora was grabbing hold of both my arms, pressing in close with a scary look on his face.

And with those words, everything finally clicked.

"Not exactly, it's more that the people of the forest's edge are heading into the next meeting with the nobles of Genos ready to do what we must if that's what it comes down to. We want to find a path forward that will satisfy

everyone, but it's not like our leaders are making that statement light—"

"Then if you aren't satisfied, you really will leave Genos? That's just awful, isn't it?!" Dora questioned. His mood had always tended to fluctuate greatly, but it really was rare to see him *this* worked up.

And down by his feet, Tara was quickly tearing up too.

"No, leaving Genos really is an absolute last resort. Not even a single person of the forest's edge actually wants that to happen. And of course, I've got no intention of abandoning Genos."

"But I can't see the nobles admitting any fault easily. They've lived in a whole other world than we do right from the very start," Dora said, his face twisted with frustration. "And I can't imagine you'll be able to hold back your rage at those nobles trying to use your comrades from the forest's edge in the way they have, either. So isn't everything already over and done with? The criminals have all lost their lives. What's there to gain from causing more of a fuss at this point?"

Even though only a single night had passed, it seemed that Dora had already heard everything.

Now that I thought about it, Zasshuma had mentioned how he often saw Dora out at the bar. If they mostly kept to the same area, then maybe it wasn't so strange that things turned out like this.

I also realized just how careless I had been. Since I knew from the start that Gazraan Rutim intended to spread that information throughout the post town, I should have told the people close to me personally in advance.

"I'm sorry. The people of the forest's edge can't bring themselves to just blindly bow their heads to the lord of Genos while everything remains undecided. But they wish to find a path forward they can accept, and keep on living as hunters here in this land... Can you please believe in us?"

"I'd like to. I really would, but... Count Turan can be even more troublesome than Lord Genos himself, can't he? Will you really be alright taking on a noble like that?"

"I believe in the strength of the people of the forest's edge."

Dora gave a deep sigh.

And then, Ai Fa suddenly chimed in.

“Sir, you have my gratitude for your concern on our behalf... But could you please remove your hands from Asuta?”

“Huh? Ah, sorry. Still, at any rate, we want to keep on having a friendly relationship with all of you.”

“I know. You opened up your hearts to us sooner than any other westerner. I have not had much opportunity to talk to you up till now, but I have long thought how precious a gift that is. So as Asuta said, please hold on and continue believing in us...” Ai Fa humbly requested.

Listlessly, Dora turned toward her and replied, “Is it really alright to believe? I’m... I’m a touch frightened, honestly. Have those nobles been making light of the strength your people possess...?”

Ai Fa furrowed her brow questioningly. And I had no idea what he was saying either.

“On that day when Asuta was abducted, you all went mad, didn’t you? Dozens of people of the forest’s edge rushed the castle gates... I couldn’t help but wonder if I was watching the destruction of Genos itself,” Dora said, his plump body starting to tremble. “There are a great many soldiers in the castle town, of course. But if all the people of the forest’s edge took up blades and went to war with Genos... I can’t imagine the people of the castle town having any chance of victory.”

“B-But there are only five hundred people of the forest’s edge in total, right? And less than half of them are hunters, so—”

“Then Asuta, can you imagine the people of the forest’s edge losing? I absolutely cannot. At most, I could see a draw.” At some point Dora had started patting Tara’s head as she clung to his leg. “I get the feeling that the folks inside those stone walls don’t realize that, though. The reason the people of the forest’s edge quietly carried out their work was simply because you have always been a proud people... But if we truly angered you, you could easily bring any town to ruin. And yet the nobles have seemingly been treating the people of

the forest's edge however they please, not even realizing that fact."

"Even on the off chance the nobles become our enemies, we will never turn our blades on all of you."

"Right, I get that. But if Genos is ruined, then we're done for too. Well, actually, if that happens, some new nobles will probably form a new town, and we'll manage to scrape by somehow. But the people of the forest's edge will have no place left for them in the western kingdom, so you'll have to move to Mahyudra or something, right? I hate the thought of that." At that, Dora's eyes were staring intently at Ai Fa. "I want to keep on living as a citizen of Genos, getting along well with you. And I can't be the only one who feels that way. So please, at least don't be short-tempered and rash."

"My old man is one of the leading clan heads, and short-tempered really may be the proper way to describe him. But he's putting his life and soul on the line to carve out a proper path for our people," Ludo Ruu chimed in as he stepped forward, apparently having been listening in on our conversation the whole time. "The forest of Morga is our home. We won't be abandoning it lightly. But we also won't just let the nobles do as they please either, so, well, I guess I just ask that you trust in us."

"You mean it? You'll always be friends with me?" Tara asked in a worried tone.

"Yeah," Ludo Ruu replied with a smile. "That runt Rimee keeps going on and on about how she wants to see you. Once this whole incident is settled, she'll probably be coming to the post town, too. So I hope you two will get along well when that time comes."



“Right!” Tara replied with a big nod. Her father patted her head again, smiling through his tears.

“I’ll be praying that those nobles reconsider matters, too... Ah, now that I think about it, one of the sons of the noble who rules over our farmland is standing with you people of the forest’s edge, isn’t he?”

“Ah, yes, the second son, Polarth. I was a little surprised to hear that his house was the one that ruled over the plantations.”

“Right. Though he’s known as a good-for-nothing second son, I can actually feel proud of him if he’s lending you his aid,” Dora said, his expression growing anxious in a slightly different way. “Still, just what exactly is he planning? He gave us a rather unusual order, to urgently harvest more poitan than we ever have before while also making certain the townsfolk don’t catch on.”

“That is definitely involved in what’s going on, so it’s probably best not to carelessly spread it around...”

“So it really is, huh? Well, if it helps you people of the forest’s edge, I’ll prepare as many poitan as it takes,” Dora replied, finally breaking out in a faint but definite smile.

◇

After that, I ended up having the same sort of conversation with a good portion of the customers visiting the stalls.

Perhaps I had significantly underestimated the speed at which rumors spread through inns and bars.

“It really is ridiculous. Makes me think more and more that you should just move to Jagar before it turns into a squabble.”

“That’s a great idea. If you trace things back, then you people of the forest’s edge all have Jagar blood running in your veins anyway. So if the western kingdom ain’t treating you right, then why not just gather up all your people and leave?”

It was men who had helped out Balan’s construction group who told me that.

In the past, Shumiral had also suggested moving to the Eastern Kingdom of

Sym. It really was nice having people I knew say such things.

But in spite of all that, moving to either Sym or Jagar would prove difficult.

If the people of the forest's edge abandoned their giba hunting duties and left Genos, they would be branded traitors by the western kingdom. And though Sym and Jagar were friendly nations, if they accepted us it could lead to a quarrel between the kingdoms.

That must have been exactly why Dora had brought up Mahyudra before. If we turned against the western kingdom, the only place left for the people of the forest's edge would be that enemy nation.

On top of that, it was also incredibly difficult to convert from serving one god to another. The people of the forest's edge had already done so eighty years in the past, so would it even be possible to do so again...? And would the enemy nation of Mahyudra welcome them in the first place? Thinking of all that, it was possible the people of the forest's edge would end up rejected by all of the kingdoms and their gods.

But at any rate, it wasn't like anyone wanted the people of the forest's edge to abandon Genos in the first place. We all strongly wished to keep living here in Genos, at the Morga forest's edge. And that was exactly why we needed to settle things with Cyclaeus.

"The town sure seems noisy today..." Mikel said with his brow deeply furrowed, having stopped by a little while before the sun hit its peak. "Are you finally going to war with the nobles or whatever? Sheesh, nothing good'll come of something like that."

"Sorry. I believe we should have some sort of results to show on the 15th of the white month, though," I replied with a smile while preparing Mikel's myamuu giba.

His expression utterly unchanged, Mikel glanced over at the giba burger stalls.

"By the way, are you the one who taught those girls how to cook...?"

"Huh? Yes, that's right. The dishes they make should be just as good as the ones I prepare."

“I already know that from back when you were captured and I came here to eat. I believe you said you come from overseas, and your father taught you what you know about cooking?”

“Yes. I was born in an island nation known as Japan, and my father made a living as a chef.”

“I don’t know anything about what it’s like overseas... But still, it seems your father must have been pretty darn skilled.”

“He was. I respect him more than anyone,” I replied, the words flowing forth without any hesitation.

I had never been able to bring myself to tell him that, and I certainly had no way of doing so now.

“Your cooking certainly is unusual. And this giba meat is a first-rate ingredient, not at all inferior to karon for sure, so it’s no surprise you’ve built up a reputation.”

His tone seemed to make it feel like he was adding, “Otherwise, you wouldn’t have to worry about catching Cyclaeus’s attention.”

Just as I was feeling at a loss for how to reply, though, I was caught off-guard by what I saw approaching. There was a large boxed wagon being drawn by totos approaching down the highway from the north... Naturally, it was the one belonging to the house of Count Daleim.

As the wagon approached the stall area, it came to a stop. It was a rule that in the post town, drivers needed to get down from their wagon and lead it by hand.

And yet, the vehicle didn’t move at all, and instead two figures stepped down and approached my stall. It was the Daleim house’s head chef Yang, as well as a guard assigned to protect him.

With this appearance of such well-dressed residents of the castle town, Mikel grimaced and took several steps back. And before long, Yang and the guard stepped into that freshly opened space.

“Sir Asuta, the karon milk has arrived from Dabagg. Lord Polarth said to split it

with you if you have need of it, but what do you say?”

It really was a perfect show of superficial politeness.

However, the guy was even older than my old man, so I felt like I had to be honestly grateful in return.

“Thank you. If you could just spare whatever’s left over for now, that would be plenty for me.”

“Well then, for the time being, does one white coin per bottle sound acceptable? From here on out, the meat seller shall be coming every couple of days, so if you place an order you should be able to procure the amount you need each time.”

“That really is a huge help. Um, would it be possible for residents of the post town to make the same sort of purchases?”

“Of course. We’re talking about merchants who come to sell meat here in Genos by trade, after all. Once I begin selling my cooking at the stall tomorrow, I’m certain everyone shall start seeking out karon milk.”

In that case, it would be possible to further vary up the menu on offer at The Kimyuus’s Tail. Combined with the kimyuus eggs and fuwano flour, karon milk made for some seriously encouraging reinforcements.

“At any rate, the containers of milk are stuffed into that wagon, so pick what you—” Yang started to say, only for his expression to freeze.

And when I followed his gaze, I was also taken aback.

The head chef had caught sight of Mikel as he ate his myamuu giba while turned away.

“Could... Could you be Sir Mikel, who served as the head chef at The Maiden in White?”

Mikel turned to face Yang with an annoyed look.

“I’ve got no business with anyone from the castle town, so just leave me be.”

“M-My name is Yang. I trained at Selva’s Spear, and now I have been entrusted with the kitchen of Count Daleim’s house. My apologies, but I heard

you had absconded from Genos, Sir Mikel...”

“Did you not hear what I said? I’m just an old man who makes a living selling charcoal. If you want some, then bring some coins to my place in Turan.”

They were both past middle age, but Yang was likely older. However, the man had a clear look of respect in his eyes as he stared at Mikel.

“It truly pained me to hear a chef of your skill had his future ruined and was driven from the castle town. But even so, seeing you here safe and sound, I—”

“You sure are a noisy one. You’re ruining the taste of my meal,” Mikel grumbled with a hostile glare as he tossed the last bite of the dish into his mouth.

Yang turned my way with a befuddled look.

“Is that your cooking Sir Mikel is eating, Sir Asuta? Are you perhaps a chef with ties to him? That would explain why you caught the eye of the daughter of Count Turan at such a young—”

“N-No, I only just recently grew acquainted with Mikel. It’s not that big of a deal,” I hurriedly said with a shake of my head, only for Mikel to give a contemptuous snort.

“You think chefs I have ties to would go creating such oddball dishes? I mean, it should be obvious with just a single bite of the kid’s cooking, right?”

“Ah, I haven’t ever eaten Sir Asuta’s cooking... And I have heard it’s made with giba meat, isn’t it?”

“That’s right. It uses giba back and chest meat, and is steeped in a marinade of fruit wine, myamuu, and tau oil before frying.”

Yang looked clearly distressed. And seeing that, Mikel’s nose wrinkled up.

“There’s no need for someone from the castle town with their pampered tongues to force themselves to eat giba. I don’t know what you had in mind coming out here to the post town, but if you don’t wanna wreck your stomach, you may as well stay inside those stone walls and keep on eating karon meat.”

“No, I...”

“I’ve got work to take care of, so I don’t have time to waste playing around with you two,” Mikel stated before promptly departing.

Yang still looked quite troubled as he watched the man leave.

“So Mikel was a pretty famous chef, huh...?”

“Of course! The Maiden in White was not an especially large inn, but during the period that Mikel served as head chef, its reputation was every bit the equal to that of Selva’s Spear. In my personal opinion, he was one of the greatest chefs in all of Genos,” Yang passionately replied, only to shrug his slender shoulders in disappointment. “But then, just because he caught Count Turan’s attention, he met with such a horrible fate... I suppose there’s no need to hedge about my feelings around you of all people, Sir Asuta. I simply cannot accept the way that Count Turan treats chefs as mere tools. That is why I made up my mind to assist Lord Polarth, even knowing it will earn me reprimand from my employer, Count Daleim.”

“I see... I really am glad to be able to work together with someone like you,” I earnestly stated.

The spindly older chef looked back at me, the strength returning to his eyes.

“Could I purchase some of your cooking, Sir Asuta...?”

“Of course. That will be two red coins.”

With the meat that had been retaining warmth at the edge of the metal tray, I went ahead and prepared a myamuu giba.

This was most likely the first time anyone from the castle town had eaten giba meat.

After timidly bringing the myamuu giba to his mouth, Yang froze up in astonishment.

“This... is giba meat?”

“Yes. Was it to your liking?”

“This taste really is every bit as good as karon breast and back meat...” An even more brilliant light began filling Yang’s eyes. “And you made this using nothing but ingredients from the post town? Ingredients that allow you to sell it

for a mere two red coins?”

“Yes, though I used just a bit of tau oil.”

“I’m shocked. I’ll need to reexamine what I planned to offer for sale in the post town.” With that, Yang indicated the wagon parked at the edge of the highway with his hand. “Please accept the karon milk. It seems I must urgently return to the manor.”

“Got it. You’ll have to let me purchase some of your cooking tomorrow, too, alright?”

“I promise you, I shall prepare a dish that I can be proud of,” Yang stated reassuringly.

4

And so, we managed to safely wrap up our work again on that day.

For the first time in several days, I was able to prepare my giba sauté arrabbiata and meat and chatchi stew for the inns, and the stalls managed to sell a hundred meals each. We really did seem to be getting even more customers now compared to how things had been before our last break.

Thanks to the rumors spread throughout the post town by Zasshuma, a lot of the customers asked about what was going on. And most of them were southerners and easterners, concerned and wanting to know, “Will you be able to keep on doing business?”

Meanwhile, Cyclaeus didn’t seem to be making any moves.

Though the town guards shot us some rather stormy looks, they never approached, and nobody attacked us, either. Even those bandits dressing like people of the forest’s edge seemed to be lying low ever since I returned from Cyclaeus’s manor.

“At least on the surface, things are quite peaceful...” Ai Fa murmured as she stood right behind the driver’s seat in our wagon, which was being pulled along by Gilulu.

In the wagon itself were the three Ruu women and Li Sudra along with one of

the youths from the branch houses acting as one of our bodyguards, while the others were accompanying us on the backs of totos borrowed from the Ruu and Lea clans, two hunters per bird. Meanwhile, Tsuvai and Ama Min Rutim were walking back, with the six hunters who arrived when the sun hit its peak watching over them.

“There are only three days remaining until the meeting. It would be best if nothing were to happen until then, but still...”

“Yeah. I’ll be praying that things stay peaceful till the day of the meeting.”

It wasn’t just Dora, as folks like Milano Mas and Nail also seemed to be seriously concerned about the future of the people of the forest’s edge.

The clash between us and Cyclaeus was liable to have an impact on the fate of Genos itself. This really was the aftereffects left by Zattsu Suun’s actions.

“Hey, I see you made it back safely again,” Bartha called out as we returned to the Ruu settlement and headed for the main house’s kitchen, to find them chopping firewood around back again. “Are you getting started on dinner right away? Think I could watch again?”

The hunters aside from Ai Fa and Ludo Ruu all dispersed, and the remaining members of our group once more headed for the kitchen. Ryada Ruu also went home, but aside from that, it was just like yesterday.

However, the group in charge of making dinner had been randomly swapped out, so today we were joined by Granny Tito Min and Rimee Ruu.

“Lala, you’re supposed to be the other one on duty, but are you switching with Sheera Ruu again?” Rimee Ruu asked as we entered the kitchen.

“You got some sort of problem with that?” Lala Ruu snapped back, her face quickly turning red.

“Nope. It’ll make Shin Ruu happy too, so it’s fine with me!” Rimee Ruu replied with a brilliant grin.

Despite the fact that this was basically what Ludo Ruu said yesterday, she just seemed so pure and innocent. And so, this time Lala Ruu only went beet red rather than exploding with rage.

“Hey, what are we making today?” Rimee Ruu asked, clinging to my chest and making the same expression she had worn when crushing her sister just moments earlier.

“For today, I was thinking of preparing a completely different dish from what I’ve made up till now. And I want to have as many folks try it out as possible, to determine whether or not it’s a proper meal for the people of the forest’s edge.”

“Really? Hooray!” Rimee Ruu shouted, rubbing her reddish-brown hair up against my chest. Ever since I returned from Cyclaeus’s manor, the girl had been showing me even more affection.

“Hey, runt! Asuta’s still technically a man, you know. So you shouldn’t go hugging him like it’s nothing,” Ludo Ruu rebuked, sounding a bit angry.

But with her cheek still pressed to my chest, Rimee Ruu adorably stuck out her tongue.

“Quiet, you meanie! I can decide for myself who I get to hug, right?”

At that, Ludo Ruu rustled his hair.

In order to maintain the peace, I chimed in, “Well then, shall we get started?”

First up came the preparations for tomorrow’s business.

Just like yesterday, I began by silently slicing up meat for the myamuu giba. Though it took quite a while to prepare enough for one hundred meals, the work itself wasn’t especially difficult.

Once that was finished, it was finally time to prepare dinner.

For today, I’d be taking a stab at my long-awaited fried giba meat dish... Giba cutlets.

“Now then, how did the fuwano turn out?” I asked, checking the dough that had been resting atop a wooden plate since yesterday.

Just as Polarth described, it had dried out.

While I wouldn’t go so far as to call it stiff as a rock, it was tough enough that I couldn’t really pinch any off. It seemed like making it less than a centimeter

thick had paid off, as it appeared to have lost quite a bit of the moisture inside.

“Alright, this seems like it’ll work. Reina and Sheera Ruu, as long as it doesn’t interfere with your jobs, if you want, why not—” I started to say, only to find their intense gazes turned my way as they kept working intently.

“Hey, what’re you gonna do with that?” Rimee Ruu questioned as she baked up the poitan for dinner.

“With this, first we’ve got to make it back into a fine powder,” I replied, holding out a grater of the sort they used in the post town, which had no holes, just notches, and was made from the flat shell of some sort of crustacean.

Fortunately it didn’t prove difficult using that to grate the fuwano, which came crumbling apart. While it was a notably primitive piece of cookware, it didn’t have any trouble handling the fuwano, since it wasn’t especially tough.

Before long, I had a little mound of fuwano crumbs sitting atop my cutting board.

“Then, you dry roast this in a pot without any fat,” I explained more toward Reina and Sheera Ruu rather than Rimee Ruu as I got to work.

With that, the moisture was pretty much completely removed from the fuwano crumbs, leaving them good and parched. They had taken on a bit of a creamy color, and so at least visually they looked to me like a proper panko substitute.

“Next up is the meat. First you sever the tendons in the back meat, then beat it with a pole. And we want it more tender than with the steaks, so do it thoroughly.”

For the cut, I went with sirloin.

If I was thinking of calories then it would be better to pick the fillet or thigh meat instead, but I had been told before that using the sirloin would keep down the fat content. That was because the fillet and thigh meat lacked in fat to start with, which meant they absorbed more oil during the frying... That bit of trivia had actually come from my childhood friend Reina of all people.

“That’s why I eat sirloin cutlets instead of ones made with fillets!” I

remembered her saying with a carefree smile as she stuffed her cheeks with the tonkatsu my old man had prepared.

Reina's statement had ultimately just been that of an ordinary high school girl, so maybe it was dangerous to go accepting it without question. But I had another reason for choosing the sirloin instead of the fillet: the shape of the meat.

Since the fillet was long and narrow, normally you would cut into it sideways to make some small, round cutlets. But when they were that small, that only increased the amount of surface area for coating, and I figured that would lead to a greater amount of oil in the meal.

I was conflicted, torn between a desire to show everyone how delicious cutlets were, while also not wanting to make a dish so far removed from what I had prepared up till now.

At any rate, those various thoughts were what led to me selecting the sirloin.

And so, I went ahead and thoroughly pounded the flat cut of sirloin in front of me. Since I wanted as many people as possible to sample it, I picked out an extra large five hundred gram chunk. It started as three centimeters or so thick, and when it was pounded down to around half of that, it was ready. At that thickness, it wouldn't take long at all to heat through.

"Then we rub salt and pico leaves onto it, and once that's done, we make the coating," I said, opening up the cloth bundle I had sat atop my work station.

As she kept on working away at baking the poitan, Rimee Ruu let out an excited, "Ooh! What's that?! It's sorta cute, isn't it?"

"This is a kimyuus egg. Kimyuus are a type of bird eaten by the townsfolk."

I had purchased it from a place that specialized in raising kimyuus and selling their meat.

The people of the forest's edge never had any issue getting enough animal protein in their diets, and I had never encountered kimyuus eggs being sold around the stalls either, so for most everyone present, this would be their first time seeing one.

“First we crack it open onto a wooden plate, then we stir together the yolk and the white. Next, we cover the meat evenly in ordinary fuwano flour, then dip it in our stirred egg, then finally give it a layer of the fuwano crumbs we just dry roasted. Take care not to make the coating too thick, though.”

“Right,” Reina and Sheera Ruu replied from a distance.

“And then, it’s finally time for the lard.”

“Lard?”

“It’s boiled down giba fat. Even here at the forest’s edge, you make the stuff normally for candles, right? It’s pretty much the same thing.”

I had prepared it in advance, and had Ai Fa bring it from back home in the morning. After all, she had already been riding Gilulu each morning since yesterday to manage the pantry and bring back giba meat.

Before, I had stored the lard in a leather bag, but lately I switched to a lidded jar, which was more airtight. It wasn’t like it would spoil that easily, but if it oxidized, the flavor would clearly worsen, so I even added an inner lid made of a suurub leaf.

When I pulled that inner lid loose, there was a sticky strand of cream-colored lard clinging to it. Using a wooden spatula, I added enough to the pot to safely submerge a chunk of meat with depth to spare.

“Now we should heat up the lard, then add the meat and let it cook through. Managing the flames here is the toughest part, so if you decide to make regular use of this recipe, I’ll teach it to you again separately.”

“Right,” they once again answered.

As I added firewood to the stove, the lard soon turned transparent as the surface started to tremble.

Several minutes passed while I kept the heat to a medium flame.

When I poked it with my long grigee chopsticks, fairly large bubbles floated up, so I went ahead and tossed in a pinch of those baked fuwano crumbs.

With a crackling sound, the fuwano crumbs jumped to the surface.

It seemed to be ready. I wanted to cook each bit of meat for the least amount of time possible, so that it wouldn't suck up any more oil than was necessary. And so, I aimed for around 180 degrees.

"Alright, let's try frying some up. Ah, Rimee Ruu, could I borrow several metal skewers?"

Since Rimee Ruu had just finished baking the poitan, she swiftly answered my request.

I laid out some suurub leaves atop a wooden plate, then layered the skewers in an alternating pattern along the outer edge. Naturally, the idea was to make a replacement metal rack to temporarily deposit the fried cutlets onto.

With that done, I picked up a bit of coated meat and gently placed it into the pot.

And this time, the lard started seriously crackling away.

"Whoa, amazing!" Rimee Ruu excitedly proclaimed.

Ai Fa, Ludo Ruu, and Bartha all watched on with great interest, while Reina and Sheera Ruu seemed a bit anxious as they handled their own work while glancing over. And all the while, the smell of heated lard filled the kitchen.

"Hmm... This seems like the most elaborate dish you've shown us since the hamburger steak," Granny Tito Min proclaimed with a smile as she walked on over, apparently having finished preparing the giba stew.

The color of the coating steadily shifted. Once it had fried to a nice golden brown, I lifted it out with a metal skewer.

"Now we just need to wait for the excess oil to drip off and it'll be done. Rimee Ruu, there's one more thing I'd like to ask you to do. Could you go get four or five of the men?"

"The men? But why?"

"Well, just like Tito Min Ruu said, this dish is unique, just as much as hamburger steak. So I'd like to see if hunters more stubborn than Ludo Ruu and Ai Fa still think it's fitting for a dinner here at the forest's edge."

"Got it. But the men are all out in the forest setting up traps and stuff... Ah,

then how about I go ask Ryada Ruu?! And Mida and the men who came back from the post town could try it, too!”

Having solved the problem on her own, Rimee Ruu went running out of the kitchen.

I certainly wouldn’t call Mida stubborn, but I figured it was still alright since I hardly ever got a chance to feed him my cooking.

“Asuta, we’ve finished with work on our end for the time being.”

With that, Reina and Sheera Ruu finally joined in directly.

“This really is just as mysterious a dish as hamburger steak, isn’t it? For some reason, I’ve felt my heart beating terribly fast for a while now.”

“This will be my first time tackling it, too. I really hope it turns out well.”

The first issue would be making sure it wasn’t half-cooked. Then came the question of if it suited the tastes of the people of the forest’s edge. And finally, there was the matter of determining whether or not the dish would act as a poison when added to their lives.

Personally, I was feeling more nervous than I had been since I presented the steak and roast giba to Donda Ruu.

“Asuta, sorry for the wait!” Rimee Ruu called out, arriving just before the sample finished cooling down.

“Thanks,” I started to reply, and then suddenly found myself at a loss for words.

Sure enough, Ryada Ruu was also standing there, but he was accompanied by his elder brother and that man’s son... In other words, Donda and Jiza Ruu.

And behind them were Shin Ruu and Mida.

“These two just happened to be on their way back from the forest! Dad and Jiza are the stubbornest ones in the whole Ruu settlement, so they should be fine, right?” Rimee Ruu said, puffing out her chest with a giggle.

As I held back my urge to flinch, I went ahead and bowed my head instead.

“Sorry about this. I’m sure Rimee Ruu already explained, but would you mind

participating in this taste test?”

“Looks like you went and made another oddity of a dish,” Donda Ruu grumbled. “Is that seriously giba meat? It just looks like a lump of earth or something to me.”

“This is giba back meat, and it’s coated with fuwano crumbs and kimyuus eggs. I’ll go ahead and cut it into several pieces now...”

There were six men and five women, so adding me, Ai Fa, and Bartha to that count, you got fourteen in total. Still, the cutlet was a big five hundred gram chunk of meat, so a single piece per person would work out.

I started by cutting it straight down the middle, and it was immediately clear I didn’t have to worry about it being undercooked. There wasn’t any red left at all, and the meat had turned a beautiful ivory shade. And the way there was a bit of transparent oil slowly seeping out from between the meat and the coating was seriously stirring up my appetite.

Once I had finished cutting it up into pieces, I also went ahead and sprinkled some juice from the lemon-like sheel on top.

I had been aiming to create something akin to tonkatsu, and at least in terms of appearances, it seemed to have come out perfectly.

The real issue, though, was how the people of the forest’s edge judged it.

“Please, dig in... No wait, this is my first time making this dish, so let me give it a shot first,” I declared, picking up a chunk of giba cutlet.

When I tossed it into my mouth and took a nice, firm bite, first I was impressed by the pleasant texture, and then I felt plenty of piping hot oil seep out.

The fuwano crumb coating was pretty much ideal in terms of both thickness and texture. And maybe it was because I had used lard, but it had an incredibly rich flavor.

To be honest, this was the first time I had ever used lard to fry cutlets. But you could get lard-fried croquettes in the shopping district, or buy it from the butchers’ shops, which was what gave me the idea.

Was this flavor from the giba meat or the lard? I could sense that the deliciousness of the meat had seeped into the coating, but it fortunately wasn't overpowering. But adding even more deliciousness onto the wonderful taste of the giba meat made it feel like an explosion of flavor in my mouth.

And the sour accent from the sheel fruit juice was nice and pleasant, too.

At least for me personally, this flavor really was the best.

Yup, with this I could safely listen to everyone's opinions without feeling any regrets.

"I'm definitely satisfied with how it turned out. Everyone, please go ahead and give it a try."

The women used the skewers, while the men all just picked the giba cutlet bits up with their bare hands before popping them in their mouths.

"Whoa..." Ludo Ruu exclaimed.

He stared at me in shock. However, as his mouth was currently full of food, he couldn't say anything further at the moment.

Rimee Ruu's big, round eyes opened wide.

Reina and Sheera Ruu wore serious looks.

And Donda Ruu was completely expressionless.

For a moment, the kitchen was filled with the light sound of chewing.

Feeling a bit on edge, I turned and looked toward Ai Fa. Sure enough, she was also chewing away with her eyes closed.

"Um, how does it taste...?"

Even though each sample was only a single bite's worth, everybody was taking quite a while to swallow.

Ultimately, the first one to finally respond to me was Rimee Ruu.

"It was super tasty!" she declared, her big eyes sparkling. "It may be the tastiest thing you've ever made, Asuta! Ah, but the stew's really good, too... Think I can say they're both the best?" she said, putting her hands on her cheeks.



As I watched that adorable sight, I went ahead and breathed a sigh of relief.

With that, I suddenly started hearing comments from all around.

“This... This is a wonderful flavor.”

“I was so taken aback I couldn’t even speak.”

“What’s with this dish?! It’s amazingly tasty!”

“Aah, this is definitely the most delicious thing I’ve ever eaten in my whole life.”

Sheera, Tito Min, and Ludo Ruu all offered such praise along with Bartha.

Ryada and Shin Ruu listened to what their comrades had to say while wearing gentle expressions.

Reina Ruu... Her eyes had closed, and she looked to be sorting out how she felt.

And then, there was Ai Fa.

Ai Fa was holding back any expression that might show on her face, and she had her eyes shut just like Reina Ruu.

“Hey Ai Fa, how is it...?”

My clan head opened her eyes and looked at me. It was a very calm, gentle gaze.

“It was delicious... It’s true that this really may be the greatest dish you have ever created.”

I could feel my heart leap a little.

Unable to hold myself back, I leaned in close and whispered into Ai Fa’s ear, “Then would you say I’ve finally served you something that surpasses hamburger steak?”

At that, Ai Fa hid her face so that nobody else could see, and broke out in a frown.

“Hamburger steak is special.”

“Special, huh?” I repeated, giving a grin.

Seeing that, Ai Fa angrily kicked me in the leg, and then she suddenly turned to glare at Mida.

“Hey, don’t start crying again, alright?”

“Yeah... I won’t cry...”

When I looked, I found Mida standing in front of the entrance to the kitchen, his cheeks trembling.

“Asuta... this is really, really tasty...”

“Thank—” I started to reply, only for a voice to chime in from another direction entirely.

“This dish... I may well sense a giba’s strength in it more than anything I have ever eaten before.”

I turned and looked in shock. Why? Because it was Jiza Ruu who said that.

“Why is that, I wonder? Even though you used ingredients that should be entirely unnecessary for us people of the forest’s edge, like fuwano and kimyuus eggs... I can truly sense the giba’s strength flowing into me.”

“That may be because I used a lot of giba fat. And it should have soaked into the coating around the meat quite a bit, too,” I explained, then felt the need to keep going. “Thanks to that, it should provide more nutrition than just boiling or grilling meat. My one concern is that it might go too far on that point, so—”

“There’s no need to worry about that. Nutrients are the source of our strength, right?” Donda Ruu grumbled.

I turned his way, still feeling quite nervous.

“Right. But I believe it really is true that too much medicine can turn into poison. Back where I come from, there was no shortage of people who got sick from improper nutrition... Besides, like I said last night, even here in Genos there’s illness of the innards resulting from overly extravagant dining.”

“Hmph. You’re talking about what that Cyclaeus noble’s suffering from, right? Like I said, there’s no need to worry about that... We need greater strength, after all,” Donda Ruu said, his blue eyes blazing bright as he faced me head on. “As the Fou clan head told you, eating food prepared by the women you taught

fills our bodies with strength... Rather than anything to do with taste, that's simply down to your dishes being packed with nutrition, isn't it?"

"Well, that's because the small clans in particular were eating nothing but giba meat, aria, and poitan, plus I guess the salt used when making jerky. Many of my dishes introduce salt even outside of jerky, then there's the sugar from the fruit wine, plus other vegetables like myamuu, making for a robust bit of nutrition."

"Never mind the details. What you're saying is that a dish this overflowing with strength could be a poison to the people of the forest's edge?" Donda Ruu questioned in a firm tone.

My thoughts raced.

"That's right... It may be as dangerous as hamburger steak. If that dish was one that threatened to weaken the strength of your teeth and jaws, this is one that could unbalance your nutrition. So even back in my home country, it was seen as best to eat it with lots of vegetables or stuff with high acidity."

"Then why not just do that?"

"Right, that was my intention from the start. If such a dish is going to be part of a dinner, it really should be along with plenty of veggies like tino, tarapa, and gigo. The reason I also sprinkled sheel juice on top was to guard against too much oil being absorbed." I just kept on answering with everything that came to mind. "Still, just like with the hamburger steak, I believe the key point is that you can't just keep eating it for every meal. Of course, the real issue comes from the giba fat used in it, so as long as you take care in regards to how much you use, I believe it shouldn't have too negative of an impact."

"Hmph. This is how that strength of yours can prove medicine instead of a poison. And in order to take on the nobles of Genos, we need even greater strength... Asuta of the Fa clan."

"Y-Yes."

It was incredibly rare for Donda Ruu to actually call me by name. Without even thinking, I stood up straight, and he shot me an even more intense glare.

"If you're one of our people, then prepare us proper food in order to grant us

proper strength in turn. That's the task given to you as a person of the forest's edge."

"Right... Understood," I answered with a nod, directly meeting his gaze.

Donda Ruu also nodded, then he said something that shocked me even further.

"Well then, as one of the leading clan heads of the forest's edge, allow me to ask something of you. Make dinner for the main Ruu house two nights from now. Rather than you assisting the women, they'll be helping you out, so prepare something fitting for that night."

"Fitting for that night...?"

Two days from now would be the night before the meeting with Cyclaeus. What exactly would be happening then?

"We'll be bringing along the seven former members of the main Suun house with us to that meeting. So the night before, we'll be having them gather here in the Ruu settlement. Zuuro Suun, Diga, Doddo, Oura, Tsuvai, Yamiru Lea, and Mida... I'm ordering you to make a dinner not just for the members of the main Ruu house, but for those seven, too."

"Right... Of course I've got no objections, but why exactly—"

"They're still our comrades. That even goes for Zuuro Suun, a criminal awaiting his execution. And they'll be standing before those nobles three days from now as people of the forest's edge." Donda Ruu's tone was solemn, brimming with both strength and dignity. "Mida and Yamiru Lea have already eaten your cooking, but the other five have only eaten food prepared by Suun women you instructed. What you bring to the forest's edge, and your reasoning for doing business in the post town... There's a need for them to understand all of that more deeply. So I'm telling you to have them eat your cooking."

"Right."

Some sort of unfamiliar powerful emotions started running wild in my chest. I felt like my body would start trembling if I didn't firmly clench my fists.

"Let me just say now, I've got no intention of paying you. If you're calling

yourself a person of the forest's edge, then I'll have you show them that you're one of us through your convictions and resolve. Just like you did with the Ruu, as well as your clan head there."

"Right. Thank you."

Donda Ruu gave a snort that seemed to say, "What're you thanking me for?" Then with a flutter of his hunter's cloak, he lightly pushed aside Mida's massive frame with the back of his hand and exited the kitchen.

Jiza Ruu soon followed after him, leaving behind a heavy silence hanging in the air.

"I don't really get it. In other words, he wants to have those fools taste your cooking, I guess?" Ludo Ruu bluntly murmured, finally breaking that silence.

I didn't know Donda Ruu's true intentions. I just might have been feeling uplifted at being ordered to do my duty as a person of the forest's edge.

Still... I had to agree it was important to properly let those six born with Zattsu Suun's blood flowing through their veins know just what the people of the forest's edge thought, what resolve they held, and how they planned to face the crimes committed by their comrades.

And if Donda Ruu figured my cooking would help teach them that, then I wanted to do whatever it took to see that task through.

"It'll be fine..." a voice quietly whispered into my ear.

When I turned to look, I found Ai Fa shooting me a resolute look.

"I know you can handle it, Asuta," she stated, her expression gentle, but a firm light gleaming in her blue eyes.

Chapter 3: The Night Before

1

It was now the following day, the 13th of the white month.

Having handed off the stalls to Li Sudra and Ama Min Rutim around when the sun hit its peak, I was heading out while feeling more than a little excited. That was because for today, the plan was to stop by Yang's stall for a snack on my way to the inns.

We had the same members in our group as yesterday, meaning I was accompanied by Reina Ruu and six hunters, including Ai Fa and Ludo Ruu.

And my clan head was walking right alongside me as she questioned, "Asuta, why exactly are you wearing such a giddy expression?"

"Hmm? I really look that excited? It's just that I'm looking forward to seeing what sort of stall that Yang guy has set up."

"Really? But why?"

"I don't really know how to answer that, but... Well, I feel like I can relate to the man on a lot of levels, and I also can't help but be curious to see how it'll turn out when a chef from the castle town makes a dish using ingredients from the post town."

"Right? I'm quite curious, too," Reina Ruu agreed with a smile.

As she glanced at that grin, Ai Fa murmured, "I see... Still, even if you share a common enemy, by opening a shop, does that not make him a... what was the term, business rival?"

"Wow, so you know terms like that, Ai Fa?! But yeah... That might be part of why I'm so anxious to find out what sort of dish he'll make, actually."

And this was also a part of the grand yet somewhat hare-brained plot to spread knowledge of what baked poitan was like throughout Genos.

Considering what I saw from Yang yesterday, I had no doubt that he was

putting his pride as a chef on the line with this job. And I couldn't help but get my hopes up thinking of what sort of dish he would be making, as someone who believed the value of a dish wasn't solely in the cost of its ingredients.

"Asuta, is that the place, perhaps?" Reina Ruu asked, tugging on my sleeve.

Looking ahead, I saw there was a crowd gathered in the direction we were heading.

It was on our right, directly in between the section of town with the stalls and the one where the inns were all lined up. There had to be forty or fifty people there, and they were half-blocking off the ten-meter-wide road.

"Yeah, looks like it."

Feeling impatient, I headed right on over to the crowd. And instantly, the fragrant aroma of heated milk fat filled my nostrils. That was even more evidence that this had to be Yang's stall.

"Whoa, there are so many people around I can't even tell what's going on. Looks like business is booming even more than expected."

"Indeed. If you wish to get a better look, would you like to get up on my shoulders?" Ai Fa asked with a dead serious look.

And she even started to bend down, so I replied in a fluster, "No, I'm fine! Let's just wait our turn. I mean, buying Yang's cooking is the reason I came here in the first place."

"I see."

With that, we joined the end of the line.

Still, we were in a large group with six hunters. And when they noticed our presence, the part of the crowd who were just staring with curiosity started to look troubled and retreated. As that reaction implied, roughly eighty percent of the people gathered around the stall were clearly westerners.

Dang, at this rate we'll be interfering with his business.

Still, thanks to that, his stall came into view, no longer hidden by the crowd.

The stall was built the same as the ones we rented, and there was a young

woman smiling and taking orders from the customers.

Next to her was Yang in a chef's uniform, passionately cooking away, and there were soldiers standing guard on either side. Since they were clearly better equipped than the town guards, they must have been men under the house of Daleim. And the stall was flying a flag embroidered with the emblem of the house of Daleim, too.

This sure is something. So he started doing business without hiding the fact that he was a chef employed by a noble, huh?

And considering they even had soldiers guarding it, I would have thought their set up would be too showy for the townsfolk and cause them to avoid it... but the stall seemed to be flourishing.

This spot at the southern extreme of the stalls was definitely a prime location, which I doubted could be claimed without paying the appropriate premium. Since it was adjacent to the area with the inns, there was a lot of foot traffic, and the sun had just about hit its peak at the moment, so it was the middle of the busy period for such food stalls.

Still, this was the first time I had ever seen so many customers lined up for a single stall. It was every bit as bustling as our giba cooking stalls were for the morning rush.

"Ah, Sir Asuta. So you really did come," Yang called out when our turn arrived, looking up from his cooking.

He was wearing a white chef's uniform very similar to the one I had been forced to wear while being held at Cyclaeus's manor, along with a cylindrical hat. Though he was skinny, his face was a nice, healthy color, and it was coated in sweat as if to prove just how hard he had been working.

"I'm glad to see business is booming for you. Good work there."

"Yes. Things seem to be going adequately for the first day," Yang replied with a solemn look and a nod. "My apologies, but since there are customers waiting behind you, could you please place your order?"

"Right, um..."

At that, my gaze turned toward the woman beside Yang.

Her long, dark-brown hair was tied behind her head, she was wearing what looked like a scarf around her head, and she had on what looked to be a high-quality frock and apron. Yes, she certainly seemed like one elegant young woman.

In all likelihood, she was probably frightened by the hunters surrounding me. After all, her face had gone rather pale, even as she forced a weak smile.

“Welcome. It is one red coin each. Which color would you like?”

“Huh? Color?”

The woman nodded, pointing to the right hand side of the counter in front of her. There were three different types of poitan sitting there on display.

All of them looked to have a diameter of around fifteen centimeters. That made them a size or two smaller than the ones I used for the myamuu giba, and they were round and flat in shape.

What really surprised me, though, were the colors. While one was the familiar cream color I had expected, the other two were pale orange and green, of all things.

“The white one uses gigo, while the orange one is nenon, and the green has nanaar mixed in. They all cost a single red coin, so please choose whichever color you like best.”

I was even more surprised to hear they had used vegetables to add color.

While I had been the one to inform them that mixing in gigo made the texture fluffier, that vegetable was also cream colored to start with, so it didn’t produce any changes in the coloration.

Nenon were a vegetable with a very similar color to carrots, and nanaar... I still hadn’t used any in my own cooking, but it seemed to be something similar to spinach.

Still, the cost is just one red coin, huh?

I ultimately accepted that the reason for their pricing was the size. Each one looked to use about half as much in terms of ingredients as what I used in my

myamuu giba.

That first kimyuus manju I had ordered in the post town had cost one red coin for a small one, too. One would be enough for a child, while an adult could just order two. The plan must have been that by keeping costs down, even people stopping by for the first time could afford to give it a try without really worrying about what they were spending.

“Umm... Is something the matter?” the girl asked with a slightly worried businesslike smile.

“Well then, we’ll take one each of the orange and green ones,” I replied.

We had decided that Reina Ruu and I would each order one of Yang’s dishes.

“Thank you. Please hold on for just a moment.” This girl must have also been a resident of the castle town with ties to the house of Count Daleim. After all, I hadn’t seen anyone here in the post town handle customers so elegantly before.

At any rate, Reina Ruu and I each paid a single red coin, and Yang prepared the snacks in response.

Inside the stall was a massive metal pan, which held a light brown filling as it cooked. And wafting through the air was the sweet scent of karon milk fat and herbs. Soon, that gooey brown paste was wrapped up in poitan. The shape used was the same as my myamuu giba... In other words, a triangular crepe shape.

“Thank you for waiting.”

“No, thank you. Anyway, I’ll let you know my thoughts later.”

“Right. And you have my gratitude for coming all this way,” Yang replied, his tone still quite formal, with a slight bow of his head.

I couldn’t imagine he had ever done business directly facing customers like this in the castle town. But he seemed like a straight-laced, sincere man to begin with, and he was concentrating fully on his work rather than falling prey to distractions. And ever since meeting with Mikel, it seemed his distrust toward the people of the forest’s edge had relaxed, and his superficial politeness had started feeling far more real.

Having gotten what we came for, we hurriedly departed from the stall. And with that, the crowds of onlookers once more gathered around the place. I gave them one last glance, and then we took a breather a bit further away.

“The scent is simply wonderful, isn’t it? So this is the smell of karon milk fat?” Reina Ruu asked, a serious expression on her face as she looked down at the snack Yang had prepared. Hers was orange, while mine was green.

“That’s correct. And then there’s the smell of the karon meat, and it seems like he used herbs, too.”

“I see. Honestly, I’m a bit nervous at the thought of eating meat that isn’t from a giba.”

However, Reina Ruu had already tasted kimyuus and karon meat while helping out with the cooking lessons for Milano Mas at The Kimyuus’s Tail. That meant she was preparing to taste this dish knowing how bland skinless kimyuus and karon leg meat were as ingredients, as well as how many steps I had used to prepare them.

“Well then, shall we give it a try?”

“Right.”

Simultaneously, the two of us bit down into the poitan.

Instantly, the smell of the butter-like milk fat and some unfamiliar herb filled my nose. It seemed to be nicely harmonized, and also rather sweet. In terms of what I was familiar with, the herb seemed like it might have been something close to cinnamon.

And then, the deliciousness of the well-cooked karon meat and vegetables spread throughout my mouth.

What vegetables had he used, exactly? At the very least I could sense the sweetness of aria and nenon, but it seemed like he had employed a variety of others, too.

That nanaar vegetable he had mixed into the poitan was supposed to be fairly leafy tasting, but it seemed to be lost in the overall flavor of the ingredients. And since he hadn’t used gigo, the poitan tasted somewhat dried out, but

thanks to the juices from the fillings, it wasn't all that big of an issue.

If I had to sum it up briefly, I'd say the dish was made to emphasize its sweetness. The sweetness from the milk fat, the karon meat, and the vegetables... And that cinnamon-like herb was likely what was tying it all together.

On top of that, it seemed like he hadn't used any further seasonings aside from that herb. The karon leg meat must have been pickled in salt, but there was no real salty flavor to the dish. It was possible even the salt was to make the sweetness stand out further.

He must have come up with this while thinking about how to put the milk fat at the dish's core.

It was difficult to get a hold of any proper seasonings other than rock salt here in the post town, so I had decided to make the aroma of myamuu, the sourness of tarapa, and the sweetness of fruit wine the core of the flavors I employed. By pairing salt and pico leaves with those, I had managed to create dishes I could feel satisfied with.

In contrast, Yang had built his flavor around milk fat and that cinnamon-like herb I didn't even know the name of.

I wouldn't go so far as to say it was shockingly tasty. Personally, I wasn't all that into dishes that focused strongly on sweetness, and so I would have chosen a different direction myself. Still, I could sense it must have taken extraordinary skill to draw the sweetness out of that meat and those vegetables, and then bring it all together with the milk fat and herb.

To cut to the chase, it felt like a flavor that had been perfected. And I'd never had a dish in the post town before that I had felt was this well put together.

"Did he grill the meat and then cook it together with the vegetables?" Reina Ruu asked, her expression as serious as always.

"Yeah. He must have grilled the surface of the karon with milk fat, then boiled it together with the vegetables and some herbs until it got nice and soft. He used aria and nenon... and maybe tino and chatchi?"

"I do believe he used tino, yeah. Though the shape is completely different."

“Ah, and I think he added skim milk when boiling it too. That should be why it has such a mellow flavor.”

Though the portions were quite small, Reina Ruu and I got wrapped up in analyzing it after taking a single bite. As for the hunters surrounding us, they were pointedly paying attention to the highway rather than us.



“The color of this poitan surprised me a bit at first, but it doesn’t seem to have impacted the taste, does it? I’d say that the one with the gigo mixed in must be tastiest then, right?”

“Yeah. I figure this is probably a trick meant to catch customers’ attention. So the nenon doesn’t impact the taste at all...?”

“I... don’t believe it does. But it may just be that I can’t sense it.”

“No, I’m not getting any taste from the nanaar either, so I think you’re probably right. Still, should we give each other’s a try just to be sure...?”

Instantly, Reina Ruu’s face went bright red.

And in the same instant, I got a fairly strong kick in the leg from behind.

Turning around, I found Ai Fa turned aside in a huff.

“Umm, Asuta... My apologies, but to eat the same dish as someone who isn’t a member of your house... Well, it’s considered best to avoid that when possible for people of the forest’s edge.”

“A-Ah, sorry. I wasn’t thinking there, huh?”

I remembered sharing my hamburger steak with Rimee Ruu in spite of that, and Ludo Ruu had given some of his manju to Tara, so maybe small children just didn’t count.

At any rate, this was clearly an error on my part, so I just earnestly accepted the pain in my calf.

“It certainly smells real tasty, though. Reina, could I have just a bite to try?” Ludo Ruu called out, his gaze remaining fixed on the road all the while.

Reina Ruu just replied, “Alright,” and held out the partially eaten dish toward her younger brother.

“Ah, Ai Fa, if you want, then—”

“I don’t need it.”

And so, I went ahead and took a second bite.

In the meantime, Ludo Ruu bit down on his sister’s snack and let out an

unintelligible, “Hrngh... Is this tasty? I mean, it’s not especially bad, but still...”

“I think it came out wonderfully for something devised in just two days. How should I put it...? The flavor feels properly thought out.”

“I don’t really get it... I definitely think the cooking you two make is way tastier, though.”

That was down to us having the advantage of giba meat on our side. But at the very least, I didn’t feel this dish fell short of the kimyuus meatballs or fried karon strips I prepared for The Kimyuus’s Tail. Of course, Yang had his own advantage in the form of milk fat, but even so, this felt like a nearly perfected dish nonetheless.

On top of that, the colorful poitan and smell of milk fat captured the eyes and noses of passersby, and he was selling the dish for just one red coin. All of that was key in a business strategy too, beyond just the taste. Nobody was a chef by trade here in the post town, and so Yang’s skill was definitely on full display.

“Hey there. So you showed up after all, eh?” a voice called out with a chuckle. The large westerner who had spoken had his cloak’s hood pulled far down, but I could see gray bandages wrapped around his mouth. In other words, it was the bodyguard Zasshuma.

“Ah, hello. It seems like things are off to a smooth start.”

“That’s right. This level of interest should be plenty for the first day. It seems to have calmed down quite a bit by now, but at first there were tons of folks shocked that those were really poitan,” Zasshuma said as I saw his eyes clearly grinning over the shoulders of the hunters. “And man, you chefs sure are something else. It’s not often you can get such good cooking at a place in the post town. I’d prefer something that goes a bit better with booze myself, though...”

“Ah, so you tried it too?” I asked, causing Zasshuma to scratch his head through his hood.

“I mean, that *is* a crucial part of our plan, y’know. Though I feel a bit bad now for still having never tried your cooking...”

“Oh, you don’t need to worry about that.”

From looking at him, was Zasshuma born somewhere near Genos? If so, that would also likely make him someone who had always avoided the people of the forest's edge.

Polarth had also said he had trouble bringing himself to eat giba cooking, but there was likely no helping that. And he was fighting alongside the people of the forest's edge despite his background, so I had no intention of complaining.

However, there was one other point that was bothering me.

"Now that I think about it, it looks like pretty much only westerners gathered around Yang's shop."

"Yeah, but there's no surprise there. I mean, the easterners and southerners all head to your place instead. And we won't get anywhere fighting one another for customers, now will we?"

That perspective might well have been correct if you were only considering immediate sales. But our ultimate goal was teaching westerners just how good giba meat tasted. With that in mind, Yang's shop had a good chance of ending up as our greatest rival in the future.

Of course, if that happens, we'll just have to face him head on.

And I figured this rivalry was sure to get me fired up in a good way.

On top of that, other shops would definitely start handling milk fat after this, so I had to figure there was a good chance cooking in the post town would level up as a whole.

But I can use milk fat too, and I've got new ingredients like fuwano and kimyuus eggs to work with. If I can just secure the personnel, I should try increasing the number of stalls and selling new dishes.

That would all have to wait till after settling things with Cyclaeus, though. If things didn't go well there, then at that point popularizing giba meat wouldn't be my concern anymore.

"Well, it's unheard of up till now for a chef employed by a noble to go opening a shop in the post town. That alone is enough to attract plenty of attention. And it's also good news for us to have the townsfolk notice the place,

with the emblem of the Daleim house flying so clearly," Zasshuma chimed in, seemingly having collected his thoughts. "It's already known throughout the post town that a member of that house played a key role in rescuing you when you were abducted by Count Turan's daughter. I figure anyone who hates you people of the forest's edge will want nothing to do with a shop like that... But on the other hand, I can't imagine the place would be doing this well if it was flying the emblem of Count Turan instead."

"I see... Yeah, I think you're right."

The majority of the westerners present had looked shaken seeing hunters of the forest's edge. But it was true that they didn't look all that fearful or disgusted by us.

"News of the conflict between the people of the forest's edge and Cyclaeus has spread a good bit, and there's been a good bit of criticism toward that noble's character. It seems that Gazraan Rutim fellow sure has a knack for reading the flow of the times. Don't take this the wrong way, but I was honestly a bit surprised to find out there was a guy like that living in the settlement at the forest's edge."

"Yeah. He's surprised me plenty, too."

"It's nice to talk to someone like him. Once all this trouble clears up, I wouldn't mind sharing a drink with—" Zasshuma started to say, but then his eyes suddenly narrowed. "Well, guess it's no time to be saying stuff like that, though. Hey, I'm going to ground for the time being, so you all should take care, too."

"Huh? What do you—?" I began responding, only for Zasshuma to swiftly blend into the crowd. I looked all around in utter confusion, only to notice Ai Fa glaring to the north.

"Ludo Ruu, those soldiers fall under Cyclaeus."

Instantly, the hunters formed a circle around me and Reina Ruu. And thanks to the close quarters, our shoulders were bumping into each other in the center of the ring.

"People of the forest's edge... How fortuitous to run into you here."

A larger figure had approached from the north, stopping in front of us. He was clad in formal white leather armor and a helmet, with a long sword dangling from his hip. From what I could recall, this was one of the officers who I had seen guarding Cyclaeus back at his manor.

“You are Asuta and Ai Fa of the Fa clan, are you not? I am the commanding officer of Count Turan’s first bodyguard unit, Jimon. Are there any members of the leading Ruu clan among this group?”

“I’m the youngest son of the main Ruu house, Ludo Ruu. Exactly what business do you have with me?” Ludo Ruu questioned with a hunter’s gaze burning bright in his eyes as he stepped forward toward Jimon.

The crest of Count Turan was emblazoned on the officer’s chestplate, and so his confrontation with a hunter of the forest’s edge was gathering a lot of attention from passersby.

In the middle of that uneasy murmuring, Jimon calmly stated, “I have a message from my lord, Count Cyclaeus Turan. I ask that you accurately convey it to the leading clan heads of the forest’s edge. The content relates to the meeting in two days...”

With that, Jimon informed us of two matters. And when she heard the second one, Ai Fa’s blue eyes blazed with fury as she shouted back, “Don’t be ridiculous!”

2

Several hours later, we had returned to the Ruu settlement in the same manner as yesterday, having finished our work on time.

However, there was a rather gloomy feeling hanging in the air today. And the rage of the hunters still hadn’t abated, with Ai Fa foremost among them.

“Ah, good work, everyone. What’s going on...? You lot are wearing some scary looks there, y’know,” Bartha of Masara called out with an inquisitive tilt of her head. She really had started to become just another member of the settlement, and was currently chopping firewood with a hatchet. Ryada Ruu was there keeping an eye on her again, and he furrowed his brow while Mida stared down

at us vacantly.

“We ended up getting a real ridiculous message from one of Cyclaeus’s underlings. Ryada Ruu, is my old man still out in the forest...?”

“Yes. The sun’s still high in the sky, so I’d imagine it will be a while yet before he returns.”

“I see. He’s sure to be furious too. Well actually, sometimes he’s surprisingly calm about stuff that makes us rage...”

“Well, what in the world is it? As long as it’s something you can tell me, then out with it already.”

Bartha’s lion-like face was starting to look nervous, too.

Turning back her way, Ludo Ruu scratched his blond head of hair.

“It’s not exactly the sorta thing we need to hide from you. But you see, that Cyclaeus bastard went and thrust some ridiculous conditions on us for the meeting on the day after tomorrow.”

“Conditions?”

“Yeah. The first is that he’s shifting the place to his manor in the castle town instead of Turan. The excuse is that he’s not doing well, and it’d be troublesome to have to leave his home.”

That alone wouldn’t be enough to get angry over. And so, Bartha still looked confused as Ludo Ruu continued on.

“You can’t set foot in the castle town without a pass, though. And only ten people not participating directly in the meeting will be allowed through. It’s ridiculous, isn’t it?”

Since the people of the forest’s edge were going to bring along Zuuro Suun and the others, they planned to have dozens of hunters accompany them as bodyguards. It would just be a few hunters including the leading clan heads at the actual meeting place, but the others would have stood by outside the building, prepared to charge in if anything happened.

“Hmm... So our request to bring along Zuuro Suun and the others put them on edge, then?”

“Hmph! That would make a lot more sense than believing his illness conveniently just happened to worsen, right?!”

Of course Jimon ultimately kept insisting it was due to Cyclaeus being in poor health, and also that we didn’t need any more bodyguards at the meeting place. And his tone said that if we didn’t accept the demand, it would be seen as an act of rebellion.

“And the other demand was even more ridiculous. That damn noble bastard went and told us to bring Asuta to the meeting place!”

Even Ryada Ruu’s eyes opened wide in shock at hearing that.

“Bring along Asuta, you say? But this is ultimately a meeting between Cyclaeus and the leading clan heads of the forest’s edge, isn’t it? Asuta should have nothing to do with it.”

“I’ve got no clue what he’s thinking! He just went on and on about some nonsense!” Ludo Ruu shouted, kicking the ground.

It seemed like I might well have been the calmest one present, so I took up the role of explaining.

“Their excuse is that they see my birthplace as an issue, apparently. There’s no real example of welcoming someone from overseas into one’s clan, so they said it should be handled more carefully...”

I didn’t fully grasp the customs of this world myself, so I had quite a time trying to understand what Jimon was saying.

But the gist of it was that people from overseas were not children of the four great gods of this continent, and should have their own heathen gods. And so, someone with such a background shouldn’t be welcomed so recklessly.

“Asuta is a fellow person of the forest’s edge! He thinks so himself, and we don’t have any issue with it, so what business do you have butting in?!” Ludo Ruu had shouted out several hours back, but Jimon still looked cool-headed as he shook his head.

“Then you are saying Asuta of the Fa clan is also currently a child of Selva?”

“Yes, or at least I consider myself one.”

“In that case, provide proof of that fact.”

Naturally, I had no idea what he was talking about.

Jimon gave a condescending nod. “I wouldn’t mind even a ritual toward Jagar or Sym. As long as you are not a child of Mahyudra, the gates of Selva will remain open to you... But of course, as long as one is not a child of Selva, they cannot be allowed to live in the Morga forest’s edge, which is Genos land.”

“I’m sorry... I don’t really understand what you’re saying.”

“Indeed. In other words, that serves as proof that you do not come from this continent.”

“Hold on a moment! It’s not as if we get what you’re saying either!” Ludo Ruu loudly protested, earning him an icy glare from Jimon.

“It seems the people of the forest’s edge have not been required to learn the customs of the children of Selva. Though it’s quite difficult to understand, that was the agreement between Duke Genos and the leading clan head of the forest’s edge eighty years ago, and so nobody can blame you for that. You people of the forest’s edge are likely the only citizens of this continent who do not know how to perform a ritual to the gods.”

“Hmph! Then Asuta shouldn’t have to—”

“The people of the forest’s edge can be determined at a glance thanks to your unique appearances. And none of you have formed ties with people outside of the forest’s edge up until now, so there has been no need to question any of your backgrounds. And yet, now you advocate for this man from overseas, this Asuta of the Fa clan, as being a child of the western god, and he has been earning coins here in this land. Count Turan believes that to simply let this pass would create an improper precedent in regards to any other mysterious visitors from overseas,” Jimon stated, sounding unconcerned all the while. “Despite Lady Lefreya’s misconduct, we cannot simply ignore the presence of Asuta of the Fa clan. If he intends to continue living as a person of the forest’s edge and a citizen of Genos, it’s only natural that he will require the approval of Duke Marstein Genos.”

“In the same breath that he apologizes for her ‘misconduct,’ he goes and

thrusts that ridiculous demand on us...?" Ai Fa questioned in a sharp, chilly tone like a blade of ice. "Does that Cyclaeus noble have no shame in his wretched soul?"

"You should watch your tongue, Ai Fa of the Fa clan. No matter how much anyone may slander him for it, the count cannot go turning a blind eye toward Asuta of the Fa clan's lineage now that it is known."

It was looking like a commotion that would inevitably end in the guards being called was about to erupt.

If I hadn't mediated things by shouting out, "We should first ask the leading clan heads how to proceed!" things seriously might have taken a turn for the worse. That was just how furious Ai Fa and Ludo Ruu seemed.

"In other words, that Cyclaeus bastard wants to get a hold of Asuta and everyone from the Suun clan! It's so obvious it's laughable!" Ludo Ruu shouted as Ryada Ruu deeply furrowed his brows. Though the boy was deeply emotional and open, it really was rare seeing him *this* angry.

"Or maybe Cyclaeus is just afraid of the people of the forest's edge running wild at the meeting. Maybe he thinks the leading clan heads wouldn't go making any rash moves with a hindrance like me around."

"That's got nothing to do with it! I mean, we were already taking along Yamiru Lea and Tsuvai! That Cyclaeus jerk is definitely after you, just like his daughter was!"

Ludo Ruu's eyes were searingly bright with the look of a hunter.

And while Ai Fa remained expressionless, there was an even more dangerous light shining away in her eyes.

"But you know just how resolved we are about the meeting two days from now, don't you...? With that in mind, it makes sense for that Cyclaeus noble to be on guard, hearing tell of our intentions," Ryada Ruu calmly stated. "And when they permitted Gazraan Rutim to spread that information, the leading clan heads were likely thinking that not only was it alright if that made Cyclaeus wary, but also that it would make it easier to measure the man's true intentions."

“What the heck?! If doing that put us at a disadvantage, it just makes us look like idiots, doesn’t it?!”

“The thought may be that any such disadvantage is too slight to truly count. At any rate, nothing will be settled by us causing a fuss. As Asuta said, we just have to wait to hear the decision of the leading clan heads.”

Still, it felt like the conclusion had long since been decided.

The other side was in charge as the ruling class. If we didn’t want it to be taken as rebellion, we had no way of fighting against them saying the meeting place was wherever they pleased, or that ten bodyguards was plenty. And it was the same for how my situation would be handled.

Ai Fa and Ludo Ruu were so furious precisely because they understood that. With just two days left till the meeting, Cyclaeus had reared his head to strike.

At any rate, though, we weren’t getting anywhere by discussing all this stuff without the leading clan heads, so for the time being we focused on the work at hand.

The hunters aside from Ai Fa and Ludo Ruu all departed, while the remaining members of our group headed for the kitchen. Rimee Ruu was on duty there today, and she had already started baking poitan.

“What are you so upset about, Ludo and Ai Fa?” the young girl asked with a tilt of her head, and so Ludo Ruu loudly started his explanation again as I began slicing meat.

With that, having accompanied us again today, Bartha called out, “Despite being at the heart of the matter, you sure look awful calm.”

“Yeah. I’ve just got to abide by the decision of the leading clan heads. I really don’t like the thought that I’m causing everyone trouble... But I don’t want to say something like, ‘If only I weren’t around,’ either.”

“Hmm... You’re surprisingly gutsy, eh, kid?”

“That’s not true at all. Inside, I’ve got plenty of anger and fear.”

But Ai Fa and the others were getting mad enough on my behalf that I just felt sorry and grateful, which left me in a strangely calm state of mind.

At any rate, this wasn't just my personal issue here. I wanted to be a person of the forest's edge, and had been accepted as such, which meant this was an issue shared by everyone. So I wanted to think it over with my comrades and choose the best path forward possible.

"Still, that sure is something, that you don't even know how to perform the ritual to your god. I never figured there was a tribe like that here on this continent," Bartha said, thrusting her burly right arm straight out as she spoke, and almost grabbing at her heart with her left hand. "'I, Bartha of Masara, swear on my soul that I am a child of the western god Selva.' That's all you have to do."

"Ah, and that serves as proof that you're a western citizen?"

"It's easy, right? But if someone lies in the ritual, their soul is shredded into four after death. Noble or bandit, this oath is the one thing that can't be taken lightly," Bartha said, then chuckled as she lowered her arms. "Well, not that you'll be asked to prove your god as long as you don't get closer to the border with Mahyudra. Still, folks with northern looks like that Kamyua Yoshu are made to do it here and there."

"Ah, I see."

If Shumiral married into the forest's edge, he would never again be permitted to call himself a child of Sym.

And if he hid that and kept doing business in Mahyudra even so, he could someday be asked to prove himself and have his loyalty to the western god revealed... That was the sort of thing we were talking about.

Changing gods really is a big deal...

In that case, I needed to firmly resign myself to being a child of the western god Selva.

Fortunately, I wasn't exactly religious back home. I believe my mom's funeral was done in the Buddhist style, but honestly, I couldn't even say which sect. So I wasn't all that concerned about swearing myself to some god I knew nothing about... And if that was the only way I would be permitted to call myself a person of the forest's edge, I didn't exactly have a choice.

But the fact that those customs weren't conveyed to the people of the forest's edge... Doesn't that mean the old lord of Genos hadn't really felt like accepting them as true comrades right from the start?

Or maybe eighty years back, the leading clan head didn't care about all that and had just ignored it.

And yet, the people of the forest's edge were originally supposed to have come from the Southern Kingdom of Jagar. Granny Jiba had been alive back then, so would she know of that ritual to the gods? Or did the people of the forest's edge always live solitary, secluded lives, never possessing such knowledge from the start?

The people of the forest's edge really are an unusual tribe... I thought to myself, only to feel like giving an awkward chuckle at my own thoughtlessness there. After all, nobody was more unusual than me. For the sake of convenience I had been acting as if I came from overseas, but in actuality, I would have to say I came from another universe entirely.

And I had gone and died once already. I had leapt into a burning building, only to be crushed by falling debris. I couldn't imagine that pain was nothing but a dream or illusion, and this new world I found myself in was full of stuff that fell outside of what I'd call common sense. And yet, I had kept on living this second life of mine.

I was supposed to have died, so why did I look just like I had in life? And this was a completely unfamiliar world, so how could I communicate with the people here? What sort of twist of fate had led me here to begin with, even...? I still didn't have the slightest clue as I stood here in this place.

Even so, I decided to live as a person of the forest's edge... As a member of the Fa clan, together with Ai Fa.

Since I had already died once, I surely had no way of returning to my original world.

The only reason that fact hadn't driven me to despair was because I met Ai Fa.

And whatever suffering I had to face, I was prepared to do so head on in order to protect this new happiness I had found.

If Cyclaeus finds fault with that, then I'll fight like a madman in order to protect my place here, I thought as I finished slicing up the meat for the myamuu giba.

"Alright, now let's move on to preparing dinner," I called out, causing Rimee Ruu to turn around.

"You're making soup today, right, Asuta? What sort of soup is it, though?"

Fortunately, Rimee Ruu didn't seem shaken at all, even after hearing what her brother had to say. She just seemed to trust in her clan head, saying, "It'll all be fine if we just leave it to Papa Donda." That apparently left Ludo Ruu dumbfounded, so he was leaning up against the wall and sulking.

"Yeah. Today, I'm planning on using karon milk. The stuff we brought by wagon yesterday."

I had purchased ten liters of karon milk from Yang, and it was sealed in jars and being stored in the pantry. A night had passed now, so the fat should have floated to the surface by this point, making it finally time to produce some milk fat. And then, I would use the remaining skim milk to prepare a soup.

"Sorry, Asuta. Could I have a bit more time before helping you out?" Reina Ruu called out while working hard at making patties. For today, I had promised to instruct her on how to make milk fat and handle karon milk.

"Yeah, no need to rush. I'll do a bit of experimenting on my own in the meantime."

The lard I used yesterday was still sitting on one of the stoves. Naturally, I sealed it up as best I could in a suurub leaf, but once the stuff was used once, it couldn't be put back in its jar. It would take several tests to determine how long the oil was still usable after oxidizing, and I intended to confirm that in the form of cooking practice.

Fortunately, I've got no lack of ideas for fried dishes.

Yesterday, in addition to the giba cutlets, I also used the same breading to coat minced giba meat and fried it to make menchi katsu for Granny Jiba, with her weak teeth. And for today, I was going to try out a third fried dish.

After lighting the stove, I first started by boiling chatchi. While that was cooking, I went ahead and minced some spare giba sirloin and rib meat bits.

“Is it hamburger steak...?” Ai Fa quietly asked.

“No, this is a different dish,” I replied.

“I see,” she said back, closing her eyes again.

“So if it’s not hamburger steak, then what is it? And you’re using chatchi, too?” Ludo Ruu questioned, peering curiously into the pot after finally regaining his calm. Now that I thought about it, he was quite fond of chatchi.

“Well, I’m working on a recipe to be sold. I’m trying to make a dish called croquettes here. Would you like to try a taste, Ludo Ruu...?”

“Is it really alright?” the boy asked, his eyes sparkling.

At that, Rimee Ruu whined, “No fair! Why does only Ludo get to try? I want some too!”

“Ah, sorry. I only planned to taste test it myself, so I just prepared enough for one.”

Perhaps I was being a bit of an excessive worrier, but I was planning on making some giba cutlets for tomorrow night’s dinner, so I wanted to hold back from having everyone eat fried foods multiple days in a row, even just as taste tests.

But I had gone ahead and responded to Ludo Ruu in spite of that in order to show at least a little gratitude to him for getting so angry on my behalf. Still, Rimee Ruu looked awfully upset.

“Like I explained yesterday, eating fried food every day can be bad for your health. And you’re little, Rimee Ruu, so I think it’s better to stay on the safe side.”

“Ludo’s little too, though!”

“Not as much as you are!”

My casual proposal had gone and incited a quarrel between the siblings.

Timidly, I turned to face Ai Fa, but fortunately she took the initiative and said,

“I don’t need any. If it’s too delicious, then a taste test alone will leave me feeling unsatisfied.”

Her face also seemed to add, “And that’s not the dish I want to eat, either.”

“A-Anyway, I’m planning to make a few giba cutlets for dinner tomorrow night, so cut me some slack, okay? And this dish in particular is meant to be sold.”

“But if you’re making it, then it’s gotta be tasty!” Rimee Ruu adorably puffed up her cheeks.

“Ah, I’ve got a whole mountain of failed attempts nobody ever saw... But if you’re that curious, I’ll set aside a sample for you next time I make it, alright?”

Now the little girl’s eyebrows drooped as she stared up at me and asked, “You really mean it? Do you promise?”

“Yeah, I promise.”

“Hmm... Alright. Then I’ll let it go for now.”

With a dejected shrug of her shoulders, Rimee Ruu returned to baking poitan. And with a triumphant look, Ludo Ruu let out a “Hehehe!” The pair really did have a twisted relationship.

And with that, I collected my thoughts and got back to work.

First up, that meant dicing up aria and quickly frying them in a bit of lard.

Once the ingredients grew nice and soft, I added the minced meat, then adjusted the flavor with salt and pico leaves.

Following that, I picked out the chatchi once it was completely boiled, then mashed it with a grigee pole while it was still hot. Atop a wooden plate, I roughly mixed together the fried ingredients and chatchi, then made them into little sand bag shapes to finish the base.

After that, just like with yesterday, I used fuwano flour, a kimyuus egg, and baked fuwano crumbs in turn to create a coating, and then fried them in lard.

But for today, I also intended to make a replacement for Worcestershire sauce.

Since the people of the forest's edge had previously only gotten by with the salt from their jerky, I felt like it was best not to go overboard on that front, just like with the oil. But the folks from the post town always ate meat pickled in salt rather than pico leaves and were probably more fond of salty flavors as a result, and they likely had a greater need of it in their diets too. And so, I whipped up my Worcestershire sauce replacement using plenty of tau oil.

I had already roughly worked out the recipe while I was being held at the Turan manor. First I boiled mashed tarapa and aria in a pot, then once it cooled down I added tau oil and fuwano flour. The sourness from the tarapa, the sweetness from the aria, and the thickness from the fuwano flour combined with the tau oil that was just like soy sauce to make something that tasted very close to Worcestershire sauce.

If I could dribble in some mamaria vinegar too the taste would get even closer, but that stuff only existed in the castle town. And I ultimately had to stick with ingredients that could be purchased in the post town when developing my dishes.

"Asuta, that dish certainly looks interesting..." Reina Ruu said with a pained look as she worked on her tarapa sauce.

"Ah, yeah. If it goes well, I was thinking of using it at an inn. And if that happens, I'll be sure to teach you how to make it properly."

The dish had even more chatchi in it than giba meat, and I was certain it would click well with the folks in the post town. But they supposedly got even less oil in their diets than the people of the forest's edge, so I'd have to talk with the inn's owner about that.

At any rate, I set about finishing the dish.

Just like yesterday, I sunk the base into the heated lard. And soon enough, a pleasant crackling sound once more filled the kitchen.

The lard was still clear, so that meant it should have been good for one or two more uses. But I had no tool for straining the oil, which made it a pain to remove the impurities each time.

Now that I think about it, can Diel still not come out to the post town?

If I was going to keep frying food, I'd really like to get a hold of some new cooking tool to help with that, like a wire mesh. There didn't seem to be anything like that sold in the post town, though. And so, it was times like this that I really wished I had a reliable metalwork seller like Diel around.

But to her father, Cyclaeus is an important business partner, so he must not want to have dealings with any people of the forest's edge.

And if we took down that wicked noble, they'd be out of a lot of work. Would that earn us their anger if it happened?

As I felt a vague lonely feeling at the thought of what my relationship with the girl would become if things played out that way, I lifted the now golden brown croquette out with metal skewers.

"It looks and smells perfectly tasty. You said it was called a croquette?"

"Yeah. I can't quite call it a proper meat dish, so it may not suit the tastes of you people of the forest's edge."

But I figured in the post town, they could be sold in a small portion as a side dish.

To digress further, I also thought it might be good for the people of the forest's edge to eat more side dishes, too.

Last night, I served up a shredded tino and tarapa salad alongside the giba cutlets, as well as boiled gigo. Since my meals undoubtedly used more salt, sugar, and oil than what they had eaten for dinner in the past, it seemed important to also add additional nutrition by pairing vegetables like that.

I feel like Ludo Ruu would probably enjoy it if I could make something like a potato salad with chatchi... I thought to myself as I lightly drizzled my sauce over the croquette, still dripping with excess oil.

"Alright, it's done. It's hot though, so take care not to burn yourself."

After splitting the little croquette in two atop a fresh plate, I held out one half to Ludo Ruu.

And when I popped the other half into my mouth... A truly nostalgic croquette flavor burst forth.

I just couldn’t get enough of the piping hot potato-like chatchi. Normally the giba meat strongly asserted itself, but this time around it took a support role. Still, it had a nice chewiness and a delicious flavor as always. And the crunchiness added by the fuwano crumbs really was excellent.

Did my old man know that lard was this excellent for fried dishes? At the very least, I hadn’t.

My impression had been that such animal fats left a far more oily taste in your mouth, but that wasn’t the case at all. In fact, the aftertaste was actually refreshing instead, and seemed to include plenty of sweetness and delicious flavor.

Well, at any rate, the croquettes didn’t seem to lose out at all to the cutlets in terms of flavor.

Feeling totally convinced that this would work as a new dish to sell, I gave a big sigh... Only to suddenly have my collar grabbed.

“Huh? What the? What is it, Ludo Ruu?”

The young hunter wore an incredibly serious expression as he got right up in my face.

“It’s crazy good...”

“Ah, really? I’m glad to—”

“It’s the most delicious thing I’ve ever tasted! Even more than steak and stew and hamburger and cutlets! Seriously, what the heck is it?!”

“Well, like I said, they’re called croquettes, and—”

“Make more! Lots more! That was nowhere near enough!”

Despite being smaller than me, Ludo Ruu was definitely stronger, and he was seriously shaking my head at the moment.

“Y-Yeah, but you know, fried dishes are a problem in terms of nutrition, so... I-I’ll make them again soon, alright?”

“When is ‘soon’?! Tomorrow?! The day after?!”

The contents of my head were being so thoroughly shaken that my vision was

steadily growing white. Either I was about to faint, or I was heading for a concussion.

The one to ultimately save me, unsurprisingly, was Ai Fa.

“Ludo Ruu, you’re getting too worked up,” she stated in a low, calm voice. With that, the pressure vanished from my chest and Ludo Ruu stepped back.

And then, the world started swaying again. Or wait, was it my skull that wouldn’t sit still?

As I felt like I was about to bonelessly collapse, I was propped up by a strong force accompanied by warmth, and instantly a sweet smell seeped deep through my nose and into my mind.

“Asuta is as weak as a woman or child. You can’t be so rough with him.”

“But it was just so crazy tasty!” Ludo Ruu wailed like a little kid.

I could still see little white lights twinkling in my eyes, and that voice sounded so distant.

“At any rate, calm yourself so we can talk. Did we not just recently discuss how continuously eating any dish can prove dangerous?”

On the other hand, Ai Fa’s voice seemed real close. Like I could hear it from right behind my ear.

That made sense though, seeing as Ai Fa was hugging me tight from behind. Since I had no strength in my legs, my clan head was supporting my whole weight, and her arms were both wrapped firmly around my chest.

“Gah, sorry! I’m alright now, Ai Fa!”

“Which part of this do you call ‘alright’? There’s no strength in your body at all,” Ai Fa replied in a displeased tone, squeezing my body even tighter.

“But if you tried it too you’d get it, Ai Fa! It’s unbelievably tasty!”

“Each person has their own tastes, you know. I believe we already had this discussion involving steak in the past.”

“In that case, croquettes are definitely the tastiest dish out there for me!”

“Then that’s even more reason you just have to be patient. Think of it as a

trial, in order prove Asuta's strength is medicine rather than poison."

Ai Fa had continued arguing with Ludo Ruu from over my shoulder.

And in the midst of that, Rimee Ruu butted in, "No fair! If it's that tasty, then I want to try it too! You better make some for me too next time, okay?"

"R-Right."

"I wanted to try it too. Even more so, seeing how it's a dish meant to be sold."

"Yeah, that's for sure. I'd love to give it a shot."

Even Sheera Ruu and Bartha were chiming in, now.

That nobody was even commenting on how Ai Fa was hugging me from behind was honestly making me feel so embarrassed I could die.

And then finally, even Reina Ruu added, "It really isn't fair..." with a resentful look.

As I went and gave a deep sigh, Ai Fa whispered into my ear, "There's no need for you to worry. To prove your strength is a medicine, it will sometimes require patience."

"Y-Yeah..."

"I am bearing it as well, so it is illogical to think that Ludo Ruu and the others cannot do so. But if you handle us crudely as we are enduring, then you will face a fitting retribution..."

At that, there was such a firm pressure around my chest that I really did feel like I was about to die. Was this my recompense for failing to provide my beloved clan head with hamburger steak for so long?

At any rate, there was only a day and a half left until the meeting.

3

The following day, the 14th of the white month, had arrived. In other words, the day before the meeting with Cyclaeus.

There was a restless air slowly permeating the post town. It seemed that the

rumors unleashed by Zasshuma were really starting to take off.

The people of the forest's edge suspected Cyclaeus of a great crime. Tomorrow, they would be meeting with the man to discuss how the relatives of the criminal known as Zattsu Suun would be dealt with. And if both sides could not come to an agreement, it was hard to say just what would happen... Soon everyone in the post town would hear how things were about to boil over.

For the time being, the plan for our stalls was to take tomorrow off. Our business with the inns would also pause, but today I'd be selling them enough raw meat to last for three days. As for what would happen the day after tomorrow onwards, that would depend on the results of tomorrow's meeting.

And in the midst of all this, Yang's business was chugging along nicely. From what I heard, he sold all two hundred meals he had prepared for the first day. Since it was normal for places selling miniature-sized meals like that to generally only sell around fifty, that was certainly a remarkable accomplishment.

Plus, from what I observed on my way to the inns, Yang's stall was looking every bit as lively again today.

However, I sensed a slight change in the customer base this time around. Yesterday there had been a roughly equal ratio of men to women, but today there definitely seemed to be more of the latter. On top of that, there also looked to be more children around, too. Perhaps that shouldn't have been surprising, though, considering it was a dish that emphasized sweetness. And the colorfulness might have also helped to make it popular with women and children, too. Also, there were unsurprisingly very few easterners and southerners, and even among the westerners, I couldn't see any of the rough types who chugged down fruit wine in the middle of the day.

It really was seeming more and more like Yang was drawing the exact opposite type of clientele as our stalls. Put another way, that meant he was getting the customers that we lost. I shelved that thought carefully in the back of my mind as something I should consider later.

But at any rate, it was clear that Yang's shop was undoubtedly prospering.

And as of today, there were three inns and four stalls using baked poitan, all of them using it as a direct substitute for fuwano. Having obtained the

assistance of the house of Saturas that ruled over the post town, Polarth had already roped in that many places to sell it. He was also offering processed powdered poitan at cost price, charging no additional service fee. And he additionally provided the method of coloring them as part of his sales experiment, it seemed.

As I walked through the stall area, I was able to confirm that those places seemed to be fairly bustling. They must have been attracting interest because of the unusual coloration from the nenon and nanaar, as well as the novel method of cooking poitan, an ingredient folks hadn't really paid attention to up till now. Of course, using the same sort of baked poitan as Yang's business, which had been earning quite a reputation throughout the post town, obviously didn't hurt.

Additionally, the shops that answered this request also got priority when it came to learning how to make milk fat. So, in the not-too-distant future when those shops handling baked poitan started using butter too, they were sure to earn an even greater reputation.

It really was thoroughly plotted out.

And the introduction of milk fat couldn't have been something Kamyua Yoshu had expected, so Polarth and Yang must have come up with that strategy entirely on their own.

At this rate, the idea of poitan and fuwano switching places really might not have been just pure fantasy. Just as Polarth had once said, poitan was notably cheaper than fuwano, so there was no reason for anyone to avoid either purchasing or selling it.

"These changes are sure to reach Cyclaeus's ears soon enough. And he may just sneer at it for now, but once he learns both the Daleim and Saturas houses are involved, well, I can't imagine he'll be keeping his calm then," Zasshuma had said with a chuckle.

But ultimately, this was all groundwork to corner Cyclaeus. It would still be quite a while till results would truly start showing, so as things stood, we wouldn't be dealing him a knock-out blow just yet. Still, we could put pressure on him with the message, "Your prosperity won't last forever," digging a hole in

the sturdy castle walls surrounding him.

Thanks to that, it might really have been more of a check against the people surrounding Cyclaeus.

In actuality, the head of the house of Daleim had given his tacit approval to his son's actions, despite finding them outrageous. And while I didn't know how far the house of Saturas had actively involved themselves, they were lending Polarth a hand at the bare minimum. Cyclaeus's stronghold was slowly yet surely crumbling.

"Tomorrow, you'll finally be marching into the castle town..." Dora said with a deeply serious expression as we approached his shop after work to purchase vegetables for dinner. "That meeting of yours is supposed to start when the sun hits its peak, right? Then it should be over by the second or third hour."

"Yeah, but I don't really know the details, either."

"At any rate, it surely won't take till the sun sets... If your people don't exit the castle gates before then, will it become another huge commotion?" Dora asked, his expression somewhere between anger and grinning. "At the very least, I'd definitely head over to the gates again. And the southerners and easterners would never keep quiet, either."

"Right. So we'll do our best to return safely before that happens."

"Aah, still, I can't help but worry! And the fact that you're going too is the biggest worry of all!" Dora exclaimed, now looking dejected.

Dora had feared that the people of the forest's edge might destroy Genos itself, and yet he was also deeply concerned for our well-being at the same time.

Naturally, that was because the leading clan heads had gone and accepted all of Cyclaeus's conditions.

Ryada Ruu had called it perfectly when he predicted that Donda Ruu had been prepared for Cyclaeus to pull something like that right from the start. Just as should be expected from the man's brother.

"Just like Gazraan Rutim said, the reason behind bringing along a whole mess

of hunters as bodyguards was to conspicuously show off our resolve. It was a threat, to let them know that we were ready to use force to resist depending on the attitude they took," Donda Ruu had stated at dinner last night. "But the other side still didn't realize that we were planning on bringing along that many men. We just let them know we were bringing the former members of the Suun house, yet they had such an overblown response... So they must be looking to prepare for this to end in violence too, in their own way."

"So what should we do, then? Just accept their ridiculous demands?" Ludo Ruu retorted, sounding clearly displeased.

Donda Ruu, however, grinned like a wild beast.

"What reason do we have to reject them? Gulaf Zaza and I will both be there at the meeting place. Same for Dari Sauti and Gazraan Rutim. No matter how many hindrances we've got, there's no chance they'll ever get the better of us. And that goes even more so when they're allowing us to bring along ten bodyguards, too."

"But they're going to take your blades at the meeting place, aren't they? And the other side will have fully-armed soldiers, so—" I started to object, but Donda Ruu's expression remained utterly unchanged as he turned my way.

"Yeah, but we just need to snatch away some blades from those soldiers if things turn violent. And we won't be the only ones dealing with hindrances..." Donda Ruu replied, his eyes turning into an intense blue blaze. "Before those hack soldiers from the castle town could put so much as a scratch on one of my allies, I'd grab that Cyclaeus noble by the scruff of his neck. And if those soldiers keep resisting even so... Then they'll *really* see some violence."

It was true that I really couldn't see Donda Ruu or Gulaf Zaza getting taken down by soldiers.

Just as Dora had worried, the greatest concern really might have been Cyclaeus underestimating the strength possessed by the hunters of the forest's edge and foolishly resorting to violence.

"Still, there's no chance of us taking up arms first, at any rate. If things end in violence even so, then it will be down to the laws of Genos to determine whether it's us or Cyclaeus who are criminals... And that's what's most

important," Donda Ruu stated, his blazing blue eyes firmly fixed on me. "Regardless, I won't be handing anyone over to Cyclaeus, be it you or the former members of the Suun. And if he's going to go complaining about your birthplace, then just go ahead and explain yourself away with that skilled tongue of yours, Asuta of the Fa clan."

"Right. Understood," I replied with a big nod.

"Hold on," Ai Fa calmly chimed in. "If that is the decision of the leading clan heads, then I will also obey. However... If Asuta's being taken along, then allow me to accompany him. As clan head of the Fa, that is one point I absolutely cannot yield on."

"There are six people set to head to the meeting. The three leading clan heads, and the hunters accompanying them... Gazraan Rutim, the Fou clan head, and the Beim clan head..."

Ai Fa just silently listened.

"However, they were the ones who went and thrust new conditions our way. If they insist that we must bring along Asuta of the Fa clan, then we'll tell Cyclaeus we're also bringing the Fa clan head, who invited him into the forest's edge in the first place."

"You have my gratitude," Ai Fa said with a bow of her head.

And so it had been decided that both I and Ai Fa would be attending tomorrow's meeting.

"Come back safely, alright?" Tara said, her eyes tearing up.

"Of course," I nodded back at the girl and her father. "I'll make it back okay for sure. I promise you that I'll do everything I can to make sure that happens."

I couldn't even properly use a blade to fight, so I shouldn't hold any real responsibility on that front. But I would still believe in my allies putting their lives and pride on the line for the same goal, and I would also do everything that I could.

And with that, we said farewell to the father and daughter pair and departed from the post town.

Back at the forest's edge, the last great task to prepare for tomorrow still awaited us.

◇

"Hey there! Long time no see, Asuta and Ai Fa!" Rau Lea greeted us upon our arrival at the Ruu settlement. In actuality, it hadn't been all that long since we last saw him. Only about four days or so.

"Ah, Rau Lea. What's up?"

"What do you mean 'what's up'? I brought Yamiru Lea. And since I lent you guys my totos, we had to walk all the way here."

"Huh? You came personally, even though you're the clan head?"

Until I was kidnapped, Rau and Yamiru Lea had paid frequent visits to the Fa house on totos-back. Was he just as light on his feet as Dan Rutim, to walk all the way here?

"All my clan members who are able to work are needed back home! And besides, this is one task I've got no intention of yielding to anyone else," Rau Lea replied, his eyes burning bright with the look of a hunting dog. "Asuta... Today you'll be serving Yamiru Lea and the others food you personally prepared, won't you? I'd like to attend too. What do you say?"

"Huh? I don't mind at all, but isn't that more a question for Donda Ruu?"

"I'll handle talking to him! But I have your approval, right?" Rau Lea asked, breaking out in a relieved grin. "You have my gratitude! Ever since that festival of the hunt, I've been seriously itching to eat your cooking again! The Lea women really have gotten a lot more skilled, but they still don't measure up to you at all!"

"Right, well, I'll do my best not to disappoint you."

I was about to ask where Yamiru Lea was, only for a booming voice to shout out from behind, "Oh, Asuta!" I turned to look while still holding onto Gilulu's reins, and unsurprisingly I found Dan Rutim standing there.

"Long time no see! The thing is, I've got a request I'd like to make of you, so _"

“Ah, right, if it’s about dinner, then could you just let Donda Ruu know?”

“My! Did you read my mind?!”

All I could do in response was give a long-suffering chuckle.

As Dan Rutim stood there with his eyes opened wide in shock, I spied Gazraan Rutim and a woman behind him.

“So you’re finally back, Asuta? Ludo Ruu, we’ve brought Oura...”

Oura was Tsuvai’s mother and had once been Zuuro Suun’s wife, and currently she fell under the Rutim clan. Her dark brown hair was evenly cut at around shoulder length, and she was slender with a graceful face. She looked so young it was hard to imagine she had given birth to Tsuvai, though her expression remained quite listless, especially her darkly clouded eyes.

“It’s good to see you again, Oura. Tsuvai’s walking back with Ama Min Rutim’s group, so I’d imagine she’ll arrive soon.”

“I see...” she quietly responded with a nod.

I hadn’t seen her since Tei Suun’s burial out in the forest. The impression I got from her hadn’t changed at all since then, but I didn’t know whether that was something to feel glad or uneasy about...

“There’s still a good bit of time left until dinner. Where should Oura wait until then?” Dan Rutim asked Ludo Ruu, but Rau Lea was the one to answer.

“I tossed Yamiru Lea into the empty house over there. I figured I’d give her a bit of a chance to talk with her former family.”

“Huh? Do you mean Mida? Or—”

“Zuuro Suun, Diga, and Doddo. Right now, Gulaf Zaza and his people are keeping watch outside the house.”

“In that case, how about you head over too?”

Oura’s shoulders twitched a bit in response to Dan Rutim’s words.

“Right... As long as I have permission...”

“There’s no need to hold back! Since you cut ties, you were forbidden from meeting each other frequently. But thinking another way, times like this are

pretty much your only chance to talk, right?”

“I’ll go talk to Gulaf Zaza, then,” Rau Lea chimed in, leading Oura toward the vacant house where we had been sleeping.

Though it was pretty unusual for him, Dan Rutim looked a bit worried as he watched them leave.

“Hmm... It’s already been a month since Oura and Tsuvai joined our Rutim clan, eh? It seems like they still aren’t ready to open up to us yet, though. Personally, I’d like to give them the Rutim name as soon as possible, but still...”

“That just goes to show how massive an influence Zattsu Suun had. I believe it’s best that we don’t rush, and allow time for their feelings on the matter to settle,” Gazraan Rutim replied while looking quite calm, and then he turned my way. “By the way, Asuta... Would it be possible to ask you to prepare dinner for several more people, rather than just my father Dan?”

“Huh? Ah, yeah. I was already expecting more than twenty people, so having to add on more is no big issue...”

“In that case, I would absolutely like to ask you to do so. Would five people be alright...?”

“Of course. But who exactly are you talking about?”

“Dari Sauti, Gulaf Zaza, the Fou and Beim clan heads, and myself. In other words, everyone who shall be attending tomorrow’s meeting,” Gazraan Rutim replied, breaking out in a grin. “Dari Sauti came to me, saying if Donda Ruu, Zuuro Suun, and all the others were going to eat your cooking, then we should just go ahead and gather everyone involved. Gulaf Zaza brought Zuuro Suun and company here personally and still remains, while Dari Sauti said he wanted to come anyway to discuss things in preparation for tomorrow.”

Back at the festival of the hunt, Dari Sauti had said that Gulaf Zaza should also eat my cooking. That if he was going to oppose the actions of the Fa clan, he should properly learn firsthand the sort of strength and joy our clan and the Ruu had gained by accepting delicious cooking into our lives.

“If you approve, then I was thinking of borrowing the Ruu clan’s totos and going to summon the Fou and Beim clan heads. Dari Sauti is already set to head

this way after finishing up his hunting work, after all.”

“Hmph! So you intended to leave me out of all your plotting?! How cruel, Gazraan!” Dan Rutim huffed.

His son Gazraan Rutim just chuckled back, “My apologies. You have a far more vigorous appetite than others, Father, so I was thinking it best not to add to the burden on Asuta. I certainly never meant any malice by my actions, though.”

“What’s that?! Did you hear what he said, Asuta?! Now that he’s married, he thinks he can discount his old man!”

“Ama Min Rutim has nothing to do with it.”

I burst out laughing without thinking.

Still, if the guest list was swelling that greatly, then I couldn’t waste time.

“Well then, I’m going to set about preparing dinner. Will you go get permission from Donda Ruu, Dan Rutim?”

“Yeah, just leave it to me!”

Since it was uncertain what would happen in terms of business the day after tomorrow, I went ahead and just bought all the vegetables we’d need ahead of time. So it would be possible to make things work in terms of ingredients, I figured.

Still, seven more guests made for a fairly significant additional load. I needed to hurry up and get to work.

“Hmm, so how many are we preparing for altogether, then?” Reina Ruu asked as we headed toward the kitchen.

“There are twelve in the main Ruu house, seven in Yamiru Lea’s group, and then three more between me, Ai Fa, and Bartha... Then six from Shin Ruu’s house, so we had twenty-eight to start.”

Since I had wanted to ask for Sheera and Tari Ruu’s help, the plan had been to make dinner for Shin Ruu’s house too.

“Adding in these newcomers, we get thirty-five people we’re preparing for. But some of that number eat more than normal, so I think it’d be good to aim

for enough for fifty.”

“Fifty people’s worth... That’s enough for a banquet, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. But if we all work together, we should be able to pull it off.”

We had roughly three hours remaining. But since tomorrow would be a day off, we could all throw everything we had at getting dinner ready on time. So with that in mind, it at least seemed doable on paper.

“Ah, welcome back! Asuta, I baked the poitan!”

When we got to the kitchen, we found that Rimee Ruu and company had already started working.

“Thanks. We’ve got more unexpected guests, though. Sorry, but could you prepare enough for ten more?”

“Ten more? Got it!” Rimee Ruu replied, taking off running toward the pantry.

“Hold on,” Sati Lea Ruu called out toward the girl’s tiny back. “You’re skilled at manning the stove, Rimee, so you should help Asuta. Allow me to handle the poitan.”

“Thank you, Sati Lea Ruu.”

“Think nothing of it,” she replied with a gentle smile. “Besides, all the stoves here are being used for different dishes, aren’t they? So I’ll go bake the poitan at Shin Ruu’s house.”

It might well have been true that Rimee Ruu was more skilled at manning the stove than Sati Lea Ruu, but the latter was likely the only one around who could see that at a glance. With such a strong lineup gathered here, there was no way we had anything to worry about.

“Well then, the process we need to follow is just like I explained, so I’ll be counting on each of you. And I’ll fill in Sati Lea Ruu’s spot.”

Between the women of the main Ruu house and Shin Ruu’s family, we had eight people cooking here in total. The only one missing was Granny Tito Min, who was looking after Kota Ruu.

“Oh, and I’m sorry this is so sudden, but I was thinking of adding ribs to our

initial menu.”

“Ribs? Why is that?” Sheera Ruu questioned, and I shot her a grin.

“It seems Dan Rutim will be attending, so I figured it’d be best if we add them just to be safe. No matter how wonderful a meal we prepare, I could still see that man feeling sad if there weren’t any ribs.”

“My...” Sheera Ruu said with a smile.

From next to her, Lala Ruu added, “But you know, is it really alright to expand the menu when we’re already preparing a ton of meals?”

“By adding another dish, we can reduce the amount of the others that we need to prepare. I doubt it’ll have too big of an impact on the total amount of work needed. And at any rate, I don’t think we’re at risk of being too late for dinner.”

“Hmm. Well, if you say so, then I don’t especially mind.”

It really was only natural for Lala Ruu to worry, as the plan was already to prepare eight different dishes for today.

Considering the number of people we were cooking for and the fact that we were trying to convey the notion of what the Fa clan’s actions truly were to Zuuro Suun and his family, through showing them just what kind of food we were selling in the post town, the thinking had been that it was best to offer as wide of a variety as possible.

So today’s menu consisted of giba burgers, myamuu giba, cubed giba meat stew, meat and chatchi stew, giba sauté arrabbiata, giba cutlets, giba soup prepared with tau oil, giba soup prepared with karon milk, and now finally giba spare ribs. That made for a grand spread of nine dishes in total.

Among those dishes, I could yield control of the giba burgers, myamuu giba, and giba soup prepared with tau oil to Reina and Sheera Ruu. For the rest, I had to assign tasks as efficiently as I could to everyone else.

“Well then, I’ll be returning home to prepare the hamburgers along with my mother.”

“Right, I’m counting on you. Reina Ruu, could you prepare the soup? I’ll go

carry in the karon milk. Ai Fa, could you help me transport the jars...?”

“Right.”

With that, Ai Fa and I exited the kitchen along with Sheera Ruu. However, as the girl from the branch houses walked in front of us, she suddenly stopped and I almost unintentionally bumped into her.

“Darmu Ruu... I see you’ve returned.”

Sure enough, I could see the man in question over Sheera Ruu’s shoulders. His long black hair was tied up in back, he had a deep scar on his right cheek, and his eyes shone like a wolf’s... Yup, that was the second son of the main Ruu house, Darmu Ruu.

Half a month ago, he had headed to the Zaza settlement to help watch over Zuuro Suun and the others. Now that they had been moved to the Ruu settlement, it was only natural that he had returned.

“It has been some time, Darmu Ruu... I’m glad to see you doing well.”

“Yeah,” he nodded back at Sheera Ruu, and then his blazing glare turned my way.

Then, he grabbed hold of my upper arm and firmly tugged.

It seemed like Ai Fa was about to immediately object, but before she could, Darmu Ruu grumbled, “I have business with Asuta of the Fa clan.”

“What sort of business do you have with him? Regardless, to just grab him like—”

“I won’t get rough with him. If I break that promise, you can take my right arm.”

With that same line he had given in the past, Darmu Ruu started dragging me away from Ai Fa, still holding firmly onto my arm.

Then, once we had marched around ten meters, he stopped. It was far enough that I could still see Ai Fa and Sheera Ruu, but our voices wouldn’t reach.

Glancing out of the corner of my eye, I saw that my clan head looked ready to

come running over at any moment, while Sheera Ruu was clinging to her arm to stop her.

“L-Long time no see, Darmu Ruu,” I threw out there, offering a perfectly ordinary greeting to start with.

Letting go of my arm, Darmu Ruu then brought his face in awfully close.

“Asuta of the Fa clan... Are you an idiot?”

“Huh? Well, I know I’m not especially sharp, but still...”

“You told me before that you wanted to protect Ai Fa, didn’t you? So why did you go and fall into the enemy’s hands?” the second Ruu son questioned, his blue eyes boring into me as he glared from up close and personal. “You said you wanted to protect her thoughts and feelings and even her pride. Were those words meant for nothing more than to escape in that moment? That’s all the resolve you’ve got standing at Ai Fa’s side?”

My chest felt like it had been pierced, and I couldn’t bring myself to immediately respond.

And all the while, the look in Darmu Ruu’s eyes grew all the more intense as he brought his face even closer.

“I told you I would end you if you failed to protect Ai Fa. But if you go and die on your own first, there won’t be anything left for me to do, now will there?”



The tone in Darmu Ruu's voice made it seem like he was desperately trying to hold back his rage.

And as if he could restrain it no longer, he suddenly grabbed my shoulders.

"What do you think will happen to Ai Fa if she loses you now? You've dug yourself a spot deep in her soul, so do you know much despair she would feel if you were gone?"

I felt like I could hear the bones in my shoulders start to creak. However, Darmu Ruu's words hurt even more than that.

"That's what it means to protect Ai Fa. Before you can start worrying about her dying out in the forest, you need to concern yourself about staying by her side. If you can't even understand that much... Then why did I even...?"

"I get that! Or at least, I think I do..."

I was fully aware that no matter what I said now, it would just sound like an excuse.

But even so, I still felt the need to speak my mind.

"Even though I'm too weak to protect myself, I want to keep on staying by Ai Fa's side... To live long, satisfying lives together, sharing our fate until we meet our natural ends. Maybe these words aren't persuasive in the least after I screwed up so badly... But if nothing else, those feelings are no lie."

Darmu Ruu didn't say a word.

"This incident thoroughly taught me just how powerless I really am. But even so... I want to stay with Ai Fa."

For a while longer, Darmu Ruu remained silent as he glared into the depths of my eyes, and then eventually he roughly shoved away my shoulders.

Then, he masked his eyes with his hands as if he were suffering from some awful headache.

"I'm begging you..."

"Huh?"

"Please, don't make Ai Fa suffer any more than you already have," Darmu Ruu

quietly muttered, turning his back to me.

With that, he swiftly departed, and then Ai Fa and Sheera Ruu came running on over to me.

“What in the world was that about? I don’t understand at all, Asuta,” Ai Fa angrily stated, getting her face up as close as Darmu Ruu’s had just been. “Whether it’s the night of the banquet or just now, why does that second son always look at you like that?”

“Yeah, well... To put it simply, he was just chewing me out for falling into enemy hands.”

Ai Fa brought her face in even closer, not looking satisfied in the least.

“That was the failure of the hunters guarding you. There’s no logic in blaming you for that.”

“That’s not true. And since pretty much nobody else blamed me for it at all, I actually appreciate Darmu Ruu doing so.” That was how I earnestly felt.

With a frown, Ai Fa stared deep into my eyes just as Darmu Ruu had done. “I simply don’t understand. You seem to grow more untalkative after quarreling with that second son, Asuta.”

“Yeah, that may be so.”

As Ai Fa pulled back, this time she gave a displeased frown.

Next to her, though, Sheera Ruu broke out in a delicate smile.

“Well then, I’ll be returning home. I’ll return soon, once the hamburger preparations are finished.”

“Right... Ah, thank you, Sheera Ruu.”

As she moved to turn around, Sheera Ruu smiled even deeper.

“I haven’t done anything you need to thank me for... I simply listened to my own feelings, Asuta.”

With that, Sheera Ruu left too.

After giving a little sigh, I firmly slapped my cheek with my right palm.

“What are you doing, Asuta?” Ai Fa questioned, her eyes opening wide.

“Ah, I was just trying to get myself fired up again. Alright, let’s get to carrying those jars!” I said, shooting my clan head a grin.

With a hearty furrowing of her brow, Ai Fa firmly pressed her own palm up to my cheek.

“That looked quite painful, Asuta.”

“I’m fine. It doesn’t hurt at all.”

With that, I took Ai Fa’s hand in my own, and we headed for the pantry.

The sun was right in between its peak and the point where it would set, steadily creeping along toward the west.

4

And so, the world grew awash in the light purple hue of twilight.

The time for dinner had arrived.

As for the place, it was being held outdoors, in the central plaza.

The main Ruu house might have been big, but it would still be quite difficult for them to accommodate this many people there. After all, there were already twenty-six people set to attend before adding on sudden guests like Dan Rutim, so it had been decided in advance that we would be eating outside.

We had also already bought the goods needed for that in the post town. Specifically, cloth to lay out on the ground and large plates for serving the food.

“I can pay for them, since we’ll be able to use them again for later banquets,” Reina Ruu had said, so the funds had come from her earnings.

It had already been seven days by this point since the Ruu clan had begun doing business on their own. Doing some simple calculations, they should have earned 2700 red coins from sales, and since they didn’t need to pay extra for personnel or giba meat, over seventy percent of that should have been pure profit.

Naturally, those earnings belonged to the Ruu clan itself rather than Reina

Ruu and the other girls personally, but apparently Donda Ruu had no objection to using them for this kind of thing.

And so, now there were several large cloths spread out in front of the main Ruu house, atop which we laid out the numerous large plates.

In the center was a stand made of stone, on which sat the pots full of soup. And surrounding that were the attendees, who had swelled to a total of thirty-five.

Twelve members of the main Ruu house and six from Shin Ruu's branch family.

Seven former members of the Suun clan.

Me, Ai Fa, and Bartha for another three.

Then there were Dan and Gazraan Rutim, Rau Lea, Dari Sauti, Gulaf Zaza, and the Fou and Beim clan heads, our seven additional guests.

It really was quite a large group, almost like we were throwing a banquet.

But rather than smiles, everyone in the crowd wore serious expressions as their faces were illuminated by the bonfires. Rimee Ruu and the young children from Shin Ruu's house were the only ones present whose eyes were sparkling with excitement.

"Well then, I see our dinner is ready for us to begin. However..." Donda Ruu started in a solemn tone, seated at the head of the group. "Tonight's dinner has a further meaning beyond simply taking in the life needed to make it through the day. Especially to those of you who have inherited the blood of the criminal known as Zattsu Suun."

Those relatives of that wicked former clan head were all seated in a row directly facing Donda Ruu.

Zattsu Suun's son, a man currently awaiting execution: Zuuro Suun.

Currently not belonging to any clan, and working for the Dom to atone for the crime of fleeing custody: Diga and Doddo.

Falling under the Ruu clan: Mida.

Belonging to the Lea clan: Yamiru Lea.

Now members of the Rutim clan: Oura and Tsuvai.

Those were the seven in question.

“While Zattsu Suun was the leading clan head of the forest’s edge, he committed countless crimes. And though none of you were any more aware than we were that he had fallen to become little more than a bandit... you did follow the unacceptable rules set by that man, and for ten years pillaged the forest of Morga.”

Donda Ruu’s piercing gaze pinned them down, one by one.

“And even after Zattsu Suun fell ill and stepped down from his position, the new clan head Zuuro Suun ordered the branch houses to keep following those same wicked rules...”

Zuuro Suun just kept listlessly hanging his head, motionless.

“Zuuro Suun’s three sons shamelessly committed numerous outrages, both at the forest’s edge and in town.”

Diga and Doddo showed no signs of looking up, either.

Despite Mida’s stomach grumbling at the food before him, he earnestly kept his gaze fixed on Donda Ruu.

“Furthermore, the women lacked the strength to keep those foolish men in check, and one closed off her heart entirely...”

Oura sat there quietly, keeping her knees together and listening.

“Another didn’t realize her family’s guilt...”

Tsuvai looked away, wearing her usual displeased expression.

“And yet another plotted to bring even further chaos to the forest’s edge.”

Yamiru Lea remained expressionless. However, her eyes flicked up to stare at Donda Ruu.

“Your punishments have already been determined. Having been the one to take over as leading clan head, Zuuro Suun must pay for these crimes with his life, but the rest of you were instead stripped of your clan names. Though they

had become part of the Dom clan, Diga and Doddo yielded before Zattsu and Tei Suun, so for the time being we are having them prove the state of their souls to us. However, there exists no law here at the forest's edge that demands you all be punished further." At that, Donda Ruu thrust out his clenched fist toward the group. "Tomorrow, you shall stand before that noble of Genos who wishes to mete out greater punishment to you all. In your own words, you shall explain how you have nothing further to feel ashamed of. While we shall lend you our aid as your comrades, what will be tested is your own pride and convictions. But if you lack those traits as people of the forest's edge, we shall be unable to help you. If nothing else, make certain that you fully understand that fact."

No one said a word in response.

And then, Donda Ruu slowly lowered his arm.

"Furthermore, there are those who have started doing business in the post town, hoping to bring greater prosperity to the forest's edge and our people. It goes without saying at this point, but of course I speak of Ai Fa and Asuta of the Fa clan. Up until now, only a small portion of the clans, we of the Ruu and those under us, as well as the Fou and Sudra, have lent them our aid. However, it's an undeniable fact that they have earned an astounding number of coins."

Everyone continued to remain silent.

"Zattsu Suun attacked townsfolk and pillaged Morga in an attempt to achieve much the same goal. He sought greater strength and wealth to fight back against the nobles of Genos, and he ultimately strayed from the proper path. But what about us...? Are the Fa and Ruu clans doing what's right? I believe those of you here who share Zattsu Suun's blood have both a right and a responsibility to learn that for yourselves. And so, we have this dinner."

Still, not so much as a word from the former members of the Suun clan.

"This introduction has gone on long enough, though. If I don't wrap it up, some old fool's liable to start causing a fuss at any moment," Donda Ruu said with a grin, as Dan Rutim looked rather displeased over on my left.

"I've got no clue who you're talking about, but while you've rambled on and on, the food's been getting cold, Donda Ruu!"

At that, Donda Ruu closed his eyes and abruptly started the pre-dinner prayer, “We give thanks for the blessings of the forest... And we offer our gratitude to Asuta, Ai Fa, Mia Lea Ruu, Sati Lea Ruu, Vina Ruu, Reina Ruu, Lala Ruu, Rimee Ruu, Tari Ruu, and Sheera Ruu, who manned the flame and gave us our life for this night...”

It made for quite a spectacle, over thirty people all reciting that.

Once the pre-dinner prayer was finished, Donda Ruu said, “Now then...” only to express his misgivings, though it was quite unusual for the man. “How exactly should we eat all this? It looks like you’ve prepared quite a bit, but our arms aren’t *that* long.”

“That’s certainly the question. I’d like to think we can overcome it through the spirit of cooperation, though,” I replied in as bright a tone as I could manage, trying to clear away the gloomy air hanging over Zuuro Suun and his family. “Reina Ruu also bought lots of individual plates, so please go ahead and split the food off onto those. And if you want something far away, you can have the people nearby pass the plate, right?”

Our crowd of thirty-five was currently seated in a circle, with the food placed in the center. I figured it would be tough to do it buffet style while we were sitting, and so I had worked something out in advance.

“For now, we’ll go ahead and just dish out the soup to start. Everyone, please feel free to eat up.”

“You say that, but I don’t even know where to start!” Rau Lea happily chimed in from Ai Fa’s right.

There was plenty of everything, piled up atop the huge tray-like dishes lined up before us.

The giba burgers with fruit wine sauce.

Myamuu giba, in which the aria, tino, and pula were all cooked together.

The cubed giba meat stew, which was boiled with whole aria.

Meat and chatchi stew, with piping hot chatchi as its selling point.

The giba sauté arrabbiata, which added chitt seeds to the tarapa sauce.

Giba cutlets, which were accompanied by a heaping helping of fresh salad.

The giba spare ribs, which were carefully glazed in a teriyaki substitute sauce and grilled.

And a mountain of baked poitan piled high, as well as a stir fry of various vegetables.

It was true that with all this, it was only natural to have difficulty choosing from all the options. And this was definitely the most packed menu I had ever prepared.

With this dinner, nearly all of the Ruu settlement's store of giba meat would be exhausted. For half a month now the hunters had been on break, and besides, meat pickled in pico leaves only lasted for around twenty days regardless. In fact, it was actually pretty amazing that they were able to have enough for the festival of the hunt, tonight's dinner, and even enough to use in business on top of that.

Of course, it wasn't as if they'd entirely run out immediately either tomorrow or the day after, but if they didn't hunt fresh giba soon, even the great and powerful Ruu clan would end up starving. Naturally, they could use their earnings to buy karon or kimyuus meat instead... but nobody from the forest's edge would ever think that way.

So is this whole fight with the nobles just seen as a big, unnecessary pain by the hunters of the forest's edge? I thought to myself as I rose from my seat and started dishing out the soup, which was my responsibility as head chef.

First up was the new dish, giba soup prepared with karon milk. It was another recipe I had more or less completed back at the Turan manor.

I made a stock from thoroughly boiling giba shoulder meat, aria, tino, chatchi, and nenon, then added karon skim milk, plus raw poitan for thickness. The seasonings were just salt and pico leaves, without anything like milk fat in it. It ended up as something like a healthy and refreshing milk soup.

I went ahead and dished that out onto wooden plates, only to notice at some point Reina Ruu had also stood and was setting places, starting from the head of the group.

And then there was a loud shout of, “Ooooh!” When I turned to look, I found Dan Rutim looking completely taken aback, frozen in place and holding spare ribs in both hands.

“A-A-Asuta, these ribs—”

“Right. I tried changing up the proportion of tau oil and fruit wine a bit. And I also added a special ingredient called chitt seeds, but does it suit your tastes?”

“It’s delicious! So delicious it’s to die for!”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

Now that I thought about it, the Fa and Ruu were the only clans that purchased tau oil, so Dan Rutim must have only had a chance to enjoy the stuff during the festival of the hunt.

“Asuta, Asuta, this flavor—”

“Right, as long as the Rutim clan can get a hold of tau oil and chitt seeds, they should be able to make it too. I’ll ask the inn owner I purchase tau oil from if it would be possible to order more.”

“How is it that you’re able to read my mind like that, Asuta...?”

Yes. How mysterious.

At any rate, Dan Rutim had thoroughly pulverized the gloomy and solemn feeling in the air, and instantly things turned as lively as any banquet.

The women were cheerfully chatting away as they started out by grabbing the nearby dishes. And it seemed like, unsurprisingly, the more unfamiliar dishes were garnering more attention than the old standards like giba burgers and myamuu giba.

“Whoa, this is so strangely soft!” Dari Sauti loudly proclaimed.

When I looked, I saw that he had cubed giba meat stew atop his plate.

“That’s boiled giba chest meat. Is that softness maybe a bit unsatisfying for a hunter after all?”

“No... I was surprised, but I have no complaints about the taste. In fact, it was actually so delicious that it caught me off guard.”

Next to him, the Fou clan head was eating the same dish and gently sighing, and in the next spot over the Beim clan head was looking at his plate of myamuu giba in shock.

“This... is supposed to be the same dish you served at the clan head meeting, isn’t it?”

“Yes. We changed the taste a bit by using an ingredient called tau oil, though.”

On top of that, the dishes everyone ate back then had been prepared by the Suun women Mia Lea Ruu and I had taught. By the time we got to the myamuu giba they had grown fairly capable, but there was an obvious difference in how it turned out compared to this version, which had been prepared by Sheera Ruu.

As that thought was running through my head, a voice shouted out, “Ow!” from behind. “Asuta, the inside of my mouth hurts! Is this dish really alright?!”

That had come from Rau Lea, and he had giba sauté arrabbiata atop his plate.

“Yeah. That dish uses a spice favored by easterners called chitt seeds. I kept the spice down quite a bit compared to the version that I sell, but is it still too much?”

“Hrmm... It’s like I accidentally bit down on a clump of pico leaves...” Rau Lea grumbled, and yet he took another bite of the dish. “It hurts, but it’s tasty...”

“In that case, I’m glad. If it hurts too much, then you can use the soup to soothe your mouth.”

Next to Rau Lea, Bartha was eating the same dish while taking hearty swigs of fruit wine.

“That sure is clever of you, using chitt seeds of all things. You pretty much can’t get a hold of them without ties to a merchant from the east. Still... that skill of yours is something else, Asuta.”

“Thank you. But I didn’t make this meal all on my own. I had the help of everyone from the Ruu clan, too.”

The members of the Ruu clan, both the main house and branch family, all

seemed to be enjoying the food.

The women had taken the initiative in passing the dishes around, and they were bringing them to the men, too. I could spy Rimee Ruu and Shin Ruu's little brothers smacking their lips and wearing brimming smiles while eating meat and chatchi stew and giba spare ribs.

Mia Lea Ruu and Granny Tito Min were seated beside Granny Jiba, and they were eating giba burgers, cubed giba meat stew, and the special soft dish, giba menchi katsu, that I had prepared just for the elder.

Ludo Ruu was talking to his older brother Darmu Ruu about something or other after seeing him again for the first time in a while, and looked to be recommending the giba cutlets. And atop the boy's plate sat the specially-made giba meat and chatchi croquettes he had begged me to prepare.

Lala Ruu had gone to deliver the soup to the group from Shin Ruu's house, and took a seat with them to eat her own food. It wasn't normally something you saw during dinner, but apparently it was acceptable to change places during this event.

Donda Ruu was discussing something with Jiza Ruu while wearing a serious expression, and next to him Sati Lea Ruu was feeding Kota Ruu the broth of the giba soup prepared with karon milk. It seemed the child had finally reached the point where he could handle baby food. In all likelihood, Kota Ruu was part of the first generation that would be raised solely on the new type of cooking I had brought here to the forest's edge. That thought alone caused me to tense up.

Still, aside from a small portion of the group, everybody was smiling. It really was just as lively as a banquet.

It was at that point that my eyes met with Gazraan Rutim's.

I gave him a nod, and then glanced over the whole group.

The soup had made it around to everybody. However, there were some who hadn't so much as touched their plates. Naturally, they would be the group of seven seated at the foot of the crowd. Oh, and Gulaf Zaza, who was right near them, looked like he had done nothing but just keep on drinking fruit wine.

Placing some of the leftover giba spare ribs and meat and chatchi stew on a

couple plates, I went and headed over that way.

“Hello, Zuuro Suun... And Diga and Doddo, too. It’s been a while.”

Diga had been hanging his head, and now he sluggishly looked up.

I unwittingly gulped when I saw how shockingly haggard he had become.

Diga had been so big and muscular, but now he looked about as thin as the Fou clan head. His eyes were sunken and his cheeks gaunt. When added to his already flat features, that gave him one seriously gloomy-looking face. Plus his hair was unkempt and there was stubble all around his mouth, making him seem like a different person entirely.

On the other hand, Doddo’s appearance hadn’t undergone quite so much of a shift. He appeared to have slimmed down a bit, but his robust frame probably kept him from losing too much mass. And there hadn’t been much of a change in his face that looked like a stone lion, or his short and stout build. It just felt like he was entirely lacking in drive.

And then, there was Zuuro Suun.

It really was my first time seeing the man since the clan head meeting.

Originally he had been a fat man even larger than Diga, but he had completely shriveled up. He really looked at least a whole size smaller than he used to. His flabby skin had grown flaccid, and now his face looked like a deflated toad. Though his little black eyes were partly obscured under their heavy lids, I could still see they were cloudy, and reminded me of a dead fish. Like how Oura and the members of the Suun branch houses had once looked...

This... This is even worse than I expected.

The only one in the group facing a death sentence was Zuuro Suun. It just hadn’t been carried out for nearly a month now, due to Cyclaeus’s demands that we hand him over.

And when he had learned of Cyclaeus’s persistent demands, he had cried out to be killed immediately.

Was Cyclaeus hoping to wipe out Zuuro Suun by his own hand? Or was his plot to reinstate the Suun as the leading clan, like Yamiru Lea had once

hypothesized? The truth was still unclear, but Zuuro Suun himself had begged for death. But that request had been denied, and the man had been left a walking corpse.

On top of that, the skin around his wrists was abraded and red with blood. And that went not just for Zuuro Suun, but also Diga and Doddo. Was that because they usually had leather straps binding them? Even now, they had leather straps around their ankles, with a line between them only about thirty centimeters long. That sort of binding was meant for criminals, so that they would be able to walk, but not run.

They just sat there in place, looking like nothing more than dolls made of mud despite all the dishes laid out before them.

All of this is because I exposed the Suun clan's crimes...

I had no regrets when it came to Diga and Doddo. They had committed vile acts again and again, so somewhat drastic measures were probably needed in order to handle them. And no matter how pitiful their circumstances became, I wasn't likely to forget my grudge over how they kidnapped Ai Fa.

But with Zuuro Suun, it was different. Thinking on how my deduction meant this man would lose his very life... It felt like someone had grabbed hold of my stomach. Even if I told myself I had no other choice, it was still pretty damn hard to make peace with.

Even so, I couldn't bring myself to look away from this pathetic figure. The leading clan heads decided he was to be executed, and the people of the forest's edge accepted that fact. All of our comrades here at the forest's edge were prepared to shoulder the burden of his death. And so I set the plate I was holding in front of Zuuro Suun, somehow managing to hold myself together in spite of the stormy emotions threatening to drown me.

"Won't you please eat my cooking, Zuuro Suun...?"

The man didn't move in the least. Was he even registering that I was in front of him?

To the right of those central three sat Mida and Yamiru Lea, while Oura and Tsuvai were to their left, and none of them seemed to have touched their

plates, either. Even Mida apparently hadn't eaten at thing.

"Mida, are you not going to eat? I'm pretty confident in all the dishes we made today."

"Mmh..."

Mida's little eyes just kept on staring at Zuuro Suun and the others. In the past, his attention had been more focused toward Yamiru Lea, Tsuvai, and Oura, so I had thought maybe he cared about them more than the men of his former family. But now, as he held his loudly gurgling stomach, Mida just kept on staring at his father and brothers with pain in his eyes.

"All of you must have heard Donda Ruu's words, too..." Gulaf Zaza eventually stated in a low, deep tone from nearby. The impact of the man's voice was enough to cause Diga and Doddo to flinch and cower even further.

"We're heading to face off with that Cyclaeus noble in order to make up for the crimes of your father and grandfather, Zattsu Suun. Do you not even have the pride and convictions needed to at least try to wipe away your past shame?"

"I-I..."

"Zattsu Suun betrayed all of us and brought disaster to the people of Genos without us knowing. Regardless of his methods, Asuta of the Fa clan is giving his all in an attempt to mend the relationship that man distorted. And so Donda Ruu figures you all need to taste the cooking he's selling in the post town, too. Will you insist on continuing to feign ignorance, even after hearing all that...?"

"P-Please hold on, Gulaf Zaza. Being questioned by you would make anybody shrink away." While internally giving my sincere gratitude to Gulaf Zaza for what he was trying to say, I went ahead and continued on, "Food isn't tasty when you force someone to eat. So please, everyone just dig in and enjoy it."

"What are you even saying...?" Gulaf Zaza questioned while taking a swig of fruit wine, his eyes shining bright like some will-o'-the-wisp.

With a calming breath, I turned back toward the former members of the main Suun house.

“Still, let me speak my mind at least a little longer, Zuuro Suun. And you too, Diga and Doddo. We’ve had nothing but bad blood between us. You caused the Fa clan some serious harm, while we worked to expose your crimes, so it’s not like we’d feel any affection toward one another.”

None of them said a word.

“However, ever since Ai Fa took me into the Fa clan, I’ve tried to live as a simple person of the forest’s edge. I want to think of all of you as comrades, and have you feel the same way about me. And Donda Ruu made it clear that you’re still fellow people of the forest’s edge, too. And in that case, I would also like to be your comrade.”

Still nothing.

“Zattsu Suun was so worried about the future of the people of the forest’s edge that he strayed from the proper path. And we’ll need everyone’s help to get us back on the right track.”

“I don’t believe Zuuro Suun possesses the strength needed to comprehend such complex matters as he is now,” Yamiru Lea stated, suddenly standing and walking over next to me. Then, she kneeled down and picked up her father’s plate of soup.

“Now then, drink up. Didn’t you have just as much of an interest in delicious food as Mida, Zuuro Suun?”

The man’s vacant eyes turned and looked at Yamiru Lea.

“There are very tasty fruits and vegetables growing out there in the forest of Morga, aren’t there? But Asuta’s cooking uses even more delicious ingredients from the fields...”

Her father’s trembling fingers reached out and grabbed the plate.

After giving a satisfied look, Yamiru Lea then turned her attention toward Diga.

“Diga, you used to love the kimyuus meat you bought with coins, didn’t you? Even though you didn’t have the courage to head into the post town yourself.”

“Huh...? I...”

“The giba meat Asuta prepares is more delicious than that, though. Did you perhaps find the cooking from the clan head meeting insufficient? Even so, today’s dishes are certain to satisfy you.”

With that, Yamiru Lea grabbed the plate of food I had brought and placed it in front of him.

“You’ve grown so thin because the food given to you by the Zaza and Dom clans isn’t enough to satisfy you, right? Just go ahead and eat this already.”

Diga timidly reached out and grabbed the plate.

Seeing that, Yamiru Lea turned toward Doddo.

“Doddo, that goes for you too. You aren’t even allowed to drink your beloved fruit wine anymore, so you should feed your appetite instead to satisfy your body and soul.”

Doddo showed no response to his sister’s words.

“Can you not hear what I’m saying?”

For just an instant, Yamiru Lea’s eyes once more flashed with the look of some poisonous snake.

And in response, Doddo let out a hoarse “Eek!”

“Goodness, none of you have any guts at all. Without the title of the leading clan behind you, you can’t even pretend to act confident, can you?”

Yamiru Lea slowly rose to her feet, and now she faced Mida’s way.

“Mida, you should hurry up and eat, too. If you dawdle too long, everyone from the Ruu and Rutim will snatch it all up.”

“Right...”

“Are you really alright with not eating even a single bite of this grand feast?”

“Yeah... I’d hate that...”

“Then eat. I’ll go get some food for you,” Yamiru Lea stated, turning around. And as she did, her eyes glanced at me. “Asuta, are you also not having anything? You shouldn’t be putting up with hunger to deal with these fools.”

“Right. But you haven’t eaten yet either, have you, Yamiru Lea?”

“I’ve been drinking fruit wine,” she replied while turning away in a huff, and then started grabbing food. And as she leaned over seductively, she looked back toward Oura.

“Oura, could I have you help me? I don’t have enough hands to carry all this.”

“Yes... Of course, Yamiru... Ah, I mean Yamiru Lea...”

At her daughter’s prompting, Oura also stood and started helping. And seeing that, I went ahead and lent a hand, too.

“Thank you, Yamiru Lea. I figure I probably couldn’t have gotten them moving on my own,” I whispered to her, only for her to shoot me back a chilly glare out of the corner of her eye.

“I don’t see any reason for you to thank me. They were just being such pathetic cowards that it was making me angry.”

Just what exactly were things like in the Suun house back when they were still family?

That clan head was depravity personified, the eldest son rested on his laurels as his successor, and the second son was a crude, violent drunk. The youngest son always seemed out of it, while the youngest daughter had no doubts that the prosperous Suun were the supreme rulers of the forest’s edge. And as for the clan head’s bride and her father, they had eyes like dead fish.

Just how had the eldest daughter conducted herself in the midst of all that, when she had wished from the depths of her heart for the clan’s destruction, despite being eyed as a true successor by the previous clan head, who was the root of all that evil?

At the very least, I couldn’t imagine she used to portion out food for the clan head with an angry look back then, like she was doing now.

“Hey, Mida, are you eating properly?” some small children asked while running over with plates.

It was Rimee Ruu, as well as Shin Ruu’s younger siblings.

“Look, it’s myamuu giba! It’s gonna run out if you don’t get some soon, so we

brought it over!”

“Right... Thanks...”

“Mida, make sure you share with Tsuvai and everyone,” Yamiru Lea added.

“Right...” Mida replied again, with a tremble of his cheeks.

At last, his little piglet-like eyes had started shining again.

5

“Now then, eat.”

Yamiru Lea, Oura, and I had lined up plates of food in front of the men. As we did that, Zuuro Suun and Doddo listlessly sipped at their soup, while Diga began eating the meat and chatchi stew anxiously.

After watching them for a bit, Yamiru Lea picked up a single plate and turned around, to approach the fierce hunter with a giba head sitting atop the pelt he wore.

“Won’t you eat too, Gulaf Zaza? Though he also objects to the Fa clan’s actions as you do, the Beim clan head seems to be quite passionately sampling the flavor of these dishes.”

“I’ve got no reason to go listening to your impertinent remarks...”

“Oh, is that so? Well, do as you please.” Yamiru Lea elegantly left the plate in front of Gulaf Zaza, before returning to her own seat. “Well then, let us eat, Asuta.”

“Right.”

I had lost the chance to return to my own seat, and so I took my place sitting across from Yamiru Lea.

And then, I heard a strange “Ungh...” sound.

Turning to look, I found that Diga had bit into the giba cutlets and frozen in place.

“This is my first time seeing that dish,” Yamiru Lea remarked, taking a bite of

the giba cutlet on her own plate.

And then, her eyes opened wide in shock.

“This... This dish is amazing, Asuta.”

“It seems those giba cutlets are super popular with the people of the forest’s edge. But eating too much of that stuff could make you put on weight, so you should watch out for that.”

Since I didn’t want to use a nasty word like “poison” when everyone was eating, I softened my statement, but Yamiru still worriedly went “Huh?” and ran her hand over the graceful contours of her stomach.

“Ah, no, this much shouldn’t be any problem. You don’t have to be *that* worried about it.”

I must have been smiling more than she cared for, as she said, “What an unpleasant man you are...” with an upturned glare.

“It’s very tasty, isn’t it, Tsuvai?” I suddenly heard a voice whisper.

It had come from Oura, who was eating some myamuu giba Mida had shared while gently staring Tsuvai’s way. As for the young girl, she just silently kept munching on the contents of her plate.

Then, I noticed that Diga and Doddo were passionately chowing down, too. Their plates of soup were now empty, and they were stuffing their cheeks with meat and vegetables. And before long, large tears started streaming down from Diga’s eyes. As he held back his sobbing as best he could, he bit into his meat and slurped down tarapa broth. Despite being coated in stubble, his face was as messy as a child’s. Doddo, meanwhile, was silently yet desperately scarfing down food. It was like watching a starving wild dog devouring prey for the first time in too long.

“It looks like that wasn’t enough, huh...?” Rimee Ruu said to no one in particular as she timidly watched them go. “I’ll go get more. What do you wanna eat, Mida?”

“I want to eat everything...”

“Got it!” Rimee Ruu replied before she took off running with the boys.

In their place, two new figures approached, one very small, and the other holding her hand: Granny Jiba and Ai Fa.

“Do you mind if we interrupt a little...?”

The pair sat themselves down next to me, with Granny Jiba now facing the former leading clan head.

“Zuuro Suun... I’m certain this is the first time we’ve ever met face to face... I am the mother of the Ruu clan head Donda Ruu’s father, an old bag of bones by the name of Jiba Ruu...”

Zuuro Suun’s vacant eyes turned toward Granny Jiba.

In his hands, he held a partially eaten plate of soup.

“I haven’t ever met Zattsu Suun, much less you... The Suun settlement is far from where we Ruu dwell, after all... But I did know Zattsu Suun’s father, who was clan head before him...”

Zuuro Suun didn’t say a word.

“I suppose it was seventy years ago now... The Gaaze had been the leading clan, but they were taken down by giba... And the Reema who were their followers had also fallen... The Suun and Ruu clans were the only ones left with the strength needed to lead our people... We had split to the north and south and each kept to our own giba hunts...”

Still no response.

“At that point I was the only one left with the blood of the main Ruu house flowing through my veins, so the Suun were entrusted to become the new leading clan... After all, no matter how many members our clan and those under it may have had, a woman like me would not be allowed to lead our people... But the Suun clan head had been a splendid hunter, and so we had no concerns allowing him to take on that role...”

Her wise blue eyes remained fixed on Zuuro Suun’s flaccid face.

It seemed to me like there was a ripple slowly but surely spreading in the former leading clan head’s murky gaze, like someone had thrown a pebble into a lake late at night.

“The clan head of the Suun, our new leader, was a truly fine man... Even the wild Zaza and Dom devoted themselves to him... And Zattsu Suun was raised with the example of that splendid father of his ever in front of him...”

Zuuro Suun remained silent.

“Even so, Zattsu Suun strayed from his path... And yet, I’m sure the man still had many thoughts about how he wished to lead us people of the forest’s edge properly... He just chose to turn onto a path that was ever so slightly wrong... Or perhaps he had been walking the wrong path from the very start...”

Even now, the former leading clan head didn’t say a word.

“Eighty years ago, when we moved to the Morga forest’s edge, the Gaaze were still our leading clan... And it’s possible the Gaaze clan head chose wrongly when forming ties with the lord of Genos... In the black forest of the south, we interacted with no one and lived with the forest as our god, so we didn’t know how to properly connect with outsiders... I have thought about that a great deal...”

Zuuro Suun still wasn’t responding.

“But no one could ever blame the Gaaze clan head... No matter who was in charge, things would have turned out the same in the end... But if we have been walking an improper path, then we need to get back on track... Though the post of leading clan has passed from the Gaaze to the Suun, and now to the new three leading clans... I believe we must all come together and search for the right way forward...”

Granny Jiba gently placed her fingers like withered branches over the back of Zuuro Suun’s swollen hand.

The man’s shoulders trembled, but he didn’t show any signs of further movement.

“And so, Zuuro Suun... You too must please lend us your strength until the very end, as a comrade here at the forest’s edge... And don’t say such a sad thing, that you wish for your own death... When your crimes must be paid for, your comrades will swing their blades at the correct and proper moment, after all...”

Zuuro Suun didn’t respond even to that.

“But you know... Zattsu Suun already paid for his crimes with his life, so I don’t believe seeking his son’s death as well is the right path to take...”

At that, Granny Jiba’s clear gaze turned to Zuuro Suun’s right, so that she was now looking at Yamiru Lea.

“You’re Yamiru Lea, aren’t you...?”

“Yes,” the woman replied, fearlessly staring back at Granny Jiba.

The Ruu elder’s wrinkled face shifted into a grin.

“That goes for you, too... You shouldn’t go offering up your life like that for your family, understand...? That sort of pride may be beautiful in its own way, but it definitely isn’t right to try to take anything and everything on your own back... You’re another of our comrades here at the forest’s edge, after all...”

Yamiru Lea looked like she was holding herself back from clicking her tongue as she glared my way.

Granny Jiba had to be referring to how Yamiru Lea had said if Cyclaeus was demanding the Suun clan be handed over, we should just offer her up as Zattsu Suun’s successor. Naturally, I hadn’t just gone and spread that all over the place, but I figured it probably reached Granny Jiba’s ears by way of Rau Lea.

At any rate, I really hadn’t ever imagined the day would come when I would find Granny Jiba and Yamiru Lea having a conversation.

“Ruu clan elder Jiba Ruu, it is not as if I don’t understand that point of view, but I have my own way of thinking as well.”

“Hmm... And what would that be, then...?” Granny Jiba asked with a smile, while Yamiru Lea stared back with a defiant look.

“If that Cyclaeus noble is plotting to reinstate the Suun clan, then the people of the forest’s edge only need hand over Zuuro Suun and myself,” Yamiru Lea stated while brushing up her finely braided blackish-brown hair. “Then I would become the new head of the Suun, as well as the leading clan head. At that point I simply need to pretend to obey Cyclaeus, then expose what he’s really plotting.”

“Ridiculous. Who’d accept a woman like you as the leading clan head?!” Gulaf Zaza shouted in a crackling voice, apparently having been listening in attentively.

Yamiru Lea shot the man a bewitching glare out of the corner of her eye.

“It may be a completely foolish method, but is it any more so than this gaggle preparing to take up blades against the nobles if things come to it? At the very least with my way of doing things, no one will have to shed their blood for the time being.”

“Are you really a person of the forest’s edge...? Even Gazraan Rutim doesn’t go around dreaming up such crafty plots. That sort of trickery is fit only for nobles to wallow in!”

“And what’s so wrong about using trickery against someone attempting to employ it against us? I believe that’s far wiser than trying to solve anything and everything through force.”

“That won’t do, Yamiru Lea... We cannot have you commit to such falsehoods to protect ourselves... And besides, a slight mistake, and you and Zuuro Suun would lose your lives under that plan, would you not...?” Granny Jiba replied while wearing the same smile and shaking her head. “You are now a member of the Lea clan, rather than Zattsu Suun’s flesh and blood... And so, you don’t need to keep trying to take everything on your own shoulders...”

“It’s not like I truly believe such thinking will get through to those stubborn leading clan heads, either...” Yamiru Lea stated in a displeased tone, stealing a glance at Zuuro Suun for just a moment.

Yamiru Lea might have thought up this plot back when Zuuro Suun panicked and shouted how they should scalp him rather than hand him over to the nobles... Perhaps she thought the man could act at least a little more resolutely if she were by his side.

But sure enough, there was no way Gulaf Zaza or Donda Ruu would give permission to a sneaky plot like that.

“It certainly is reassuring, having someone like you around... Please lend the leading clan heads your strength tomorrow, Yamiru Lea...” Granny Jiba said,

then she thrust a plate of food toward the former leading clan head. “Now then, go ahead and eat Asuta’s cooking, Zuuro Suun...When I lost my way too, it helped me somehow find my strength once again... Let Asuta’s dishes restore your strength, so you can give everything you have as well...”

As an irregular light was kindled in his murky eyes, Zuuro Suun accepted the plate. As he held onto it with trembling fingers, he scooped up some of the cubed giba meat stew, which had been boiled until it was nice and soft.

And when he listlessly bit down on the giba meat... a single stream of tears spilled down his flaccid cheeks.

“I...”

“Yes, what is it...?”

“I was afraid... of my father Zattsu...” Zuuro Suun murmured in a tone that reminded me of a sleepwalker as he chewed the meat.

And Granny Jiba just quietly listened to what he had to say.

“But I wasn’t able to find a path forward other than the one my father had forged... I just had to believe his words... That someday we would all walk that same road with the clans under us, and live new lives together where we didn’t need to bend to the nobles... I thought that otherwise we would all be destroyed by the Ruu clan...”

“Right, the fates of your dozens of relatives living in the Suun settlement depended on your every move... I was once a clan head myself, so I know how difficult that can be...” Granny Jiba said, her eyes narrowing as her gaze seemed to drift to some far off point. “But you’re not carrying anything on your shoulders any longer... The rest of us are taking care of your precious family and those who committed crimes under your command now... So you can share that responsibility with everyone else, and help search for what we think is our best future...”

As the tears streamed down his face, Zuuro Suun kept on eating.

“Allow me to ask just one last question, Zuuro Suun...” Gulaf Zaza chimed in, his voice rumbling. “Did you really not know about the crimes committed by Zattsu Suun and his ilk in town...? Answer truthfully, on your pride as a person

of the forest's edge."

"I didn't know... Or actually, I had thought it strange when my father Zattsu suddenly brought in so many coins from nowhere... But I was so frightened I couldn't bring myself to ask him where they had come from..."

"Your crime is your weak character, Zuuro Suun," Gulaf Zaza uttered in a truly resentful tone, and then he suddenly grabbed a plate of food. With his white, sturdy teeth like fangs, he bit into the giba cutlets. "You feared your father Zattsu Suun, the Ruu clan, those nobles from Genos... and in the end, you even feared the Zaza and Dom clans that fell under you. That sort of weakness is unacceptable for a person of the forest's edge. It will always be my greatest shame, having respected a weakling like you as the leading clan head."

Zuuro Suun offered nothing in response.

"But if you were even half as strong-willed as your father or your oldest daughter there, Zattsu Suun would have revealed everything to you and plotted to have you succeed him. Then even more blood would have been shed throughout Genos," Gulaf Zaza stated, his wild, bestial eyes blazing just as fiercely as Donda Ruu's did. "Your weakness is something we people of the forest's edge cannot accept... But in a ridiculous twist of fate, it served to put a stop to Zattsu Suun's obsession and grudge... Or maybe that's just down to the forest's guidance, too," Gulaf Zaza said, washing down the giba cutlets with fruit wine. "At any rate, your punishment will have to wait till after things with the nobles are settled. So until the final moment before your soul returns to the forest, keep on living as a person of the forest's edge."

Though Zuuro Suun didn't speak a word, tears came trickling down his cheeks.

Granny Jiba gently smiled.

Diga and Doddo kept on silently eating.

And even Gulaf Zaza was sinking his teeth into the remaining giba cutlets.

It was then that Rimee Ruu's group returned with a "Thanks for waiting!" holding fresh plates of food. They were rather late coming back, so perhaps they had been held up by other family until Granny Jiba had finished talking.

And at last, it seemed like this long back and forth had come to a close.

But then, someone unexpected suddenly spoke up.

“Hmph! So everyone’s just gonna listen to the new clan heads’ decision?!”

It was Tsuvai.

She had stood and puffed out her slender chest as she glared around at everyone present. And when her eyes reached Yamiru Lea, they fixed in place.

“Hey, Yamiru, if you’re talking about Zattsu Suun’s successor, wouldn’t I be way more fitting than you?”

“What are you saying? As the youngest of us siblings, you’re unsuited for that role,” Yamiru Lea replied, shooting Tsuvai a dubious look.

“Hmph!” Tsuvai snorted again. “But Zattsu Suun and Grandpa Tei are the only ones who were judged as criminals, right? And I’m the only one who shares both their blood equally! So I’m the one most suited to be the successor to those criminals!”

Zattsu and Tei Suun were Tsuvai’s two grandfathers. And Tei Suun’s daughter Oura was currently staring at her child with a bewildered look.

“Tsuvai... There’s no logic behind saying the child of criminals is a criminal themselves...” Granny Jiba calmly called out.

Tsuvai’s big eyes glared back at the old woman, burning with a rebellious spirit.

“I don’t care! I just don’t care about all this stupid nonsense at all! If you want to go to war with the nobles, then just go ahead!”

“Tsuvai!”

Slipping away from her mother’s grasp, Tsuvai suddenly fled into the darkness.

And in a fluster, I rose to my feet to chase after her.

She should have been completely safe as long as she remained in the Ruu settlement, but there was no way I could just leave her be. And so, I followed after her, relying on the moonlight to guide my way. Fortunately, though, she was even more slow-footed than I was.

“Tsuvai, what in the world is going on with you?” I questioned as I grabbed the shoulder of that small figure clad in her dress.

Instantly, she shouted, “Don’t touch me!” as she scratched the back of my hand. And she also glared at me with eyes like flames. “You must be feeling awful good about yourself, Asuta of the Fa clan! The Suun clan has fallen, and everything’s gone your way! You really are the number one hero at the forest’s edge!”

“Hero...?”

As I found myself at a loss for words, I suddenly noticed someone standing at my side.

Unsurprisingly, it was Ai Fa. She must have entrusted Granny Jiba to someone else and followed after us.

And even here out in the dark, where the light from the bonfires didn’t reach, Tsuvai’s eyes were still burning bright.

“You mean how you said the one who earns the most coins is the most admirable? That probably comes from Zattsu and Zuuro Suun teaching you that strength and justice come from prosperity... That sort of thinking is prejudiced and wrong, though.”

“Hmph! Then what are you earning all those coins for?! Wasn’t that part of some plan to bring prosperity to the poor forest’s edge?!”

“Yeah, that’s true, but...”

“So you’re right, while the Suun clan was wrong! That’s why the Ruu clan who backed the Fa are thriving, while the Suun were destroyed! There’s no mistakes there! You all are heroes, and the Suun are just criminals!”

“Zattsu and Zuuro Suun are criminals for the mistakes they made while acting as leaders of our people. What issue could you have with that, exactly?” Ai Fa calmly asked, only for the flames burning in Tsuvai’s eyes to grow even more intense.

“But Zattsu Suun and my father weren’t the only criminals! Grandpa Tei was one too! He got executed as a criminal, didn’t he?!”

“That was because Tei Suun pointed a blade at us and the townsfolk, so—”

“Grandpa Tei just couldn’t go against Zattsu Suun! No one in the Suun clan could have, so why is he the only one treated like a criminal?!”

“Like I said, that’s—”

“I know! Grandpa Tei killed a lot of townsfolk along with Zattsu Suun! And then in the end he tried to kill you, Asuta, and the Sudra clan head struck him down for that crime! You didn’t do anything wrong! Grandpa Tei did! And he had to pay for his crimes with his life!” Tsuvai wailed while stomping her feet. And then, tears started gushing forth from her big eyes. “I hate you all!”

“Tsuvai...”

As I stood there dumbfounded, Tsuvai thrust out a tiny finger toward my chest.

“If someone doesn’t hate you, even if it’s just me... Then it’d be way too sad for Grandpa Tei, wouldn’t it?!”

At that point, Tsuvai pushed her forehead up against my chest and started sobbing like a child. Actually, she was still twelve... This small girl really was just a child.

Still unable to speak, I turned my head and found Ai Fa’s eyes narrowing ever so slightly as she quietly stared at Tsuvai’s back.

Placing my hands on Tsuvai’s slender shoulders, I got down on my knees. And with her face now buried in my shoulder, Tsuvai sobbed even harder.

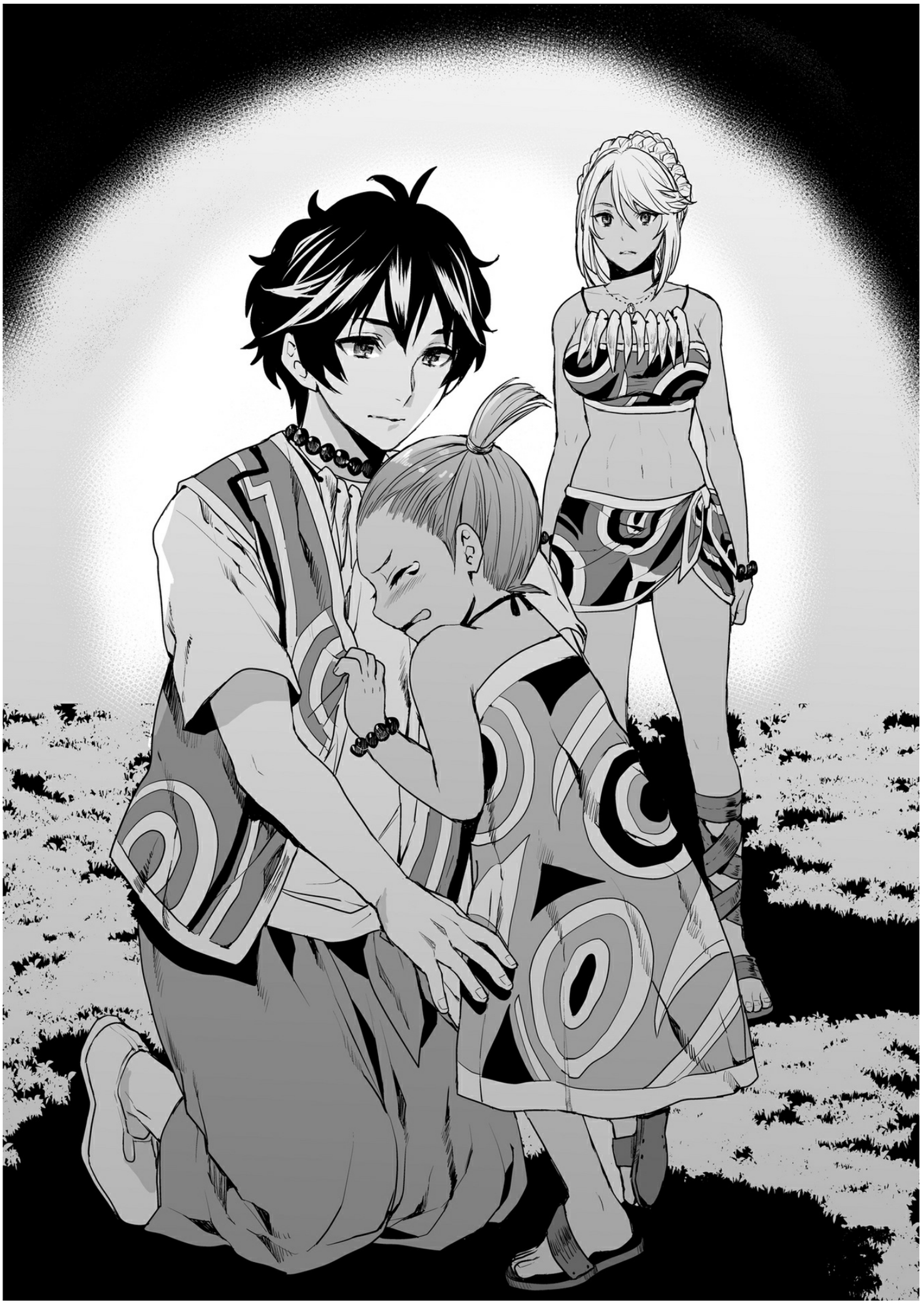
“Tsuvai... Just like Donda Ruu said, no matter what crimes they may commit, it doesn’t change the fact that they’re still fellow people of the forest’s edge,” I said, gently placing a hand atop her head, with her hair pulled back into an onion-like bun. “Zattsu and Tei Suun both lived as people of the forest’s edge, and died that way too. Donda Ruu and everyone are doing the best they can to inherit their anger and the regrets they left behind, and carry them forward the right way... Or at least, that’s what I think.”

“I hate you all... I really, really hate you...”

“I know.”

As we stood there under the blue light of the half moon hanging in the night sky, no one approached us.

And as every single one of us carried our own unique thoughts and feelings in our hearts, the day before the showdown with Cyclaeus came to a close.



Intermezzo: The Same Path as You

On this particular day, Lala Ruu had been in a bad mood from the moment she woke up in the morning.

She rose when dawn broke, bathed with her sisters, washed the dishes in the same place, and went to the edge of the forest to gather pico and lilo leaves. And she had hardly said a word the whole time, so on the way back, Sati Lea Ruu asked in a concerned tone, “What’s the matter, Lala? You seem rather down today.”

Sati Lea Ruu was married to Lala Ruu’s older brother, Jiza Ruu. She was older than the girl’s sisters, and was currently staring at Lala Ruu with an incredibly gentle look in her eyes. Turning her way, Lala Ruu just replied, “It’s nothing.”

“But you haven’t said a word all morning, have you? If you’re not feeling well, you should take it easy rather than pushing yourself.”

“I feel fine! And I gathered even more pico leaves than you, Sati Lea Ruu,” Lala Ruu snapped back due to her bad mood. She regretted that for a moment, until she noticed Sati Lea Ruu’s smile hadn’t changed one bit.

“That’s true. You certainly are impressive, considering you’re still just nine years old, Lala. But are you really not feeling bad at all...? Or is there something bothering you?”

It seemed like her lies couldn’t win against Sati Lea Ruu’s wisdom. But even so, Lala Ruu stubbornly replied, “No,” with a shake of her head. “It really is nothing. And we’re done with work, so let’s hurry on back.”

“I see...” was the only response she got. Sati Lea Ruu didn’t pursue the matter any further.

As they walked along the edge of the forest, her sisters were happily chatting away. Since the youngest, Rimee Ruu, had been left back home, the group consisted of Lala Ruu and her two older sisters, and also Sati Lea Ruu. And from the strong sunlight streaming down through the branches overhead, it seemed that the sun was getting close to its peak.

Before long the giba would start waking up out in the forest, and the hunters would get to work.

That thought caused the oppressive feeling in Lala Ruu's chest to grow even heavier.

"Ah, welcome back. Did you get all your work done?" her grandmother Tito Min Ruu greeted as they exited the forest.

She had a large hatchet in her hand, and there was a big pile of firewood by her feet. She must have been chopping it all on her own.

"Yeah, we got plenty of pico and lilo. We should help you out with chopping the firewood, too..." the oldest sister, Vina Ruu, replied.

Tito Min Ruu responded with a smile, "There's no need to be in such a hurry. I was thinking it was about time for me to take a break, too. The sun will hit its peak soon, so the rest can wait till after we chew on some jerky. Just go ahead and store that lilo and pico in the pantry first."

"Alright. Well then, we'll see you later..."

It really was a perfectly ordinary day, just like always.

And yet, today was special. After storing away the herbs they picked in the pantry, they went to return home, only to hear some commotion from the plaza as if to prove that fact.

"Hmm? What are they making such a fuss about?" Reina Ruu questioned with a tilt of her head.

Lala Ruu bit her lip, then turned toward her sisters.

"Sorry, but I've got a little something to take care of. You guys go ahead, okay?"

"Ah, Lala...?" Sati Lea Ruu called out in concern, but Lala Ruu ignored her and took off running toward the plaza.

She already knew where those voices had come from. There was a crowd gathered in front of a branch house not far removed from the main house. It belonged to Ryada Ruu, the younger brother of Lala Ruu's father Donda Ruu.

Ryada and Shin Ruu were standing there in front of the house.

And when she saw them, Lala Ruu bit her lip again.

Shin Ruu was wearing a brand new hunter's cloak his family must have made for him, and he had a sword dangling at his hip. Yesterday he had turned thirteen, and so starting today he would participate in giba hunts as a hunter in training.

"Ah, you really look the part."

"You're still a bit small, but you look just like Ryada Ruu when he was little."

"I'm sure you'll become a fine hunter, Shin Ruu."

The women from the other branch houses gathered there were all chatting away. And Shin Ruu just stood there silently in the middle of them, looking as calm as always.

He was about a head shorter than Ryada Ruu. And though his father was on the slender side, Shin Ruu was even more so. Lala Ruu was still just a child at the age of nine, but there was only a four-year difference between her and Shin Ruu. So before even considering the sword, that thick fur cloak alone already looked heavy for Shin Ruu as he was now.

"It sure is something. Starting today, Shin Ruu's finally a hunter, huh?" a familiar voice said from right beside Lala Ruu.

At some point her older brother Ludo Ruu had approached, staring at Shin Ruu while chewing on jerky.

"Up till yesterday, he was playing together with us. I wanna hurry up and become a hunter, too."

Ludo Ruu was twelve, so he still had around a whole year left until he would be a hunter. He was even shorter than Shin Ruu, and was slender like a woman, too.

"But when you become a hunter, you have to face off with giba out in the forest, right...?" Lala Ruu quietly replied.

"Of course you do," her brother answered with a chuckle. "That's a hunter's job, right? Man, I wish my birthday wasn't so far off."

“But why...? You and Shin Ruu are so small. If you take on a giba, you could die.”

“If you die out in the forest, then that’s just your fate. No matter how strong a hunter may be, they can still end up having their soul return to the forest at an early age, even if they *are* big,” Ludo Ruu said while sticking out his tongue and facing straight ahead.

Lala Ruu was reaching out to smack him on the head, but just then the crowd parted and Shin Ruu approached.

“So you came, Ludo and Lala Ruu? Is Donda Ruu up already?”

“Who knows? He’s probably still asleep. Either that, or back home chewing on jerky.”

“I see. I’ll have to make sure I greet the head of the main house before we head out, though.”

Sure enough, Shin Ruu was still acting just the same as always. And his face that hardly ever smiled, as elegant as a woman’s, was unchanged too.

The only thing that had changed was the hunter’s cloak on his slender frame and the large sword dangling at his hip. But that alone was enough to make him look a whole lot more grown up.

Even if he was little, he was still around a head taller than the nine-year-old Lala Ruu, enough so that it was hard to tell whether or not her head reached up to his shoulders. At any rate, Shin Ruu looked down at her with the same calm gaze as always.

“Are you two taking a break? I suppose it’s about time for everyone to be finished gathering herbs and firewood.”

“Ah, I guess you don’t have to help out around the house anymore. That alone’s enough to make me jealous,” Ludo Ruu said before his sister spoke up, causing Shin Ruu to turn his way.

“Housework and hunting are both equally important. It’s not good to make light of that, Ludo Ruu.”

“But there’s nothing fun at all about gathering herbs and skinning pelts. It’s

way more fun to have contests of strength with you, Shin Ruu."

"Right. Please help my younger brothers train until you turn thirteen, too."

"Your brothers are still just itty bitty runts! You can give them sticks or whatever, but they still won't put up a decent fight."

The pair seemed to really be enjoying themselves.

Even if he hadn't changed, Shin Ruu still looked incredibly proud, and Ludo Ruu was clearly happy for him. That much was only naturally for folks around their age.

But amidst all that, Lala Ruu still had a heavy heart.

"Shin Ruu, take care not to get hurt, alright...?" Lala Ruu called out, causing Shin Ruu to look back her way, his upturned eyes happily narrowing.

"Everything is in accordance with the will of the forest, but I intend to strive my hardest to keep working as a hunter for as long as I can. And you should keep on striving with your housework too, Lala Ruu."

Since Lala Ruu's emotions were still in flux, she couldn't even bring herself to respond. Shin Ruu's eyes had made him look glad, but now he appeared a bit worried. Before he could say anything further, though, Ryada Ruu approached.

"Shin, you should go visit the head of the main house, Donda Ruu. And if she's up to it, you should also greet the elder before heading into the forest."

"Right, understood," Shin Ruu nodded, then after taking one more look down at Lala Ruu, he headed for the main house alongside his father.

And with that, the women of the branch houses returned to their own work, leaving just Lala and Ludo Ruu standing there.

"What's with you? Did you have a fight with Shin Ruu or something? You're seriously acting different than usual."

"Of course I didn't..."

"Bet you did. Geez, this is an important day for Shin Ruu, so stop it with the weird worrying, already," Ludo Ruu stated, bringing his hands together behind his head and walking off toward who knows where.

After heaving a sigh, Lala Ruu noticed there were still a number of people in front of the house, so she headed over that way. There, she found Shin Ruu's mother Tari Ruu, his older sister Sheera Ruu, and his two younger brothers.

Sheera Ruu's eyes were cast downwards and full of worry, while Tari Ruu was patting her shoulder to comfort her. The two young boys didn't seem to understand what was going on all that well, and they were just chatting away and chewing jerky.

Their family member had finally been thrust into the dangerous world of a hunter. There was no way the only thing they'd feel about that was pride.

And seeing how worried the especially timid Sheera Ruu was, Lala Ruu felt like she had finally found someone who could relate with what she was feeling.

◇

"I see. So you were worried about Shin Ruu?" Sati Lea Ruu asked as they were laying out the pico leaves they gathered that morning atop a spread cloth.

As she helped with the task, Lala Ruu nodded back, "Yeah."

Unable to hold it back any longer, she had opened up to Sati Lea Ruu about what she had been feeling.

The sun had already reached its peak, and the men were out in the forest. When she recalled how Shin Ruu had looked so strikingly small compared to the others as they headed off, Lala Ruu had to hold back tears.

"You got along quite well with Shin Ruu, didn't you, Lala? I can understand how you'd be worried. Hunting giba is incredibly dangerous work, after all."

"Right..."

"But being a hunter in training shouldn't be all that bad, you know. At the start, he'll be accompanied by strong hunters as he learns to hide his presence and track giba, from what I've been told."

"You can be attacked out of nowhere just walking out in the forest, though, right? A man from the branch houses had his soul return to the forest not long ago like that, didn't he?"

"That's true. Things like that do happen, of course. But it's all according to the

will of the forest.”

Sati Lea Ruu patted Lala Ruu on the shoulder, just like Tari Ruu had done for her daughter just a little while earlier.

As she wiped away the tears gradually leaking out with the back of her hand, Lala Ruu looked up at her.

“How can you all keep so calm, Sati Lea? If your precious family or husband lose their lives out in the forest, you’ll never see them again. There’s no way you don’t get sad thinking about that, right?”

“Of course. And so we pray to the forest each and every day that that won’t happen.”

“But day after day, the forest doesn’t ever answer those prayers... I just can’t stand it!”

If her parents heard those words, she would definitely be scolded. And so, Lala Ruu clung to Sati Lea Ruu instead.

The woman was even older than her sisters, and was already married, too. But she was still just nineteen, so she was closer in age to Lala Ruu than to her parents. While she probably wasn’t as wise and far-sighted as older women, Sati Lea Ruu was always calm and wearing a gentle smile, and so she looked more reliable than anyone to Lala Ruu at the moment.

“Just as you say, losing family or a husband is incredibly sad. Even if it is the result of the forest’s guidance, you’re still never able to so much as talk to that precious person ever again. I can’t think of a worse pain than that.”

“Right.”

“A soul returned to the forest will appear again before its allies, though its form will be changed. Those are the teachings of the forest, but there’s no way to truly understand that while you’re still young... You just wonder why, chasing after traces of the one you lost,” Sati Lea Ruu said, breaking out in a sudden smile. It was a bit different than her usual one though, looking somehow pained. “Lala, I’ve already lost both of my parents.”

“Huh?! B-But you were born into the main Lea house, weren’t you? And I

know I saw the Lea clan head at the last festival of the hunt...”

“I was originally born to a branch house. But I lost my parents at a young age, and was taken into the main house,” Sati Lea Ruu replied, her eyes narrowing and staring off into the distance. “My father lost his life as a hunter in the forest, while an illness took my mother away. And so I thought... When someone dies, the people left behind only lose them, while those who die lose everyone all at once. But even so... Up until the very end, the only thing my mother worried about was me.”

Lala Ruu just quietly listened.

“So then, I had the thought... that it wasn’t good for those left behind to keep dragging along that sadness with them. My mother and father’s souls watch over me together with the forest... I decided to believe that teaching with all my heart. Otherwise, it would just be too sad for my parents, who were ripped away from everyone...”

“I don’t... understand...”

Not even knowing what was driving her feelings at the moment, Lala Ruu finally broke down crying.

Still smiling, Sati Lea Ruu wrapped her arms gently around the girl’s head.

“You’re still young, so it may be a bit too tricky of a topic for you, Lala. What I wanted to say is, my mother and father both seemed very happy. Back then I was still little so I was just awash in sadness, but when I grew a bit, I started thinking I would like to live joyful lives like them. And then at the end, my soul could return to the forest.”

“Right...”

“Death awaits us all. But that’s exactly why we have to live as hard as we can up until the very end. Focus on life, rather than death. If you can do that, I believe you’ll be able to feel satisfied when your soul returns to the forest, just like my parents were.”

Sati Lea Ruu’s words really were too much for the young Lala Ruu to truly understand.

It was then, though, that there was a commotion in the plaza behind them again.

Turning around in surprise, Lala Ruu saw that a number of hunters had returned carrying giba. Even though practically no time at all had passed since they went into the forest, they had already hunted down two of the beasts.

Lala Ruu turned back toward Sati Lea Ruu, a look of urgency on her face. Seeing her anxiousness, the older girl patted her head and gently smiled.

“Go. I’ll take care of the pico leaves.”

With a nod, Lala Ruu once more took off running toward the plaza.

There were four hunters there in total, carrying the two giba in pairs. And among them was Shin Ruu, who Lala Ruu couldn’t fail to recognize even at a distance.

“Shin Ruu! You’re back already?”

“Ah, Lala Ruu... Yes, we were attacked by these two while on the way to check on the traps that had been set. We weren’t that far from the settlement at that point, so we turned around to deliver these giba first.”

The giba’s legs were tied to a grigee pole, and the hunters were carrying it on their shoulders. It was a fine giba, even bigger than Shin Ruu. He was carrying it along with his father Ryada Ruu, while the other two men belonged to a different branch family.

“You were attacked by giba? Did you get hurt anywhere?” Lala Ruu asked in a trembling voice.

“No,” Shin Ruu succinctly replied.

It was true that he didn’t have any visible wounds, and the two of them also seemed to be carrying such a big giba easily. It was a sight that clearly displayed the strength possessed by the hunters of the forest’s edge.

“My father Ryada dealt the finishing blow, but the arrow I shot hit its leg and stopped it from moving. So, we’ll get to keep this giba’s pelt.”

“I see... That’s amazing, Shin Ruu.”

“I just got lucky. Still, I’m glad to have carried out my work,” Shin Ruu replied, breaking out in a grin.

It was a proud, somewhat childish smile of the sort that the boy only rarely showed.

Shin Ruu was living life to its furthest. And he clearly felt proudly about living as a hunter, more so than anything. That was why he could bring himself to smile like that.

From underneath the painful emotions swirling about in her chest, Lala Ruu managed to force out a different feeling entirely.

She wasn’t lying to herself. Instead, she was openly expressing her own feelings, having been crushed under the weight of sadness and doubt.

When Shin Ruu was smiling like that, she didn’t want to be the only one sobbing. So with such thoughts running through her head, she grinned with all her might.

“Congratulations! I’m glad to see you do so well at your work, too!”

At that, Shin Ruu smiled even more joyfully.

That smile from her beloved childhood friend was something Lala Ruu knew quite well.

“Once we get these put away, we’ll be heading back out into the forest. Please, pray that we stay safe on our hunt.”

“Right! I’ll be waiting, along with Sheera Ruu and everyone!”

Urged on by Ryada Ruu, Shin Ruu then headed back to his house.

And as she watched them leave, Lala Ruu once again wiped away the tears welling up in her eyes.

I want to hurry and grow up, too.

On her next birthday she would be able to dress as a woman, and then when she turned thirteen, she would be able to do the same work as all the adults. Would she be able to properly understand what Sati Lea Ruu had told her then, too?

She had no idea, but there was something she *did* know.

Lala Ruu wanted to walk the same path as Shin Ruu.

She wanted to live as a person of the forest's edge should. Never letting her soul grow rotten like the Suun clan, never fearing what others thought, and properly following the teachings of her people... And she wanted to share her happiness together with the people precious to her. Those feelings burned bright in her.

With her doubts put to rest, Lala Ruu turned around and took off running back to the place where she belonged.

Afterword

You have my deepest thanks for picking up this book, the twelfth volume of *Cooking with Wild Game*.

It's been three years and two months since I started the web version, and two years and eight months since the first novel was published, and in that time we've released twelve whole volumes. And that is all thanks to the support everyone has given to the series.

On top of that, in September of this year the manga will finally kick off. And once again, that's something that I never could have accomplished on my own. I simply cannot thank everyone enough.

In general, this seemed like the type of work that would be difficult to move into other forms of media. The cast of characters is massive, and it's stuffed with old folks and kids on top of that, plus it would require showing stuff like the dissecting and cooking of giba, which sounds like a real handful. And shortly before this work was novelized, I was told how brave I was being for how little attention I paid to the idea of it being adapted.

But since I started writing it, I started thinking about the matter of commercial publishing.

Before that, I had applied for rookie of the year awards and the like, but I found it difficult to keep my stories within the size limits and preferred to just keep contributing to web publishing sites where I could write as much as I pleased.

It's also not like I even had a firm image of how my work would function as a novel, so the idea of it being adapted to other media felt like some far off dream.

As for what I'm actually trying to say, it's that I never even considered this work being drawn as illustrations or manga while I wrote it. If I had, I probably wouldn't have gone and decided the main Ruu house had thirteen members right from the start, for example. It just feels like such an imposition on the artist, after all.

And the one suffering for my thoughtlessness as the author is Kochimo, who is in charge of both the illustrations in this work and the manga. I really must use this opportunity to give them my greatest thanks for that.

I can still vividly recall how moved I felt when I first saw Kochimo's initial rough character designs for Asuta and Ai Fa back before volume one was published. Ai Fa's angry expression with the popping veins made me feel like they had hit the bullseye, and I was thoroughly satisfied. And of course, I was positively elated seeing the characters I had come up with in my head so ideally visualized.

Now that Kochimo will also be making the manga for this work, I feel every bit as overjoyed as I did back then.

Just like all of you readers, I'll be looking forward to watching how the manga develops.

The manga version of *Cooking with Wild Game* is being published on Hobby Japan's website Comic Fire, so please check it out if you're interested.

Anyway, I'm just so excited about the manga that I've gone on overly long about it, but I have to talk about this volume, too.

If volumes 1-6 were the Suun clan arc, then volume 7 onwards has been the Cyclaeus arc. And with the next volume, that arc will finally be hitting its climax.

But the Suun clan arc and the Cyclaeus arc are all tied together, so you could say it's all been one big Conspiracy arc since volume 1. As the author, I consider it all the first part of the story.

At any rate, though, I'd certainly feel grateful if you've been looking forward to how Asuta and company handle the various nobles like the wicked Cyclaeus, his daughter Lefreya, and his younger brother who still hasn't appeared, Ciluel.

Of course, the series will still continue on after that. Even the rather extensive web version still hasn't reached a conclusion just yet. I believe it will finally wrap up next year, but I had thought as such last year too, so the schedule remains up in the air.

I'm truly overjoyed to not only have this novel version but also the manga in development, but I'll keep up my responsibility of continuing to write the

original web version too. There's no shortage of stories I want to tell, but I also intend to keep aiming for the final scene I imagined without needlessly stretching things out, so I'll keep on writing at my own pace.

It really is a first for me, writing such a long story over such an extended period of time. Even though over three years have passed now, I haven't fallen prey to fatigue, and want to keep writing just as much as I did when I started. And I know that's thanks to all of you enjoying this ride alongside me.

Of course, none of the changes in these novels or the manga version have been things I didn't approve of, and it's all been according to what I felt is best.

I've been enjoying all this more than anyone, and all of you enjoying it alongside me has made me happiest of all, giving me the fuel needed to keep on writing.

Over three years have passed and I've written who knows how many millions of characters by this point, so there are certainly points that have diverged quite a bit from my initial plans. Characters intended to become bit players have become core members of the cast, while characters meant to fall to ruin have been saved instead. There really is just too much to count.

At any rate, I want to keep on writing this story up until the bitter end, enjoying each and every moment along the way.

I know I've certainly gone on long here, but I'll be truly grateful if you keep on enjoying this story in its many forms, be it on the web, in these novels, or in the manga version.

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.

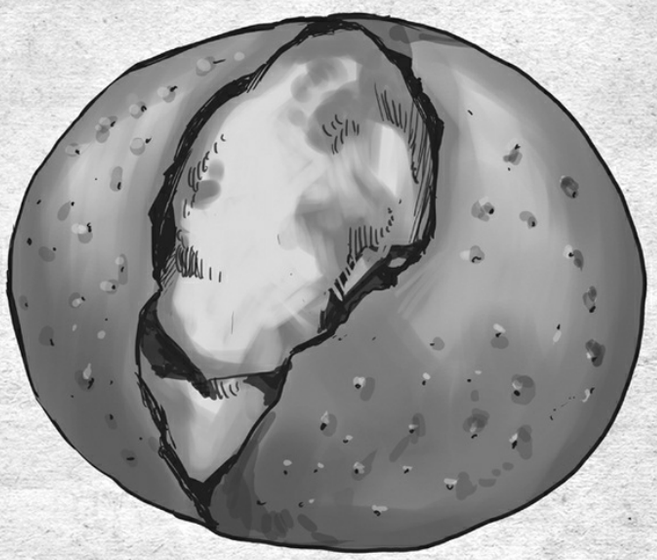
I hope to see you all again with the next volume!

October 2017,

EDA

COOKING WITH WILD GAME

Vegetable Reference Materials

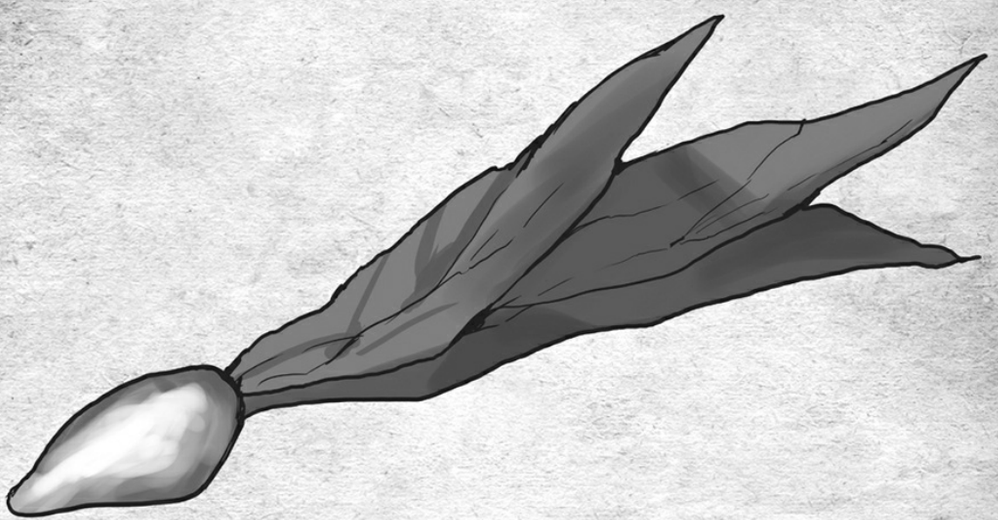


Chatchi

Price: Two for one red coin

Has a yellowish exterior and an appearance similar to a citrus fruit. Diameter is around seven to eight centimeters. The interior is white, and its flavor and texture is very similar to that of a potato.

Myamuu

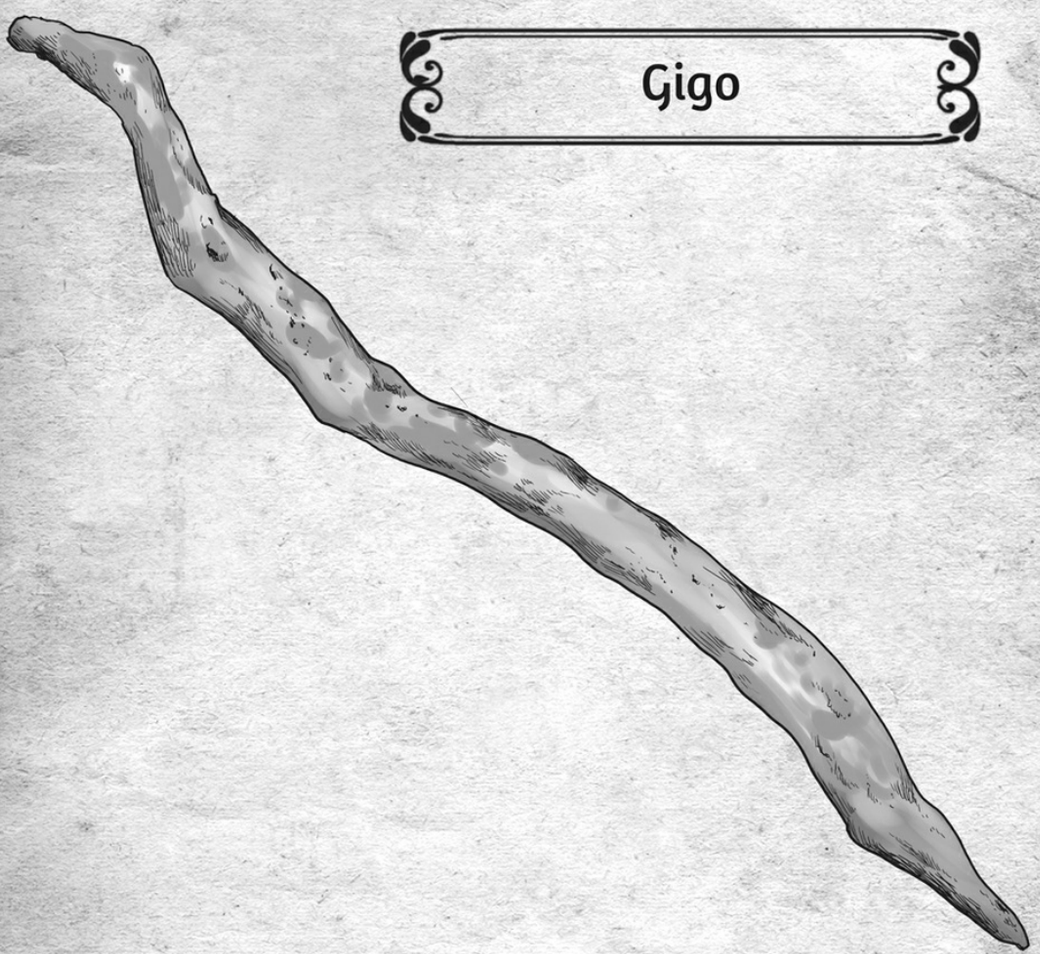


Price: One red coin each

A thin root vegetable with a diameter of seven to eight millimeters. Green in color. Around twenty centimeters long. Has a strong, sharp flavor akin to garlic and coriander.

The price per unit is high, but it is possible to use a very small amount to provide a powerful aroma.

Gigo



Price: Two red coins each (Sold by the piece)

Has a diameter of ten centimeters and a length of two meters.
Surface is deep brown with a texture like a great burdock.
When the skin is peeled, it reveals a white interior.
Has a flavor and texture akin to a Japanese yam.

Tarapa



Price: One red coin each

Has a size and shape similar to a pumpkin.
However, the color inside and outside is a brilliant red.

The flavor and texture greatly resemble a tomato,
with strong acidity and light sweetness.

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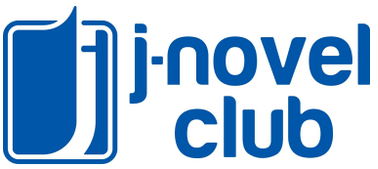
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Cooking with Wild Game: Volume 12

by EDA

Translated by Matthew Warner

Edited by Adam Fogle

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