COOKING WITH WILD GAME

Author: EDA

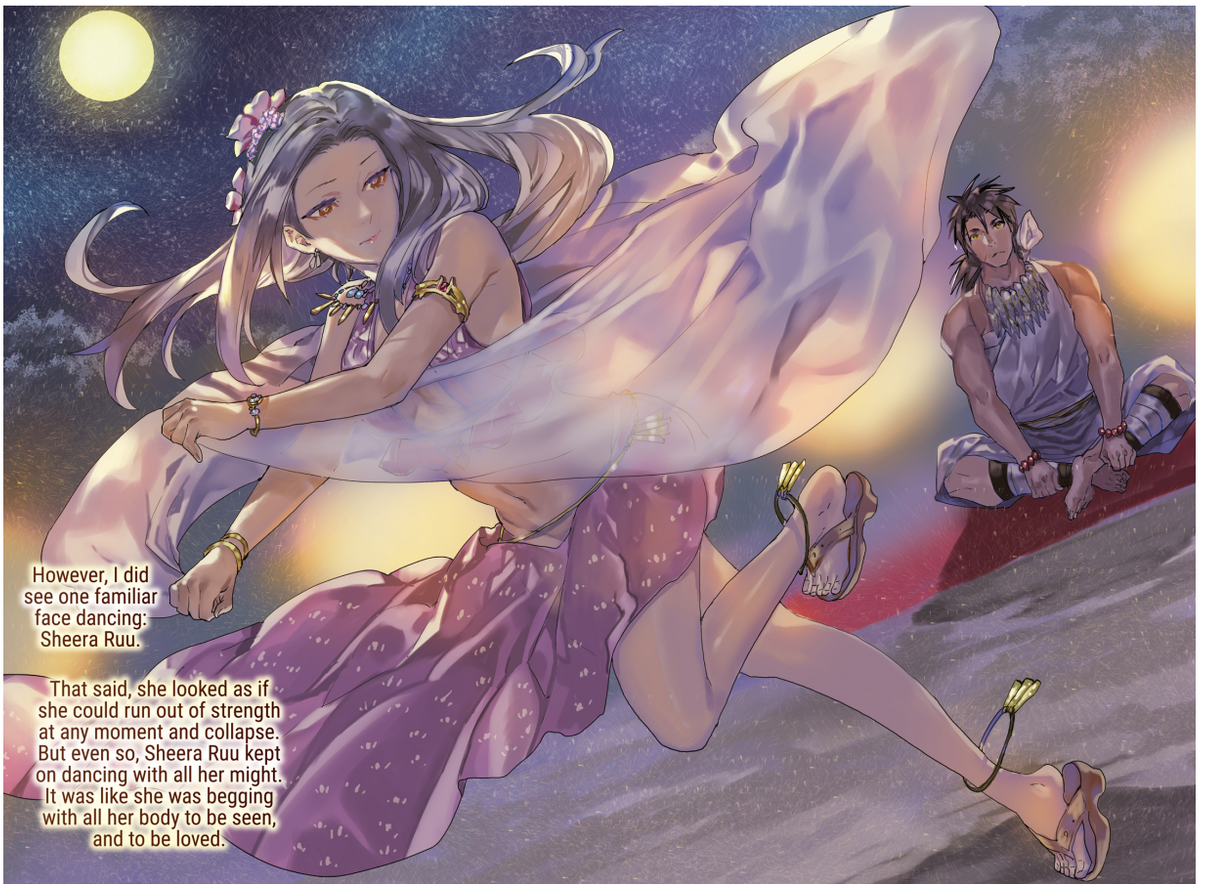
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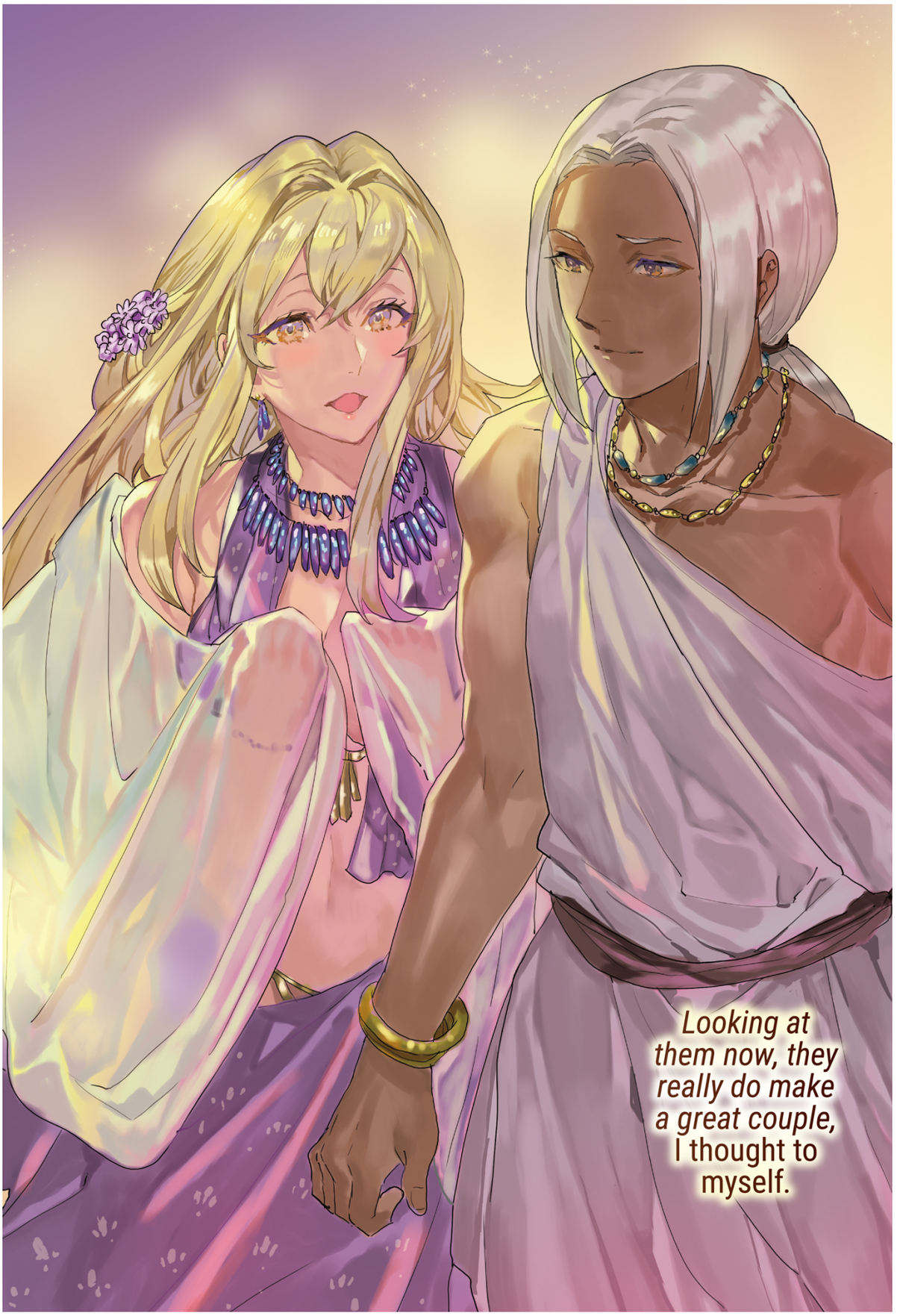
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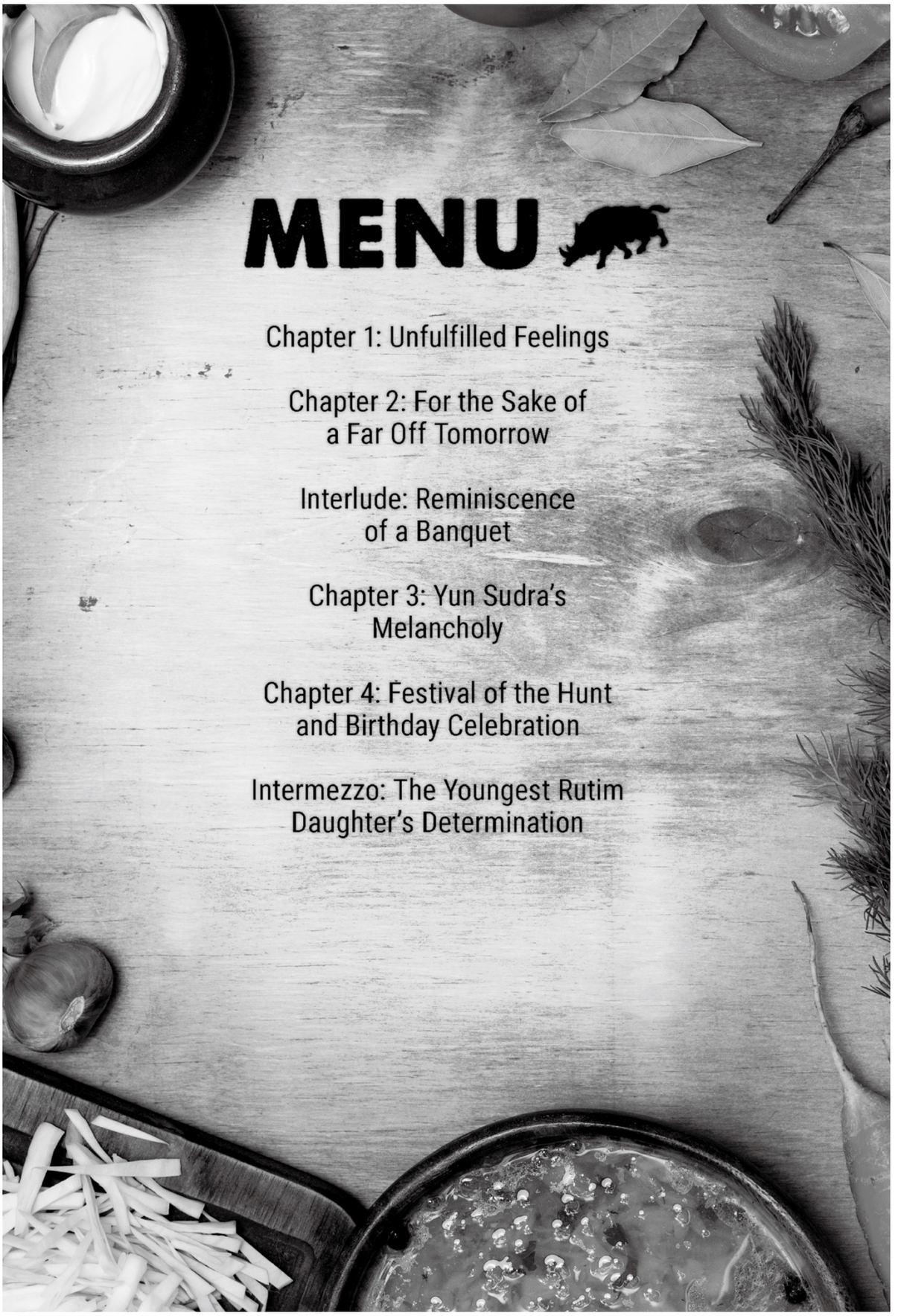



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"Leiriss..."
"Sufira Zaza, could I ask you to cast aside your status as a woman of the forest's edge and become my bride?"
Leiriss said, holding out a hand now freed of its gauntlet toward Sufira Zaza. Her tears were now dripping down onto his outstretched palm.
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However, I did see one familiar face dancing: Sheera Ruu.
That said, she looked as if she could run out of strength at any moment and collapse. But even so, Sheera Ruu kept on dancing with all her might. It was like she was begging with all her body to be seen, and to be loved.


Looking at them now, they really do make a great couple, I thought to myself.



MENU

Chapter 1: Unfulfilled Feelings

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Chapter 3: Yun Sudra's Melancholy

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Intermezzo: The Youngest Rutim Daughter's Determination

Character Introductions

~ People of the Forest's Edge ~



Asuta Tsurumi

A chef-in-training born in Japan. Though he remembers losing his life in a fire, some strange power has taken him to another world.



Ai Fa

The only female hunter at the forest's edge. She seems calm and composed at a glance, but hides strong emotions inside. She has made the decision to welcome Asuta into the Fa clan.



Donda Ruu

The head of the Ruu clan and one of the three leading clan heads of the forest's edge. An exceedingly skilled hunter. He injured his right shoulder in the battle with the lord of the forest.



Jiza Ruu

The eldest son of the main Ruu house. He has a strict personality and highly values the laws of the forest's edge. One of the top eight under the Ruu clan.



Darmu Ruu

The second son of the main Ruu house. He can be curt and rough at times and is emotional in general. He's slowly opening up to Asuta and company.



Ludo Ruu

The youngest son of the main Ruu house. Mischievous by nature. A stronger hunter than most. One of the top eight under the Ruu clan.



Vina Ruu

The eldest daughter of the main Ruu house. A peerless seductive beauty. The easterner Shumiral asked her to marry him.



Reina Ruu

The second daughter of the main Ruu house. An excellent chef. She also runs the Ruu clan's stalls alongside Sheera Ruu.



Lala Ruu

The third daughter of the main Ruu house. A frank girl who has feelings for Shin Ruu.



Rimee Ruu

The youngest Ruu daughter.
An earnest, innocent child
who specializes in making sweets.
She adores Ai Fa and Tara.



Sheera Ruu

Shin Ruu's older sister and the eldest daughter of a Ruu branch house. She has a mild-mannered personality and has hidden feelings for Darmu Ruu.



Shin Ruu

The young head of a Ruu branch house. He blames himself for failing to prevent Asuta's kidnapping, and after much training in the aftermath, he became one of the top eight under the Ruu clan.



Dan Rutim

Gazraan Rutim's father and the former head of the Rutim clan. He possesses uncommon strength as a hunter and is a bighearted man.

Mia Lea Ruu

Donda Ruu's wife and the mother of the seven siblings. She is cheerful and bighearted.

Jiba Ruu

The Ruu clan elder and Donda Ruu's grandmother. Thanks to Asuta's cooking, she has regained the strength to keep on living.



Gazraan Rutim

The head of the Rutim clan. A calm-natured man with undeniable wisdom. Also a friend without equal to Asuta. One of the top eight under the Ruu clan.

Ama Min Rutim

Gazraan Rutim's wife. A woman with a gentle and kind personality. Due to her pregnancy, she is not currently working at the stalls.

Morun Rutim

Gazraan Rutim's younger sister. A bright and earnest woman. She has hidden feelings for Deek Dom.



Geol Zaza

The youngest son of the main Zaza house. He has a rough yet cheerful nature. Because his older brothers have passed away, he's next in line to become a leading clan head.



Sufira Zaza

The youngest daughter of the main Zaza house, who has a strict personality. She stayed at the Ruu settlement in order to oversee the actions of the Fa and Ruu clans. A childhood friend of the Dom siblings.



Toor Deen

Originally belonged to a Suun branch house. She is introverted by nature, but she gives her all to assist Asuta with his business. Her skills at making sweets are blossoming.



Yun Sudra

A member of the small Sudra clan. An earnest and kind woman. Greatly adores Asuta.



Rau Lea

The Lea clan head. A hunter with delicate looks but a fierce nature. One of the top eight under the Ruu clan.



Yamiru Lea

The former eldest daughter of the main Suun house. Currently a member of the Lea clan. She possesses both bewitching beauty and a strong intellect.



Lem Dom

Deek Dom's younger sister and a member of the main Dom house. A daring woman who wishes to become a hunter and has great respect for Ai Fa.



Deek Dom

The head of the main Dom house. Despite being the same age as Asuta, his quiet single-minded nature makes him seem older. He possesses similar strength to Donda Ruu.



Shumiral

A member of Silver Vase—
a merchant group from Sym. Having asked Vina Ruu to marry him, he has been accepted as a member of the Ririn clan. However, he hasn't been given their name yet.



Tsuvai

The youngest daughter of the former main Suun house. Currently a member of the Rutim clan. Short tempered and has quite a mouth on her, but thanks to her excellent calculation skills, she is able to assist the Ruu clan with their business.



Mida

The former youngest son of the main Suun house and a current member of the Ruu clan. He's a slow thinker and simple by nature. He's also huge and a big eater.

Oura

The fifth wife of the former Suun clan head and currently a member of the Rutim clan. She is Tsuvai's mother and possesses a trim appearance and gentle demeanor.

Jou Ran

The eldest son of a Ran branch house. Sixteen years old and the victor of the pole tugging competition at the combined festival of the hunt. He asked Ai Fa to marry him, but she refused.

~ Townsfolk ~



Yumi

The daughter of the owners of an inn called the Westerly Wind. Friendly and cheerful. Seventeen years old. She acts as a bridge between Asuta and her father, who dislikes the people of the forest's edge.

Mikel

A former chef from the castle town. Due to a crippling injury inflicted on his right hand, he lost his ability to cook professionally. Currently, he lives as a charcoal seller in the Turan lands.

Leiriss

A young member of the Knights of Saturas. He became fixated on Shin Ruu due to events surrounding his father, but that was settled during the swordsmanship competition.

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Chapter 1: Unfulfilled Feelings

1

The popular consensus in Genos was that the rainy season had fully come to an end on the third day of the vermilion month. It had officially started back on the fourth of the brown month, so it had lasted for roughly two months.

A few days prior, the sky had started showing itself more and more as the amount of rain tapered off and the temperature rose. By the third day of the month, the skies had been clear from dawn till dusk, and it had gotten hot enough that you couldn't wear long-sleeved coats any longer, so people had marked that as the proper end of the rainy season.

Of course, that didn't mean the post town bounced right back to its usual hustle and bustle. The people who were visiting from Sym, Jagar, and various far-off towns would probably be hitting the road again soon. The hastier folks might have taken their totos and left already, but I figured it would take a little time for the rest to depart.

However, the residents of Genos were now free to head outside as they pleased. That alone was enough to make the roads throughout the post town feel so much more lively. On top of that, travelers and merchants started pouring in from nearby towns all at once, having been eagerly awaiting the end of the rainy season. As a result, the sales at our stalls were rising day by day.

We would be able to use tino, tarapa, and pula again roughly half a month from now. Until then, we would be sticking with the rainy season vegetables. Not that it mattered all that much. Our new dishes, the traip cream stew foremost among them, were once again earning loads of praise from our customers.

This wasn't directly related to the rainy season, but there was one other thing worth bringing up: the brick oven we had ordered from Mikel was finally complete, and by sheer coincidence, we got the news about that on the third of the vermilion month as well.

"Whoa, this is really well made!" I said in admiration, having

just arrived at the Ruu settlement for a visit after work. The oven had been built next to the kitchen of the house where Myme and Mikel were staying, with a leather canopy over it that had been set up first. Once the covering had been erected, it had taken several more days to construct the brickwork structure.

The oven was fairly large—around two meters wide and a meter tall and deep—so it could be used to bake a huge amount of poitan at once. The sides and top were built with a thick layer of bricks to prevent heat from escaping.

The bricks had been bought from town, while the clay used to join them had been collected from the forest's edge. The people of the forest's edge already used that kind of clay to plug gaps in stone stoves, so its durability was well established. There was a metal plate over the mouth of the oven, serving as a door. That part couldn't be made with bricks and clay alone, after all. It was around a centimeter thick and slid over to the side. A slight depression had been carved into the bricks so the door would fit just right, and the plate had metal rings attached to it to allow it to be mounted on hooks.

"It's pretty excessive if you're only going to be using it for baking fuwano and poitan, but it can contain residual heat, so at least you'll be able to cut down on the amount of firewood you need," Mikel said with a sour look on his face.

Mia Lea Ruu was also present. "I'm glad to hear that," she replied with a smile. Mikel still couldn't move one of his legs properly, so the Ruu women were the ones who had actually assembled the oven. "Reina and the others have had quite a lot of trouble preparing the amount of fuwano and poitan they need for their business. If we can build more of these at the other houses, it should make their jobs a whole lot easier."

"That's right. And there are some dishes we can only make with a brick oven too," I noted.

A brick oven could cook food at a much higher temperature than a stone stove was capable of. It could also cook food through both thermal conduction and direct infrared heating, so we would be able to use it to improve the cooking process for all kinds of broiled dishes, or dishes that involved baking things in covered pans.

"So, you want to teach the northerners living in the Turan lands how to make these too, right?" Mikel asked, shooting me an annoyed glare.

“Yes. We taught them how to make steamed fuwano manju, but with the end of the rainy season, poitan supplies will go back to normal, so they’re going to be getting that instead once again. But it’s difficult to knead water into poitan and have it bind together in a way that would let you make steamed manju with it, right? I’d feel bad for them if that meant they had to go back to eating poitan soup, so I’d really like to teach them how to make brick ovens.”

“Have you asked the nobles about that?”

“No, I haven’t even brought it up with the leading clan heads yet. After all, they did warn us not to involve ourselves with the northerners too much.”

But the northerners were only given metal pots to cook with. It would take far too long to cook poitan one by one under those conditions. If they had a brick oven, that problem would instantly vanish.

“But as you can see, these things need to have a metal door, and those are not cheap, even if the rest of the oven is,” Mikel said.

“Yeah, but I’m pretty sure it would be able to pay for itself in the long run. It would mean a lot less effort needed to gather firewood or money to buy charcoal, after all.”

“Except that they wouldn’t need any extra firewood or charcoal in the first place if they were to go back to eating poitan soup like before.”

“Right. But delicious food motivates them to work harder, which will increase Genos’s profits. The nobles have already accepted that reasoning as valid.”

Since Mikel—who was currently sitting on a wooden box so as not to strain his leg—was under the Ruu clan’s care, he was of course already aware of that “Hmph. That’s the logic you used to get permission to give cooking lessons to the northerners, right? Didn’t the nobles warn you not to involve yourselves with the northerners beyond that?”

“Y-Yes, that’s right.”

“So then, it sounds like you’re planning to go through a huge hassle just to get chewed out again at the end. That whole thing about carving a path through the forest’s edge is already over and done with, so there’s no sense in you going out on a limb to try to keep helping them at this point.”

“Yeah, I know. I’m fully prepared to get dismissed out of hand

as soon as I bring this up."

Mikel's annoyed gaze then shifted over to Mia Lea Ruu. "How do you think the leading clan heads will react to this idea?"

"Hmm. It's hard to say. The nobles told us in very clear terms that we shouldn't involve ourselves with the northerners, and one of the reasons they gave was that it could easily lead to our people finding themselves in a worsening position, so the leading clan heads may very well decide that it's best to follow the nobles' instructions on this matter."

"But didn't they say they needed to put some more thought into how we should interact with the nobles of Genos and the northerners? So they might not reject the idea outright."

Mia Lea Ruu smiled as if attempting to placate me. "But the nobles said to leave this matter to them, did they not? And since they did tell us that so explicitly, it's pretty clear that we would be butting into their business if we were to interject at this point."

"B-But the nobles don't know how to make brick ovens…so our knowledge could be beneficial to them…" I desperately objected, but I was steadily losing confidence. It was a fact that Melfried and the others had warned us not to get involved with the northerners any further, so perhaps it would be best to pay attention to that warning.

"What if I propose it to the nobles?" Mikel suddenly suggested.

Mia Lea Ruu, Myme, and I all went wide-eyed and said, "Huh?"

"I'm a resident of the Turan lands, not a person of the forest's edge, so it wouldn't be all that strange for me to make a proposal to the nobles about the northerners."

"You want to go directly to them about the brick ovens?"

"Of course. The nobles accepted the idea that better food makes the northerners work harder, right? I can just tell them that I'll teach their slaves how to make ovens in exchange for payment," Mikel stated, the same annoyed look on his face. "I'm a poor man, no doubt about it, and there's nothing strange about a poor man racking his brain to think up a way to earn some money. Honestly, it's not like I'd be doing it out of pity for the northerners or anything, so even if those observers from the capital come sniffing around, I shouldn't be in any danger."

The observers he had referred to were the actual reason that Melfried and the other nobles were concerned about our actions. There was apparently some chance that they'd notice

what we were doing and take issue with what they would see as a bunch of frontier nobles giving northerners suspiciously preferential treatment.

“Nobles are always searching for ways to advance their interests, so if they think I’m working for my own benefit, they won’t look any deeper into it,” Mikel concluded.

“But you hate nobles, don’t you, Mikel? So do you really want to be the one to take the lead on this?” I asked, causing Mikel to furrow his brow even deeper.

“I’m simply trying to repay my debt, so stop nitpicking already. You sure are a noisy little brat, you know.”

“S-Sorry. I didn’t mean to seem like I was criticizing you or anything.”

“Jeez, dad. Asuta was just worried about you!” Myme said with a smile, gently placing a hand on her father’s right arm. That was the arm that had been permanently injured on Cyclaeus’s orders because Mikel had opposed him.

“At any rate, the nobles of Genos are the ones who’ll have to make the final decision. If they think it’s fine to keep having the northerners subsist on poitan soup, they won’t want to bother with all this anyway.”

“That part shouldn’t be a problem,” I said, thinking back on Melfried watching the northerners working in the rain and Lefreya offering her gratitude at the tea party. They were the ones who were the most worried about what to do with the northerners Cyclaeus had brought to Genos solely on his own initiative, so I couldn’t imagine them ignoring this little proposal from us.

At any rate, we now had a plan for how to give the northerners access to brick ovens. A few days later, the leading clan heads gave their approval, and I received word from Polarth shortly after that Mikel would indeed be allowed to go ahead with the construction. As a result, Mikel ended up commuting to the Turan lands for several days with Bartha guarding him. There, he oversaw the construction of a number of brick ovens beside the kitchen allotted to the northerners. It was possible that I’d never have a chance to see them in person, but the thought of Eleo Chel and the others being able to enjoy delicious poitan was enough to satisfy me.

After that, the vermilion month was mostly quiet as it continued to pass on by, but there *were* a number of things that

happened in a short time span that seemed to me like they were triggered all at once by the end of the rainy season. I thought that because of the way certain events were celebrated at the forest's edge. There wasn't a law about it or anything. It was just a natural consequence of how people did things.

Which is to say, it related to weddings.

During the rainy season, it wasn't possible to hold banquets outdoors. Because of that, there tended to be a whole bunch of wedding celebrations in a short span of time as soon as the rainy season ended. It probably also had something to do with the fact that hunters had a lot more days off during the rainy season, giving more opportunities for love to blossom between men and women. For one example of that involving just the clans that lived near us, the Fou, Ran, and Sudra had held a banquet during the rainy season to give people a chance to find a spouse.

They were the only ones who had done that, but men would often visit the houses of extended relatives during the rainy season, giving them plenty of opportunities to interact with others. Those who found partners in the process would wait until the end of the rainy season and then get married.

From what I heard, there were new pairings between the Min and Muufa, the Gaaz and Matua, and the Liddo and Havira. The Havira were a new name to me, but apparently they were a subordinate clan to the Zaza that lived to the north of the Suun settlement. Though they were located far away from the Liddo, they could visit one another using wagons, which had allowed them to form new blood ties.

I didn't personally know any of those people, but it was still welcome news. These were joyous occasions that were sorely needed after the rainy season's two months of darkness.

However, matters related to love weren't always happy ones, as several incidents that happened around us amply demonstrated.

The Fa clan learned about the first such issue on the fifth of the vermilion month. This was the third day since the rainy season had ended. This was also the day when the nobles finally got around to accepting Mikel's proposal. A chef by the name of Yang, who spent some of his time working in the post town, told me about it, passing along the message from Polarth so that I could deliver it to Mikel.

However, the issue at hand had nothing to do with that. Earlier in the day, right after I had finished preparing for work with some of the women who lived nearby and was getting ready to head to the post town, a totos approached from the north.

Rather than pulling a wagon, the bird only had a single person riding it in a saddle. He was a northern hunter who was wearing a giba pelt over his head. Was he heading to the Ruu or Sauti settlements to deliver some sort of news?

We went ahead and stopped our wagon so as to not get in the hunter's way, and he passed by us. But then he seemed to notice that we were there, did a U-turn, and approached us. Then he dismounted the totos and suddenly grabbed the front of my vest.

"Perfect timing, Asuta of the Fa clan! I have something I want to say to you!" He was a huge guy, over 180 centimeters tall. There was a fire blazing in his black eyes, and he had a large scar over his right eyebrow. This was the youngest son of the main Zaza house and a candidate to be their next clan head, Geol Zaza.

"G-Geol Zaza? What's got you so worked up?"

"As if I could be calm and just loaf around with what's going on! And here you are, looking all nonchalant, not knowing a thing about it!"

"Y-Yeah, I have no idea what you're talking about, so it's only natural to be nonchalant, right?"

Ai Fa, having already noticed that something was off, came running over. "If it isn't the youngest son of the Zaza. If you do not unhand him immediately, I will consider this a hostile act against the Fa clan." Her eyes were burning intensely with rage, a sight I hadn't seen in some time.

"Hmph!" Geol Zaza snorted, shoving me away. "The Fa clan is clearly at fault for causing this disaster! This is the result of letting you all run wild, so *you* will have to be the ones to take responsibility!"

"G-Geol Zaza, what in the world are you so mad about?" Toor Deen called out, appearing from inside the wagon, looking flustered.

When he saw the petite chef, the ferocity in Geol Zaza's eyes receded a bit. "Toor Deen, eh? You've tagged along with them when they've gone to the castle town many times now, haven't

you? That's perfect, I'll have you hear me out too."

"The castle town? What does that have to do with anything?"

"It's ridiculous! My old man and I have been left with a real headache thanks to those nobles." Geol Zaza's rage steadily waned until he started to look like a sulking child. It seemed the hot-headed youth had a bit of a soft spot for Toor Deen, who belonged to a clan related to his.

"You need to calm down and talk to us. What exactly did the nobles in the castle town do?" Ai Fa urged, moving between us to protect me. The other women were now peering out from inside the wagon.

As if trying to push back against the gazes now falling on him, Geol Zaza loudly declared, "My older sister Sufira has fallen for a noble! As if something that ludicrous would ever be permitted! We would never allow her to marry into a noble's house!"

Every last one of us was taken aback by what he had said.

"H-Hold on. Sufira Zaza fell for a noble? Who exactly does she have feelings for?" I asked.

"That young noble Leiriss, the one who looks so prim and proper! It's ridiculous, isn't it?!" As Geol Zaza shouted, I could see that his expression was full of not just anger, but also confusion and sorrow.

This whole situation felt so absurd that we were having difficulty even grasping it.

2

"Apparently, Sufira Zaza has been interested in Leiriss ever since first meeting him at the celebration following the swordsmanship tournament. Then they deepened their relationship at the house of Daleim's dance party, and she realized her feelings were romantic in nature."

As we arrived at the post town and started getting our stalls ready, I ended up having to explain the earlier incident to everyone. Naturally, they all wanted to know why Geol Zaza had been rushing over to the Ruu settlement and what had made him so upset.

"She spent a long time agonizing over what to do—more than two months, I guess, since the dance party was held around the end of the gold month—but eventually she decided to open up to her family about her feelings."

I knew that a festival of the hunt had been held at the northern settlement around then too. When women danced and hunters participated in contests of strength during those festivals, it often led to discussions of marriage. I could easily imagine such an event prompting Sufira Zaza to take a very close look at her feelings.

"But why did Sufira Zaza fall for a noble of all people? She only met him twice, at that tournament and the dance party, right?" Lala Ruu asked. Sheera Ruu, Morun Rutim, Tsuvai, and Yamiru Lea were also listening in as they did their work.

"Well, it seems that she started to fall for him when she saw him beat Geol Zaza in the swordsmanship tournament. Apparently, Geol Zaza is strong enough to make it into the final eight at the northern settlement."

"Oh? That certainly is impressive, but is it really enough to make a woman of the forest's edge fall for a noble?"

"Well, he's very strong, but he's also quite calm and polite, usually. Maybe that's the kind of man Sufira Zaza likes. By the way, didn't you meet him at that celebratory banquet too, Lala Ruu?"

"Yeah, I remember that noble guy. He spent a long time talking to Shin Ruu, after all," Lala Ruu replied. Then she paused for a moment to search her memories. "Hmm. Well, I guess he didn't seem like a bad person. At the very least, he wasn't as bad as I had expected."

"Ah, now that you mention it, Shin Ruu got pulled into that swordsmanship tournament because of Leiriss, didn't he?"

"That's right! His father tried to beat Shin Ruu with a craven trick, and Shin Ruu ended up having to go to all that trouble because of it! I was really angry about that back then."

Leiriss's father Geimalos had participated in a swordsmanship match against Shin Ruu, where he had replaced Shin Ruu's light armor with heavy cavalry armor in a cowardly attempt to cheat. That had resulted in him losing his position as head of the Knights of Saturas, which had settled things as far as the people of the forest's edge were concerned...but then his son Leiriss had gotten all broody over it. He had wanted to know if the hunters of the forest's edge were truly such incredible swordsmen that his father felt like he had to commit such a crime, and that had seriously ignited his fighting spirit.

However, after crossing blades with Shin Ruu in the contest of

swordsmanship, he had been able to lay his doubts to rest. When I had met him again at the Daleim dance party, he had been all smiles and seemed so high-spirited that it had been as if he'd freed himself from some kind of evil spirit that had been possessing him.

"Now that you mention it, I did see him speaking with Sufira Zaza a number of times back during the dance party. But I didn't think much of it, since there didn't seem to be anything bad going on," Sheera Ruu called out. She had also attended that event. Neither she nor I had paid too much attention to what the two of them had been doing. I had just been glad to see the nobles and people of the forest's edge getting closer.

"Still, it's no small matter for a woman of the forest's edge to fall for a noble! Is she saying she wants to marry into his house, then?"

"No, she knows that won't be permitted, and she can't bring herself to abandon the settlement at the forest's edge either. But she can't simply shake off her feelings toward Leiriss, so she actually wants to be rebuked for straying from the proper path as a person of the forest's edge. That's the request she's making to her father, Gulaf Zaza. She wants him to show her the proper path forward, as a leading clan head."

"Wow! That sounds like a really big problem for Gulaf Zaza! I feel sorry for him!" Lala Ruu said.

I found her reaction to be kind of unexpected.

"You feel bad for Gulaf Zaza? Well, I definitely get that he's been put in a difficult position, at least."

"I feel just as bad for him as I do for Sufira Zaza! This is even more ridiculous than that whole thing with Vina that was such a headache for Papa Donda!"

Ah, so she was sympathetic to Gulaf Zaza because he was dealing with the same troubles as her own father? It *was* true that this situation was even more wild than the matter with Vina Ruu and Shumiral.

"Gulaf Zaza must be at a complete loss as to how to deal with this situation if he's consulting with Papa Donda and Dari Sauti about it. I wonder what's going to end up happening."

"Hmm, I'm not sure myself. There would definitely be all sorts of problems that would come up if a person of the forest's edge and a noble were to try to get married."

"Hmph! Yeah, it's not like a noble would ever marry into our

people. And, well, Sufira Zaza's the one who developed feelings for someone she shouldn't," Tsuvai remarked with an astonished shrug.

Yamiru Lea, meanwhile, gave a listless sigh. "Quite so. Still, I never expected Sufira Zaza of all people to fall for a noble. You can truly never predict the whims of fate."

The two of them had once belonged to the Suun clan, so they had been close with Sufira Zaza, though ever since the Suun's crimes had been exposed, Sufira Zaza had been very strict with them.

"She must have gone crazy to fall for a noble. I feel bad for poor Deek Dom," Tsuvai stated.

"Huh?" Morun Rutim exclaimed. "Ts-Tsuvai, what are you bringing up Deek Dom for? This is a Zaza clan issue, isn't it?"

"Hmm? Didn't you know? Sufira Zaza and Deek Dom were supposed to get married. At least, that's what everyone around them thought."

Morun Rutim stumbled and caught herself against the stall.

Lala Ruu worriedly reached out and grabbed her shoulder. "What's the matter? You've gone pale, Morun Rutim!"

"O-Oh, it's nothing. Th-The pot will probably be hot enough soon, right?" Morun Rutim said as she hurriedly returned to her own stall.

I was rather concerned, so I turned to look at Yamiru Lea. "Um, is it true that Sufira Zaza and Deek Dom were going to get married? This is the first time I've heard anything about that."

"No, people just assumed that they would. It was the best possible pairing for deepening the bond between the Zaza and the Dom, and Sufira Zaza is quite close to Deek Dom's younger sister Lem Dom as well."

Now that she mentioned it, I had heard similar things regarding Lem Dom and Geol Zaza. Lem Dom had denied it, but at the very least, Geol Zaza did want to marry her.

The four of them are all around the same age, so it really wouldn't be strange for the topic to be raised between them. Since they all belong to the Zaza and Dom main houses, the pairings would work out quite well. But that also meant that this new development could be a real problem for the relationship between the Zaza and the Dom. Lem Dom had no intention whatsoever of marrying Geol Zaza, since she wanted to live as a hunter, and Sufira Zaza had fallen for a noble. Having those two

potential pairings ruined was sure to cause some anxiety for them.

Still, the chances of Sufira Zaza and Leiriss getting together are near zero…so maybe there's nothing to worry about? All I could do was pray to the mother forest that everything would work out okay.

However, in the end it took several days and a whole lot of effort for everything to be resolved.

The next morning—the sixth of the vermilion month—brought with it Lem Dom's first visit to the Fa house in a while.

"Long time no see, Asuta. Glad to see you looking well."

"Hey there, Lem Dom. You're looking as healthy as always too."

Just like Geol Zaza had done yesterday, Lem Dom had come to the Fa house riding atop a totos. She had arrived a bit earlier than him, though, so I was still in the process of loading the wagon after finishing my prep work for the stalls.

"Sorry, but could I have a bit of your time? I want to hear your opinion about what's going on."

"You mean about the thing with Sufira Zaza, right? Sorry, Toor Deen, but could you take charge of getting everything loaded?"

Lem Dom turned and called out to the young chef as well. "My apologies, Toor Deen. I'm glad to see you looking well too."

"Thanks!" Toor Deen replied with a nod and a happy smile. The Zaza was the parent clan to both of them and they had worked together often, so the two of them got along surprisingly well.

At any rate, I left the packing to her and headed off to the side of the house with Lem Dom.

"You really do look much better now. The last time I saw you, you were all skinny, so I was pretty concerned."

"Yeah. Sorry for worrying you. And thank you for coming to see me when I was ill."

"Of course I did. I'm endlessly grateful to both you and Ai Fa," Lem Dom said with a calm smile.

Every time I had seen her recently, she had looked more and more like the dauntless hunter she aspired to be. I also found it interesting that her rough and wild nature seemed like it was gradually getting reined in at the same time.

Naturally, she had grown even burlier than she had been in

the past. She was taller than me, the muscles on her arms and legs stood out visibly, and she had a six-pack. Honestly, her appearance was more in line with what I expected of a female hunter than Ai Fa's. However, the look in her eyes was now much calmer, and the expression she wore was more mature than it had been in the past.

"Okay, let's just get right into it. You've interacted with that Leiriss fellow before, right, Asuta?"

"Yeah, though we've only met twice. Once at the banquet put on by the house of Saturas, and the other time at the Daleim dance party."

"Oh, right, you didn't take part in that celebratory banquet after the tournament, huh?"

"Nope. Everyone who attended belonged to the leading clans. I just ran a stall outside of the arena and did a bit of spectating afterward."

"Then you saw Leiriss's fight with Geol Zaza?" Lem Dom questioned, leaning forward ever so slightly. "How exactly did the fight go? Geol Zaza won't really talk about it, and I would feel bad if I pressured him to tell me, so I still have no clue how it played out."

"It'd be hard for me to describe it in detail...but they were both thoroughly exhausted, and Leiriss just barely managed to win. They'd both had tough battles in the previous round, after all."

Leiriss had been beaten by Shin Ruu, and Geol Zaza had been beaten by Melfried after some seriously intense fights. The two defeated competitors had then fought each other for third place.

"I got the impression that Geol Zaza and Shin Ruu both found it extremely restrictive to have to fight while wearing armor. I'm a total amateur when it comes to combat, but I'm sure if it hadn't been for that, Geol Zaza would never have lost to any noble."

"I see. Well, there's no point in complaining about the rules of a competition. Still, it's unusual for a hunter of the forest's edge to lose, regardless of the conditions in place."

"I feel the same way. Leiriss and Melfried are both incredible swordsmen. Oh, right, and a while back, Ai Fa said that Melfried was about as strong as Jiza Ruu."

When she heard that, Lem Dom's eyes seemed to light up. "Speaking of which, wasn't Melfried the one who defeated that criminal from the Suun?"

"Oh, you mean Tei Suun? Yeah, that was him."

“I see. In that case, I suppose I can see how he might have been able to get the better of a hunter from the forest’s edge in that competition. I think I can understand Sufira Zaza’s feelings a little better now.”

“Really?” I asked, tilting my head.

“Only a little, though,” Lem Dom replied with a shrug. “At the northern settlement, might makes right. We were raised to be drawn to strong people, more so than the women of other clans, so I could definitely see her being attracted to the noble who took down Geol Zaza.”

“Yeah, I guess that may be true…but Deek Dom must be stronger than Leiriss, don’t you think?”

“Deek? Why are you bringing him up all of a sudden?”

“Oh, well, I heard a rumor that he was supposed to marry Sufira Zaza.”

“Ah… That’s just something people say because it seems like those two are the best possible match for each other in the northern settlement. Even more so because none of the elder Zaza sisters married into the Dom clan.” Lem Dom ran her fingers through her long back hair and sighed. “Well, since I’m in no position to marry, it would probably ease a lot of people’s concerns if Deek married Sufira Zaza, but it doesn’t seem like that’ll happen anytime soon. Despite appearances, Sufira Zaza is deeply emotional, so I don’t think she’ll be open to marrying another man in the near future.”

“I suppose not. She did spend two whole months trying to forget her feelings before she spoke to anyone about them.”

“Of course. After all, it simply isn’t possible for a noble and a person of the forest’s edge to marry.”

From what I had heard, though, the emergency meeting between the leading clan heads yesterday hadn’t yielded any results.

If Leiriss was told about this and firmly rejected her, would that save Sufira Zaza? But after that big kerfuffle between us and the house of Saturas over Leeheim’s behavior toward Reina Ruu, the nobles would probably think we were pretty brazen if we brought up the topic of romantic feelings again, except this time coming from our direction, wouldn’t they? Apparently, the people who had participated in the discussions about this issue had wildly varying opinions about it.

“How is Sufira Zaza doing now?”

“She looks like she’s the same as always on the surface, but I’m sure she must feel like a criminal waiting for her sentence to be handed down. She’s full of regret for having troubled her father and leading clan head, Gulaf Zaza.”

I really did feel sorry for her. Hearing that she wanted to be scolded for falling in love with the wrong person and being unable to suppress her feelings made me feel awful.

“What a mess. I feel like I need to apologize to her, considering I was the one who insisted that we should strengthen our bonds with outsiders.”

“Oh? You took Geol Zaza’s words to heart? It’s not like you to act so pathetic, Asuta.”

“Yeah. It’s not like I think everything I’ve been doing was wrong now, but it’s still hard to accept the fact that I’ve caused so much heartache for Sufira Zaza.”

“You think too much about how other people feel. Although, I suppose that also happens to be the reason you decided to help me out so much.” Lem Dom said, and then she brought her face close to mine. “Besides, do you really think you’ve got the leeway to be worrying about other people’s love troubles? What’s been going on between you and Ai Fa recently?”

“H-Huh? Nothing in particular, really.”

“Seriously? But when Ai Fa was all cuddled up with you when you were sick, you looked like you were practically husband and wife already.” An impudent expression then crept onto Lem Dom’s face. This was how she always used to look. “Hey, Asuta…I’m grateful to you, and I think you’re both charming and pleasant to be around…but Ai Fa’s an unbelievably strong female hunter, and she’s incredibly precious to me.”

“Y-Yeah, I get all that, of course.”

“If Ai Fa gets married like an ordinary woman, I’ll be the only female hunter left at the forest’s edge.”

“Is that something you’re worried about? Ai Fa and I don’t have any plans to marry,” I replied.

Lem Dom raised an eyebrow suspiciously. “You said that awfully quick. You love Ai Fa as a woman, don’t you?”

“Wh-Why are you putting so much pressure on me this early in the morning? I do, but I want to respect Ai Fa’s feelings.”

Lem Dom stared intently at me. “Ah, right. You had to work up quite a bit of resolve to make that decision, didn’t you?”

“Well, yeah.”

“In that case, I guess it’s my turn to feel bad for you, Asuta.” Lem Dom licked her lips, and a different kind of light then appeared in her eyes. Her gaze was weighty and alluring, and seemed to be trying to envelop me. “In that case, why don’t I ease your suffering a bit?”



“I-I’m not really comfortable with you looking at me that way. The last time you had that look in your eyes, I remember you making a really dicey proposition.”

“That’s a fine thing to say, calling it a dicey proposition. All I did was offer to teach you how to indulge in some pleasure without having a child,” Lem Dom replied, whispering that devilish temptation into my ears once more. “Still, it would certainly ruin the fun if you did it with a woman you weren’t interested in. In that case, why don’t I share my knowledge with Ai Fa instead? That would let you have as much fun as you could possibly want with your beloved Ai Fa.”

“D-Don’t be ridiculous!” I shouted, nearly leaping into the air as I pulled away from Lem Dom. “S-Seriously, cut it out! I know I’m a weakling, but if I have to use force to stop you from doing that, I will!”

“My, you’re getting so serious about this. And here I thought you’d be happy to have the option. What exactly are you so upset about?”

“O-Of course I’m upset! That goes against the customs of the forest’s edge, doesn’t it?”

“And how much does that *actually* bother you? I mean, you’ve overturned our customs more than a few times already. And I know you’d feel such bliss that you’d stop caring about any of that in no time at all.”

“O-On the off chance things ever go in that direction between me and Ai Fa…I probably wouldn’t be able to hold myself back! And that’d spell trouble for you too, wouldn’t it?”

Lem Dom’s eyes opened wide in bemusement. Then a moment later she started laughing, unable to hold herself back. “I have no idea if your will is incredibly strong or pathetically weak. Still, that really does sound just like you, Asuta.”

“Oh yeah? Well, I guess I’m glad I amused you, at least.”

“Come on, don’t be angry. I was trying to make you happy. Oh, I wasn’t trying to pick a fight or anything, so you’ve got nothing to worry about, Ai Fa.”

When I heard her say that, I felt myself get goose bumps. Fearfully, I turned my head to follow her gaze…and sure enough, I found my clan head emerging from the shadow of the house.

“Then what was all that wailing about? Asuta is clearly upset.”

“A-A-Ai Fa, how long have you been listening?”

“I wasn’t able to make out what you two were saying from

over here. Would it be inconvenient for you somehow if I overheard?" Ai Fa asked, clearly looking miffed. If Lem Dom hadn't been present as well, she probably would have been openly frowning about now.

As I struggled to find a response, I shot Lem Dom a resentful glare. All that did was make her smile in amusement, though.

"I'm relieved to see that the two of you are the same as always. For my sake, I hope you stay that way forever," she said.

"I don't understand you at all. We don't need you to tell us to be ourselves," Ai Fa grumbled.

I didn't know whether to feel relieved to hear that, but at any rate, I went ahead and let out a sigh. But then Ai Fa suddenly brought her face close to mine.

"I can't see any reason for you to be sighing. You aren't trying to hide some kind of wicked plot from me, are you?"

"No, definitely not!"

It was just that I had been thrown for one heck of a loop, considering that it was still early in the morning. Honestly, at that point I wasn't sure who was worse off, Sufira Zaza or me.

At any rate, even with everyone anxiously worrying about what was going to happen next, the situation surrounding Sufira Zaza and Leiriss wasn't showing any signs of heading toward a conclusion in the near future.

3

It was now the following day, the seventh of the vermilion month, and the heads of the Deen and Liddo clans were visiting the Fa house. They arrived around sunset after they got back from hunting in the forest—while I was giving a cooking lesson to some of the women who lived near the Fa clan, using our dinner for that evening as an example—and the very first thing the two of them did was ask about Leiriss.

"Is that noble truly a warrior who surpasses Geol Zaza? Or did the Zaza boy simply let his guard down?"

"And what kind of person is he? Aren't all nobles arrogant and haughty?"

"H-Hold on a moment. Why exactly are you two so interested in Leiriss?" I asked.

The Liddo clan head, Radd Liddo, crossed his arms and replied, "Of course we're interested. The Zaza are a leading clan,

and they are our parent clan on top of that, so do you really think we'd stay silent after learning that a member of the main house has fallen for a noble of all people? Unless this Leiriss is an exceptional man, there's no way I could possibly accept it."

"But even if you do find him exceptional, you still won't accept Sufira Zaza marrying into his house, right?"

"Of course we won't! Gulaf Zaza would never allow them to do something so ridiculous! Nonetheless, it doesn't change the fact that a member of the Zaza has fallen for a noble, so we can't simply ignore this."

It seemed the two of them were as confused and shaken as everyone else was by the recent news. Perhaps that wasn't too surprising when it came to an expressive guy like Radd Liddo, but the Deen clan head was in the same state, and he struck me as being a lot more serious and composed.

At any rate, all I could do was convey what I knew. It wasn't like I was all that familiar with Leiriss in the first place. I mean, I had only met him twice, with only a handful of words exchanged between us.

"By the way, what does he look like? How old is he? Is he a big man?"

"He's about my age and a bit taller than me, but he doesn't have a particularly robust build or anything. I guess I'd say he looks how you'd expect a noble to."

"We've never seen a noble, so we have no idea how we should expect one to look."

"Still, if he beat Geol Zaza despite being smaller, that's quite the accomplishment."

It was sounding like they wanted Leiriss to be as worthy of their respect as possible. They probably found it unthinkable that a woman of the forest's edge would fall for an outsider without him being extraordinarily appealing.

Radd Liddo was staring at me with a troubled look on his face. "Hey, Asuta, couldn't this Leiriss fellow just marry into our people?"

"Huh? I really don't think that would be possible. Nobles value their houses and bloodlines very strongly, in their own way."

"Hmm. But that Shumiral man who's now under the Ririn went so far as to cast aside his god so he could ask to marry into our people, did he not?"

"That's because Shumiral's madly in love with one of our

people. This time, though, it's a person of the forest's edge that's fallen for an outsider."

"But couldn't this Leiriss's heart be moved if he learns how Sufira Zaza feels?" Radd Liddo insisted, causing me to tilt my head.

"Um, do you *want* Leiriss to marry into the Zaza clan, Radd Liddo?"

"Who would ever wish for such a hassle?! I just feel bad for Sufira Zaza, considering how distressed she is over all of this."

I understood how he felt, but still, it was hard to imagine Leiriss casting aside his status as a noble. On top of that, as the nephew of Count Saturas, and considering that his father used to be the head of the knights of Saturas, he probably had a pretty high position in the hierarchy of nobles.

Seems like everyone's really on edge because the leading clan heads still haven't handed down their ultimate decision.

At any rate, the two clan heads stuck around for about half an hour before finally heading back to their respective homes. I figured that meant it was about time for me to get back to finishing dinner, but then the Fou and Ran women timidly called out to me.

"Um, Sufira Zaza participated in that dance party the nobles held, didn't she?"

"They gave her banquet attire from the castle town to wear, right?"

"Toor Deen said it was a beautiful outfit, so isn't it possible that this Leiriss person fell for Sufira Zaza too?"

I turned in surprise and found that all of the women who were still around were staring at me with eyes full of curiosity. Out of the entire group, only Toor Deen and Yun Sudra were acting normally.

"Wh-What's going on? Nobody seemed this interested yesterday or the day before."

"Well, we didn't think it would be proper to talk about something so frivolous while we were working."

"And besides, we were expecting the leading clan heads to have settled the matter by now."

It seemed the news had really piqued their womanly curiosity. Apparently, even the earnest women of the forest's edge were still interested in gossip about romance.

"That's right. Honestly, we talk about stuff like that quite a bit

when you're not around, Asuta," Yun Sudra informed me as she was about to leave. "You may be a chef, but you're still a man, so everyone tends to hold back from discussing this kind of thing around you, but most women like to talk about romance."

"Yeah, I noticed... *You* didn't seem all that interested in talking about it, though."

"I don't really...have the energy to get worked up over other people's romantic problems," Yun Sudra replied with a faint, pained smile before departing.

She hadn't said anything about how the marriage meetings between the Fou and Ran had gone, but since her clan and theirs had been holding banquets again and again to deepen their relationship, talks of marriage were sure to start coming together soon.

I guess romantic matters aren't always something to be happy about.

Anyway, other than that, things had remained more or less peaceful at the Fa house. Ai Fa made it home safely again today, having caught a small young giba. Since the end of the rainy season, she had been performing better than ever as a hunter.

On my end, I had worked hard to prepare a fine dinner for my clan head. Today's menu centered on myamuu giba, revised to use ginger-like keru root, and I had used a large amount of the rainy season vegetables that would soon vanish from the market.

"What do you think of onda, Ai Fa?" I asked my clan head as she ate.

"What do you mean?" she questioned with a tilt of her head.

"Well, reggi and traip are difficult to grow outside of the rainy season, but onda apparently just need some specialized techniques. It's an unusual kind of vegetable that can be grown in a shed."

"Hmm. But I don't recall ever seeing them outside of the rainy season."

"That's just because it's customary to sell them only during that part of the year. But Dora said he would keep growing more if he gets a certain number of orders for them." Onda was a kind of vegetable similar to bean sprouts. They were great in stir-fries and soups, so I wanted to be able to buy them regardless of the season. "If we continue to use them in the food we serve at the stalls, that would create a steady demand. I was thinking I'd

consult with everyone in the Ruu clan and the inn owners, and would start placing regular orders as long as no one has any objections."

"If that's what you think is best, then that sounds fine to me. What do you need my opinion for?"

"Well, I'm curious to know whether onda is a vegetable you enjoy eating."

"My favorite food is your cooking, Asuta," Ai Fa said, breaking into a smile. I hadn't been expecting her to do that, so it really got my attention. "Everything you made tonight is delicious. Even when tino and tarapa become available again, it's not like having onda would stop you from using them. Although, I might be a bit surprised if you were to add onda to hamburger steak."

"I've never even thought about using it like that."

"There are no issues, then," Ai Fa said with a look of satisfaction as she slurped some giba soup with lots of tau oil and onda in it.

It was a truly tranquil evening. The kind of carefree moment in time that was always so precious to us. But then, an untimely sound interrupted our peace. We had just finished dinner and were cleaning up when suddenly there was a wild knocking on the door.

Gilulu, who had been curled up by the entrance, looked up in surprise, while Ai Fa furrowed her brow suspiciously. She grabbed her sword as a precaution, then padded over to the door.

"What are you doing here so late at night? State your name."

"It's me, Geol Zaza from the Zaza clan."

Ai Fa silently opened the door, revealing the hunter's huge frame in the darkness of the night.

"Sorry for the abrupt visit, but I came here to discuss something with you two. I'd appreciate it if you'd let me in."

That was a pretty normal introduction, and he wasn't raging wildly like he had been two days ago, so after looking him up and down, Ai Fa went ahead and stepped aside.

Geol Zaza stepped inside onto the dirt floor along with the totos he had ridden in on. It was the one that had recently been purchased by the Zaza clan, which Lem Dom had ridden when she had come over yesterday. After spotting Gilulu, the totos promptly sat down beside him.

"Ah, you just finished dinner? That's fortunate."

After handing the sword on his hip to Ai Fa, Geol Zaza plopped down on the ground in our main hall. Ai Fa sat cross-legged directly across from him, while I was off to the side.

"Before you state your business, I would like to ask a question. Did the leading clan heads not have a meeting at the Ruu settlement tonight?" Ai Fa asked.

"Yeah, it should still be going on now."

"And yet, you came to visit the Fa house? Is the heir not supposed to protect the home when the clan head is away?"

"This is more important than a custom like that," Geol Zaza replied, remaining calm despite the blazing fire in his black eyes underneath his pelt hood. "And I intend to head to the Ruu settlement myself later. I'd like to arrive before the leading clan heads finish their meeting, so I'll keep this discussion as short as possible."

"Yes, we would appreciate that as well."

"Ai Fa of the Fa clan...what is your assessment of Leiriss's strength?"

Ai Fa's eyebrows raised suspiciously. "You faced him personally, so you should know better than anyone, shouldn't you?"

"I don't have that 'gaze of the weak' thing, so I'm bad at judging the strength of others. That's why I'm asking you." Then, with his eyes a blazing inferno, he leaned forward. "There's no need to mince words. How do you see it? Which one of us is stronger...me, or that noble?"

Ai Fa placed an arm atop her raised knee and stared straight back into Geol Zaza's black eyes. However, her mouth remained firmly shut, and soon Geol Zaza's shoulders started to tremble with impatience.

"Why won't you reply? I told you, there's no need to hold back."

"I'm not. I am simply looking for the proper words to say...and it's proving to be quite difficult."

"But why? You possess the gaze of the weak, don't you?"

"That is a tool to judge the difference in strength between myself and my opponent. It is not meant for comparing two others."

"But weren't you able to measure my strength with ease back on the night of the festival of the hunt?"

"The one who judged you was Cheem Sudra, not me. But

regardless, I find it difficult to compare Leiriss's strength to yours."

"Why, though? Tell me why!"

"Because we have already seen a different result than what I sense."

Though Geol Zaza was working himself up into a fierce rage, Ai Fa remained perfectly calm.

"I sense that you are stronger," she said. "However, Leiriss was the one who emerged victorious, which is why I say that I cannot accurately compare the strengths of others like that."

"If I'm stronger, then why did I lose to him?!"

"I cannot answer that question no matter how many times you ask. All I can say is that my senses tell me you are stronger."

Geol Zaza looked like he was about to shout again, but then he bit his lip and restrained himself. Instead, he stared at Ai Fa with a piercing gaze, searching for her true intentions.

"Ai Fa of the Fa clan, you said you were confident that you could beat me, did you not?"

"Correct."

"And yet, you believe me to be stronger than that noble?"

"Indeed."

"Which means...you could easily defeat that Leiriss noble?"

"Yes. However, the rules of the competition would be crucial," Ai Fa replied as she brushed aside her golden bangs. "If it were a contest of strength in the style of the forest's edge, you could bind one of my arms and I still wouldn't lose. A competition with swords may well be the same. But I could lose if the competition was held in the style of the matches you participated in for that tournament."

"How?"

"That should be obvious. With such heavy and restrictive armor on, I could not utilize my full strength. Even you and Shin Ruu were greatly hindered in your movements."

Geol Zaza placed his fists on the floor and leaned further forward.

"Yeah, that's exactly what I wanted to ask about. So even you would have trouble fighting with something like that on?"

"I would."

"Even though you insist that you're stronger than me?"

"I am a woman, and my body is far from large. If I were to wear such armor, it would sap my strength even more than it did

yours and Shin Ruu's. Leiriss, on the other hand, is accustomed to wearing such things, so it would work doubly in his favor."

Geol Zaza ground his teeth. "So then, it would always be difficult for me to beat that guy under those circumstances?"

"I cannot say. However, you have an excellent physique, so you should lose less strength than Shin Ruu or myself."

"Hmph! Yet Shin Ruu beat Leiriss and Melfried when I couldn't," Geol Zaza muttered in frustration, his shoulders trembling. "I don't know much about the strength of others, but I have to acknowledge the fact that Shin Ruu is more skilled than me."

"There is no need to lament that. After all, I believe Shin Ruu is older than you are."

"And you're confident that you're stronger than Shin Ruu. You possess similar strength to the Rutim clan head, though, so that's no surprise," Geol Zaza said, striking his own knee with his fist, seemingly unable to hold himself back. "I'm painfully aware of how inexperienced I am. But I don't want to cause my precious comrades and family any more trouble."

"Youngest son of the Zaza, what are you—"

"I want to challenge that noble to another match. Then I'll bring Sufira back to her senses," Geol Zaza declared, cutting Ai Fa off.

Ai Fa stirred slightly, her eyes narrowing. "Oh? Let me just ask, you aren't planning on simply marching into the castle town with no regard for the laws of the kingdom and the forest's edge, correct?"

"I'm expected to become a leading clan head one day, so there's obviously no way I could ever do something like that. No, I intend to talk to my old man and the others about putting in an official request."

"I see. Then I have no objection," Ai Fa said, the light in her eyes softening. "I might have told you this before, but Shin Ruu has grown as strong as he is through countless trials and tribulations. If you face your own trial head-on, the forest will surely grant you greater strength than you've ever had before."

"Hmph! Don't go talking like some wise elder, you annoying hunter woman!" Geol Zaza gruffly replied, rising to his feet. When he did, though, the expression on his rugged face looked ever so slightly relieved.

4

The days continued to pass on by unremarkably until the twelfth of the vermilion month arrived. It was five days after the night when Geol Zaza had visited the Fa house, and the competition he had proposed was set to be held today. After a number of meetings in both the settlement at the forest's edge and the castle town, Geol Zaza's proposal had ultimately been accepted. In short, he would demonstrate his strength as a hunter of the forest's edge, in the hopes of easing Sufira Zaza's aching heart at least slightly. Sufira Zaza's feelings for Leiriss had first taken root when he had beaten Geol Zaza, so Geol Zaza believed he could alleviate her feelings if he negated that loss.

Looking at it as an outsider, it didn't feel like there was all that much meaning in having another match, but ultimately, Donda Ruu, Dari Sauti, and the nobles of the castle town had accepted Geol Zaza's logic. In all likelihood, they had only agreed to it because regardless of how things played out, Sufira Zaza and Leiriss could never be wed. Even if Geol Zaza lost again, the situation wouldn't change in the least. Sufira Zaza had no intention of casting aside the forest's edge or her people, and the same went for Leiriss and his noble status, so this was basically just an attempt to settle the matter on an emotional level.

"It would've been best if we could have taken care of this without troubling the nobles, but if we can have a frank discussion with them about this, based on the premise that marriage would be impossible, that wouldn't be so bad," Dari Sauti had said at a meeting between the leading clan heads. "And if we inform them of what is happening, it should be no problem for us to learn how this Leiriss fellow actually feels. Then perhaps Sufira Zaza will be able to find the resolve to cast aside her feelings."

Ultimately, it was just an assumption on our part that Leiriss would never let go of his rank. It would undoubtedly be quite difficult for Sufira Zaza to bury her feelings without knowing that definitively. That was why Dari Sauti felt it was worthwhile to proceed with Geol Zaza's proposal, if only to resolve that issue.

Then, the day after that, a message was sent to the castle town early in the morning about the proposal...and we learned that our assumption had been correct.

“As expected, Leiriss would never be willing to marry into the forest’s edge, nor would such a thing be permitted.”

“However, the nobles *are* willing to agree to a match if it would help to ease Sufira Zaza’s feelings.”

That was the reply that had come from the folks in the castle town. With that, it became an unassailable fact that Sufira Zaza’s desires would never be realized. What had Sufira Zaza thought when she’d heard that news, and how had she reacted? Naturally, that particular piece of information had not been shared outside of her clan.

And then, the day of the match arrived. Melfried had decided that it should be held somewhere within the settlement at the forest’s edge rather than the castle town because he wanted to keep the matter as private as possible. Apparently, only a very small number of people in the castle town had been informed of it in the first place.

The Ruu settlement eventually ended up being the location chosen for the match, since the Zaza settlement was too far away from the castle town. The time was set for early in the morning, at the upper fourth hour, which I figured was the equivalent of nine a.m. That was out of consideration for the hunters’ schedule—if they finished up before the sun hit its peak, the match wouldn’t interfere with giba hunting.

I opted to take the day off from work in the post town so I could go to the Ruu settlement instead to observe. As the one who was always insisting that we needed to form proper bonds with outsiders, I felt like I needed to do at least that much. Ai Fa had no objections, and even decided to accompany me.

We arrived with time to spare, but there was already a large crowd in the plaza. The Zaza and Sauti had both sent as many people as their wagons could carry, and since the Zaza had bought a new totos recently, there were more than ten of them present. Among them, I recognized Geol, Sufira, and Gulaf Zaza; Deek and Lem Dom; and the Jeen clan head. The Sauti group also seemed to mostly be composed of the heads of their clans.

On top of that, a number of folks from the Ruu and their subordinate clans had also gathered. They included the six clan heads, Dan Rutim, Morun Rutim, Yamiru Lea, Tsuvai, Oura, and Shumiral, so there were quite a few familiar faces.

Most of the spectators were standing around the perimeter of the huge plaza, with the three leading clan heads in the center,

along with Geol and Sufira Zaza. As we had no blood ties to the leading clans, Ai Fa and I naturally waited off to the side for Leiriss's group to arrive.

"They sure are making us wait. I'm getting sort of sleepy, honestly," Dan Rutim remarked. He was standing next to us and seemed to be holding back a sigh. It looked like all of the members of the main Rutim house were present, aside from their elder, Raa Rutim. Since the Rutim had their own totos named Mim Cha, they were able to get around easily. They had also brought Tsuvai and Oura along instead of the heads of their branch houses, which was a very Rutim thing to do.

Gazraan Rutim looked as composed as usual, while Morun Rutim was wringing her hands nervously. It felt like she had been doing that a lot recently. *Actually, I think the first time I noticed her acting like this was when someone brought up Deek Dom during that one party.* If I recalled correctly, it had been at the banquet that Dora and the other townsfolk had been invited to, which had also been held here in this plaza. I hadn't understood why at the time, but after seeing it happen twice, even a thickheaded guy like me could figure out that Morun Rutim had special feelings for the head of the Dom clan.

Deek Dom himself was on the other side of the plaza—I was able to spot him by looking for the giba skull he wore on his head. If not for that and his height, I would have had a pretty hard time picking him out of the crowd.

"Yeah, I'm getting really sleepy now. Maybe I'll take a nap until the nobles arrive. Tsuvai, let me through," Dan Rutim said.

"You just can't stand still, can you?! If you're that tired, you should have stayed home!"

"And miss a show like this?! There aren't many folks in town who can compete with a hunter of the forest's edge!"

"Hmph! The Zaza are putting their pride on the line here, but to you it's nothing more than a spectacle!"

"Well, yeah. The Rutim and Zaza don't have any blood ties, and there's no chance that a marriage between a noble and one of us will be allowed, so all that's left to do is to enjoy the show," Dan Rutim said with a big grin. "But I suppose you and your mother must know Sufira Zaza well, don't you? Even if your blood ties have been severed, you can still worry about her as a friend."

"I was never friends with Sufira Zaza! In fact, I'd enjoy seeing her cry a bit!" Tsuvai declared loudly, but Sufira Zaza took no

notice. She simply kept standing where she was with the same chilly look as always on her face.

Since she was in the center of the plaza, I could see her quite well. Positioned between the huge frames of her father and brother, she was holding her head up high and facing her destiny directly, not letting any weakness show.

There were also members of the Deen and Liddo on the other side of the crowd. They had come here in Fafa's wagon, wanting to attend because the Zaza were their parent clan and this was a very serious matter for them. I was pretty sure Toor Deen was among them, and she would no doubt have been staring right at Sufira Zaza this whole time. After all, she was as close with Sufira Zaza as she was with Lem Dom.

Baadu Fou and the Beim clan head were in attendance too, standing beside Ai Fa and me. They had asked to observe so they could later convey what was about to happen to the small clans. There were probably more clans represented here today than I had ever seen gathered at the Ruu settlement before.

"This sure is quite the turnout. It's almost like a festival," Ludo Ruu called out as he strode over to us. "I wonder who'll win. What do you think, Ai Fa?"

"I do not know. Judging from their actual capabilities, I would assume Geol Zaza, but he tends to rely too much on his physical strength."

"Yeah. He's about as strong as Ji Maam, isn't he? He wouldn't make it to the top eight among the Ruu like that," Ludo Ruu said. Then he got a gleam in his eyes. "By the way, our festival of the hunt is coming up soon! The number of giba hasn't been dropping off as quickly as we expected, though, so there's been some talk of combining the festival of the hunt and Granny Jiba's birthday's celebration."

"I see. If it would be permitted, I would appreciate the opportunity to give her a celebratory flower."

"Oh come on, you have to participate in the contest of strength too. Everyone wants to compete with you."

"I am not related to your clan. I should not overstep my bounds," Ai Fa replied.

"Heh heh," Ludo Ruu snorted. "Are you worried that you'd make us lose face if you came out on top? I promise, it won't be that easy. Me, Jiza, Darmu, Shin Ruu, Rau Lea, Mida...we're all way stronger than before!"

“I’m well aware that all of you would be very hard for me to defeat. I would never dare to think otherwise.”

“Then there’s no problem. Ah, sounds like they’re finally here,” Ludo Ruu said.

A few seconds later, I also heard the sound of carriages approaching, and before long the buzz of conversation among the crowd started to quiet down.

A group of three carriages pulled by two totos each soon rolled into the plaza one after another. Each of them looked big enough to carry at least ten people, so it was quite an entourage.

The carriages eventually stopped several meters away from where the leading clan heads stood. The first ones to descend from inside were a group of soldiers clad in white armor. They all wore white cloaks and had long swords hanging from their hips, so I assumed they were from the ducal guards, who were under Melfried’s direct command.

Nearly thirty of them got out of the carriages and lined up before their masters finally emerged: Melfried, Polarth, and Leiriss. The first two were here to act as intermediaries with the people of the forest’s edge for this match.

“The totos and carriages will get in the way, will they not? Send them outside of the plaza, and have two men stand by with each of them.”

Following Melfried’s orders, six of the soldiers then left, taking the carriages along with them. Melfried watched them go for a moment, then stepped toward the leading clan heads. He was clad in beautiful armor today, with a tassel on his helmet that was fancier than anyone else’s.

“Preparations took longer than expected, so we ended up arriving later than the agreed upon time. Allow me to offer my apologies.”

“No, we’re the ones who made this an unreasonable request, so you have nothing to apologize for. We’re just grateful to you for coming all this way,” Dari Sauti replied, speaking as the representative for the three leading clan heads.

Melfried and the soldiers seemed unflappable, but Polarth looked quite nervous. He was the only one among the nobles who didn’t have combat training.

“S-Still, it’s quite a sight, seeing all these people of the forest’s edge gathered. There must be around a hundred here, correct?”

Polarth asked.

"We haven't counted, but that should be about right. None here will do you any harm, so please be at ease."

"I-I of course trust in our bond with your people."

Polarth was a man with more guts than you might assume at a glance, but it was no surprise that he felt on edge under the circumstances. Between the people who lived at the Ruu settlement, those with direct ties to the leading clans, and the handful of members of the small clans, there probably were around a hundred of us present. On top of that, over half of them were muscular hunters, which undoubtedly made this a very imposing scene.

"As we mentioned at the meeting the other day, we are terribly sorry to be imposing on our friends from the ruling class simply because it's a convenient way for us to resolve this situation," Dari Sauti continued. "I hope you understand that we aren't trying to make light of your stations."

"I am sure I said something similar when I imposed on you people of the forest's edge with my summons to the swordsmanship tournament. That was the cause of these events, so I do hold some responsibility for them," Melfried replied in a low yet clearly audible voice. "Besides, the madness of the first son of the house of Saturas and the former knight leader Geimalos have caused you all a great deal of trouble. In light of all that, the house of Saturas could hardly refuse your request."

"I'm grateful to hear you say so."

Apparently, that concluded the formal introductions.

"Well then, let us proceed right away. We have the armor and blades here." With that, two of the soldiers carried a large box over and set it down in front of Melfried. "We have prepared the same kinds that were used in the tournament. I would now like you to confirm that they have not been tampered with in any way."

This step was seen as essential because of the trickery Leiriss's father Geimalos had once employed. Dari Sauti and Gulaf Zaza stepped forward to inspect the contents of that box, and while they were doing that, I glanced over at Leiriss.

The young noble was already clad in armor—a silvery set that was rather different in design from what the soldiers were wearing. It was dueling armor, made of leather with metal plates on top. His face guard was still up, but I wasn't able to make out

his expression from this distance. However, he seemed to be looking in Geol and Sufira Zaza's direction with his eyes slightly downcast.

"There don't seem to be any issues. You don't have any objections either, do you, Gulaf Zaza?"

The Zaza clan head silently nodded. I wondered how he felt about all this, considering his own son and daughter had caused this whole commotion? I had no way of knowing.

"Very well. Go ahead and dress Geol Zaza in his armor. In the meantime, the rest of us will set up the arena."

Under Melfried's instructions, two of the soldiers began doing something a little unusual. One of them stood in the center of the plaza holding one end of a rope that looked to be about five meters long, while the other held the opposite end and walked around in a circle, drawing a shallow curved line in the dirt using a wooden stick. The circle ended up being around ten meters in diameter, and fifteen of the guards arranged themselves at even intervals around it.

"The match will be held within this circle, and anyone who steps outside of it will automatically lose. All other rules are the same as during the tournament," Melfried explained. "Is that acceptable?"

As a soldier helped him put his armor on, Geol Zaza replied in a low voice, "Yeah."

"As it has been some time, allow me to remind everyone of the rest of the rules. The match shall be concluded when the judge determines that the life of any participant is in danger or when one side admits defeat. No equipment may be replaced once the match begins, even in the event of a sword breaking, and bare-handed attacks are considered valid. Is all of that understood?"

"Yeah."

"Well then, leading clan heads, will you please exit the circle? I shall serve as the judge."

The three leading clan heads, Sufira Zaza, and Polarth (who was surrounded by soldiers acting as his personal bodyguards) stepped out of the circle. The only ones left behind were Geol Zaza and Leiriss, each clad in armor, and Melfried.

"Both of you, swear your oaths to the western god."

"I, Leiriss of the house of Saturas, swear to Selva to fight honorably."

“And I, Geol Zaza, son of the leading clan head of the forest’s edge Gulaf Zaza, swear to the western god and the mother forest to fight in a way that shall bring no shame to the hunters of our people.”

The two drew their long swords simultaneously. They were rather slender blades without sharp edges, meaning they had been made specifically for competitions like this one.

Melfried raised his right arm into the air and sharply called out, “Begin!”

The crowd didn’t make so much as a sound. Around a hundred people all around the plaza just watched in silence, barely moving except to breathe. And in the middle of it all, the two warriors shuffled their feet without moving closer to each other. Leiriss held the hilt of his sword with both hands, pointing the tip toward his opponent. Geol Zaza, meanwhile, held his blade with one hand in a relaxed stance and glared at his opponent.

Despite how reckless Geol Zaza could be, he didn’t instantly rush in and start slashing. He must have been wary of how nimble Leiriss was. In their previous fight, Leiriss had primarily made use of thrusts. His style focused on quick jabbing motions that reminded me of fencing, as opposed to kendo.

Naturally, since the swords lacked cutting blades, they wouldn’t pierce through armor, but even so, they were still long pieces of steel, and the armor the two combatants were wearing was little more than thin metal over leather, so a single blow in the wrong place could knock someone unconscious.

“Last time, the two of them were both completely exhausted,” Ludo Ruu whispered, barely disturbing the weighty silence hanging in the air. “They’re both coming into this fight fresh today, but which side will that benefit more?”

Neither side made a move for a while. All they did was steadily circle around each other while maintaining their distance. It was a psychological fight, and just watching was making me feel a knot in my stomach.

Then, suddenly, the silence was broken. Leiriss lunged forward with his sword. Geol Zaza leaped backward with beastlike agility, and as he did so he raised the sword in his right hand. In all likelihood, he was trying to deflect Leiriss’s thrust. However, the young noble swiftly pulled his blade back, preventing any collision from happening.

Leiriss moved quickly to fill the gap created by Geol Zaza's leap, and as he did, Geol Zaza swung his blade in a huge motion from left to right, carving an arc perfectly sideways through the air.

The young noble pulled back, before almost immediately moving in again, but by the time that he did, Geol Zaza's arm had returned to its original position. After stumbling forward one more step, Leiriss retreated once more, guarding against a follow-up attack.

Both of them were deadly serious and extremely cautious, no doubt because they were fully aware of how strong their opponent was.

The sun was mercilessly shining down upon the pair. It was as hot as early summer, so it had to be incredibly exhausting just to wear that armor.

And with a helmet on, you can't even wipe away your sweat. If this match stretches on, will Geol Zaza be at a disadvantage? I thought.

As if in response, Geol Zaza once again made a move. This time he raised his blade and slashed at Leiriss diagonally.

Leiriss dodged the attack, then adjusted his grip on his blade and thrust with it. Geol Zaza twisted his huge frame to dodge, then swung his sword once more, this time upward from below.

His form was seriously rough, but it had the strength of a hunter of the forest's edge behind it. A single blow like that would surely be enough to settle the match on its own if it landed. However, the young noble avoided it with skillful footwork and launched a counterattack, grazing Geol Zaza's armor with the tip of his blade.

The Zaza hunter undoubtedly had an overwhelming advantage in terms of physical strength and reflexes. Honestly, the physical capabilities of pretty much every hunter of the forest's edge were beyond exceptional. However, this was still turning out to be an even match. The greatest reason for that was the level of swordsmanship of both sides. Like Ai Fa and Raielfam Sudra had once said, hunters honed their techniques to take down giba. Leiriss had refined his swordsmanship skills for fighting human opponents.

Put bluntly, Geol Zaza's movements were all huge. Because of his pride in his strength, he relied on it quite a bit, and that was necessary for fighting giba, which were even larger and more monstrously strong than he was. To take down a giba, you

needed to swing a blade with your whole body, meaning huge swings that utilized your body's full momentum were the norm. I had never seen an actual giba hunt myself, but even for me, it was easy to understand that much.

On the other hand, Leiriss specialized in speed and primarily used thrusts. A fighting style like that would never work against giba, so Geol Zaza had next to no familiarity with such techniques.

The bottom line was, Geol Zaza's movements were big, while Leiriss's were as small as possible as he probed for an opening. The difference in their styles undoubtedly worked out in Leiriss's favor, which was why the fight was so even despite Geol Zaza's strength advantage.

On top of that, Geol Zaza had a handicap, as he wasn't used to wearing armor. It stopped him from moving his body as nimbly as he normally could, and the visor hindered his vision. Hunters of the forest's edge relied on smell, hearing, and various sensations on their skin in order to hunt giba, so even if the weight of the armor itself was no issue, Geol Zaza's true strength was doubtlessly being hindered in a number of ways.

"What are you doing, Geol Zaza?!" someone suddenly called out. It was such an intense shout that it made two men visibly shudder and stop their fierce battle for a moment, backing off from one another as if by reflex. "You think you can ease your family's anguish like that? Show us a battle that won't cast any shame on your role as the next leading clan head and a hunter of the forest's edge!"

After the reverberations from that roaring command died off, there was an explosion of supportive yells. The people of the forest's edge who had been watching with bated breath all began cheering for Geol Zaza. The members of the ducal guards who seemed like distinguished veterans ducked their heads and started glancing around, and poor Polarth was cradling his head and looked ready to collapse on the spot.

The people of the forest's edge were so full of vim and vigor, it was sometimes hard to believe. It only took a few moments for the Ruu plaza to erupt with feverish excitement. If there were any giba prowling about the area after waking up early, they must have been fleeing in a panic after that.

"Was that voice just now Deek Dom? I didn't think he could shout out that loudly," Ludo Ruu whispered to me.

I had no way of knowing. However, Geol Zaza and Leiriss were both being spurred on by the boisterous cheering and started swinging their swords once again.

Geol Zaza launched a fierce attack like a raging storm, with Leiriss barely dodging each swing while constantly thrusting his sword at his opponent's chest and legs.

Leiriss's swordsmanship really was something, but if his offensive were ever to slacken, he would probably get caught up in Geol Zaza's assault in an instant. He was somehow managing to hold on by counterattacking and forcing Geol Zaza to shift his posture to dodge. However, before long, there was a shift in their movements. Geol Zaza was picking up the pace, while Leiriss's footwork seemed to be growing sloppier. He was also dealing with the weight of the armor he was wearing, and even if he was accustomed to doing so, that wouldn't save him from the fatigue it caused.

Bit by bit, Leiriss's movements became larger and rougher. It wouldn't be surprising at all if his blade were to be knocked away at any moment, followed immediately by him taking a powerful hit from his opponent.

But just as I was growing certain of Geol Zaza's victory...Leiriss took a big leap backward. Geol Zaza's sword had been an instant away from clashing with the young noble's, so the hunter ended up stumbling a bit before catching himself. Seizing that tiny opening, Leiriss tightly gripped his blade's hilt and kicked off the ground with incredible force.

It was the sharpest movement he had shown yet. He removed his left hand from his blade after having been holding it two-handed this whole time, then turned his body almost perfectly sideways as he thrust his sword straight out. Despite the significant amount of distance between them, it was clear that his attack had more than enough reach to hit his opponent.

Geol Zaza finally regained his footing without a single moment to spare as Leiriss's blade hurtled toward his solar plexus. The Zaza hunter let out a beastly howl, twisting his body with tremendous force, and as he contorted himself, his blade—which had been pointing down toward his feet—swung up.

A harsh clang rang out and something gray and shiny—a blade—flew through the air, plunging into the ground at the feet of one of the soldiers guarding the edge of the arena. Which is to say, Leiriss had lost his sword.

Geol Zaza's weapon was now pointing directly at the noble's chest. Slowly, Leiriss lifted both hands. He might have said, "I surrender," but if he did, it was drowned out by the cheering of the people of the forest's edge.

"The match is over! The hunter of the forest's edge, Geol Zaza, is victorious!" I faintly heard Melfried announce amid all the shouting.

Geol Zaza's shoulders were heaving heavily up and down, and a moment later he tossed his sword aside and had a seat on the ground. Leiriss soon fell to one knee as well. The two combatants stayed like that for what seemed like around two or three minutes, completely drained of energy.

With a signal from Melfried, the soldiers hurried over to Geol Zaza and began removing his armor. The three leading clan heads and Sufira Zaza started walking toward the center of the arena at the same time.

"That was a splendid fight. Geol Zaza and Leiriss, both of you are excellent warriors," Dari Sauti loudly declared. With that, the cheering all around us finally started to quiet. "And I'm truly glad that you were able to finish this match without shedding a single drop of blood. You did extremely well, Geol Zaza."

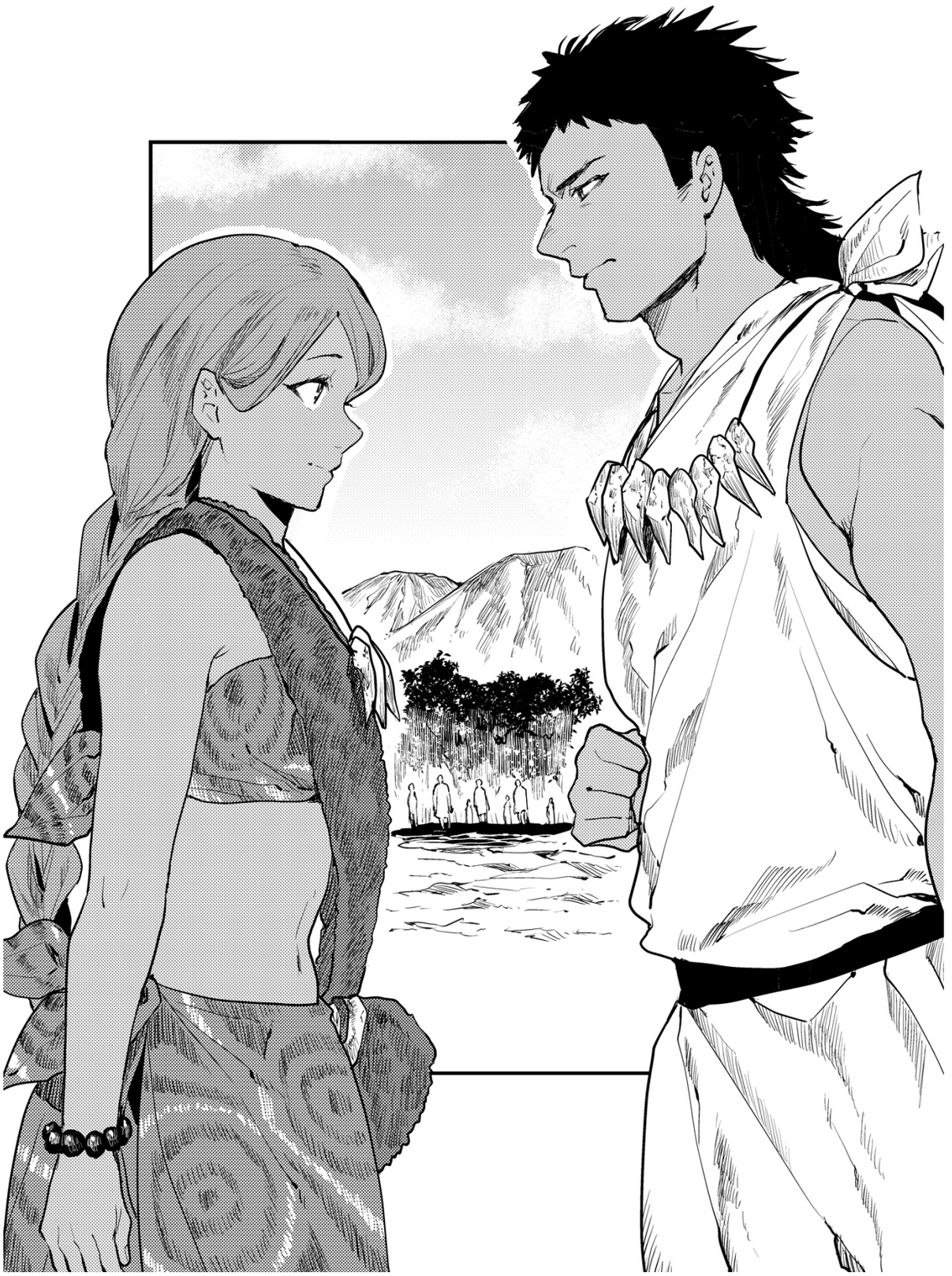
As the soldiers speedily pulled the armor off him, Geol Zaza snorted, "Hmph. Even so, this match dragged on way too long. It might have ended up doing nothing but proving how inexperienced I am and how skilled this guy is."

"You don't have to worry about that, I promise," Sufira Zaza chimed in, speaking up for the first time. With that, the few people still cheering finally went silent. "You showed even more strength today than you did at our last festival. As a warrior, you do the Zaza clan proud. I'm sure our father feels the same way."

Gulaf Zaza just silently stared down at his children. Because of the giba pelt he wore, I couldn't make out his expression.

"And I am truly, deeply grateful to you for fighting so hard to make up for my shortcomings. Thank you," she finished.

"Cut it out. Hearing you say stuff like that makes my back feel itchy." Geol Zaza scratched his head with one of his hands which had just been freed from its gauntlet. He looked surprisingly young without his hunter's cloak on.



After giving her younger brother a gentle nod, Sufira Zaza turned to face Leiriss. The noble had removed his helmet and was still breathing heavily. He was a young man of seventeen years old, with a face that really fit my image of a noble. He stood up and turned toward Sufira Zaza.

“Leiriss of the house of Saturas…I let my emotions get out of control and caused you a great deal of trouble. As a member of the leading Zaza clan, I am terribly embarrassed. I hope…that you will be willing to continue forming proper bonds with our people in the future,” Sufira Zaza said with a deep bow.

Leiriss’s eyes rose to stare up at the sky for a moment. He took a deep breath, and then lowered his gaze to look at her once again. “Please raise your head, Sufira Zaza. My father once committed an unforgivable act against your people. Coming here today was the least I could do in return.”

Sufira Zaza did indeed raise her head and silently stared back at Leiriss. The young noble’s dark-brown hair was stuck to his forehead with sweat, and he had a faint, gentle smile on his face.

“And, well…I hesitate to say this in front of such a crowd…but I cannot imagine anyone considering a woman such as you having feelings for them to be a hardship.”

“That ends today. I shall never again set foot in the castle town. I hope that you will be able to simply forget me forever,” Sufira Zaza declared, her expression not budging in the slightest.

Leiriss looked pained as he cast his gaze downward. “That may prove rather difficult. But I suppose I have no other choice. Neither of us are able to cast aside our house or our status, after all.”

“Yes, it is as you say.”

“I am proud to have been born into the house of Saturas. My father committed a crime unbefitting of that name, but even so…I wish to live a righteous life in order to atone for his sins.”

“And I’m certain you will someday.”

“You think so? I had to work up a lot of resolve before I could decide to follow this path.”

Sufira Zaza tilted her head a bit, questioningly.

Still with that small smile on his face, Leiriss raised his lowered eyes. “Why am I not able to live more freely? That thought has been tormenting me constantly for the last two months.”

“What do you…?”

“Just like you, I have lamented my lack of freedom. Because I met you.”

Sufira Zaza staggered. Leiriss started to reach out a hand to support her, but then he stopped himself and clenched his fist.

“However, I have decided that my destiny is to protect my house. After what became of my father, I must act as the head of the house and protect my remaining family members. That is why I cannot marry into the forest’s edge, nor would I be permitted to take a wife who is not a noble. No matter how strong my feelings for that woman may be.”

“Leiriss, you mean…”

“But now I know you have felt the same pain…and that, I think, will be my heart’s salvation. I wish to keep this joy and sorrow with me as I move forward with my life.”

Sufira Zaza was no longer able to hold back the tears that were now pouring down her cheeks. “Th-That’s… Leiriss, you know that lying is a crime, don’t you?”

“Yes. I’ve only spoken the truth.”

“But how could a noble ever fall for a woman of the forest’s edge…? It’s ridiculous…”

“You don’t believe my words?” Leiriss asked, his smile turning terribly sad. “Sufira Zaza, even if I can do nothing to change our fates, I do not want you to think my words are lies. I am not being frivolous like my cousin Leeheim was. I truly…truly would want to take you as my bride, if only it were permitted.”

Sufira Zaza continued to sob silently. Leiriss shook his head as if to drive some thought away before getting down on one knee and looking up at Sufira Zaza’s face from below.

“Please, just this once…allow me to speak free from all logic and restraint.”

“Leiriss…”

“Sufira Zaza, could I ask you to cast aside your status as a woman of the forest’s edge and become my bride?” Leiriss said, holding out a hand now freed of its gauntlet toward Sufira Zaza. Her tears were now dripping down onto his outstretched palm.

“No… That is the one thing I cannot do… I cannot abandon my family, my home, and my people…”

“I see…” Leiriss replied, closing his hand around her fallen tears. He rose to his feet, but as he did, Sufira Zaza began speaking.

“Leiriss, allow me to ask you as well… Won’t you please cast

aside your rank and live as my husband, as a person of the forest's edge...?"

"No... That is also the one request I cannot fulfill," Leiriss said, staring at her with an open smile.

As she stared back at him, Sufira Zaza also smiled for the first time. "Well then...this is it."

"Yes, it seems so." Leiriss just kept on smiling, clenching his fist as if trying to steel himself. "When my life comes to an end, my soul will return to Selva. After that, I shall be invited to live in the heavenly realm or otherwise be born again into this world. Whatever my fate may be, I hope that I can spend my next life by your side, Sufira Zaza."

Sufira Zaza continued to stare at Leiriss, tears still streaming from her eyes. Then, Geol Zaza walked up beside her with an angry look on his face. However, Leiriss simply glanced at him with an unchanging expression.

"Geol Zaza, thanks to you, I am now confident that the path I have chosen is the correct one. I am not a fitting partner for Sufira Zaza. I hope that you will continue to watch over her as she searches for happiness in life."

"I don't need you to tell me that." Wrapping an arm around his older sister's head, Geol Zaza pulled her into his burly chest, and Sufira Zaza hugged her brother tightly in return as she kept on sobbing. "Still, I'm grateful to you. I'll be praying for you to live a happy life too."

"You have my thanks. Farewell," Leiriss declared with an elegant bow before turning away from the Zaza siblings and departing. As he left, the people of the forest's edge who were gathered in the plaza continued to watch over the embracing pair in silence.

And that was how a love shared between the forest's edge and the castle town ended before it could even begin. However, this was just the prelude to yet another incident that would soon bring about a significant change for our tribe.

Chapter 2: For the Sake of a Far-Off Tomorrow

1

It was now the thirteenth of the vermilion month, the day after the match between Geol Zaza and Leiriss. The morning started like normal, with us heading to the post town to open our stalls, but when we stopped by the Ruu settlement along the way like we always did, we were surprised to find a bit of a commotion waiting for us there.

I drove the wagon into the plaza, wondering what exactly was going on. It looked to me like all the old folks and women from the branch houses had gathered together outside and were talking about something with one another. Some were drying pico leaves or tanning hides at the same time, but all were engaged in the conversation.

“What’s going on here? Is this about what happened yesterday?” I called out while tugging on Gilulu’s reins.

Yun Sudra, who was holding Fafa’s reins, tilted her head and replied, “I’m not sure.”

The news about the outcome of the previous day’s events had already made it around to the entire forest through the information network. I could easily imagine the stir it must’ve caused in the other clans, but it would be surprising to me if the members of the Ruu clan were still this animated about it, considering they had witnessed the event personally.

At any rate, once we made it over to the front of the main house, we noticed something else that was a bit out of sorts there. Specifically, there were two wagons waiting outside the house, even though the Fa were supposed to be the ones bringing two wagons today.

Had the members of the Ruu clan gotten the schedule confused due to the unexpected day off yesterday? I pondered that matter as I approached the house, only for someone truly unexpected to appear from the shadow of the wagons.

“Good morning, Asuta.”

“Hey, Shumiral! What in the world brings you here today?”

“Well, you see, yesterday afternoon, we received a report, from the castle town. The hunting dogs, from Jagar, have been delivered,” Shumiral replied while pulling back his leather hood.

“Oh, the hunting dogs?! That’s pretty quick. It hasn’t even been ten days since the end of the rainy season.”

“Yes. It takes, half a month, to a full month, to travel from, Jagar to Genos, so they must have left, ahead of time, aiming roughly for the end, of the rainy season.”

“Yeah, I’m sure you’re right. So you’ll be heading to town to evaluate them as planned, then?”

“Yes. I am the only one, who can assess the quality, of hunting dogs.”

Shumiral had previously bought six hunting dogs in the capital of Selva. He’d had a bit of difficulty convincing the merchant from Jagar who imported them to do business with him until he had converted to the western god. That had shocked and impressed the merchant so profoundly that he had quickly changed his tune and kindly offered Shumiral all kinds of advice about dogs to boot.

There were apparently ranks assigned to hunting dogs that indicated how thoroughly trained they were. The ones Shumiral had bought in the capital were of the top rank, and Donda Ruu had asked for more of the same for the people of the forest’s edge to buy, so it was important to have someone who could assess them, hence why Shumiral had been asked to determine the quality of the hunting dogs when they arrived.

“Still, that’s pretty rough, having to travel all the way over to the castle town. You’ll still have to go out and hunt later, after all.”

“Yes. But this is the first time, hunting dog merchants, have visited Genos, so they likely, will not want, to eat giba cooking, and will have, an aversion to, the people of the forest’s edge. They would surely, prefer to avoid coming, to the settlement.”

Well, there was nothing to be done about that. After all, many folks from Jagar still saw the people of the forest’s edge as traitors, so merchants who were visiting Genos for the first time wouldn’t know which areas were safe or who could be trusted, and would definitely be hesitant to do business with our people.

“Take care, okay? But I guess you’ve visited the castle town plenty of times in the past, so I’ve got nothing to worry about.”

“Right. It will not, be an issue,” Shumiral replied, and then he tilted his head a bit. “Asuta, have you been, looking forward to,

the hunting dogs?”

“Huh? Yeah, of course! I’ve been thinking for a while that I would love for my clan head to have one. Why do you ask, though?”

“You just had, such a happy look, on your face.”

“Ah,” I replied with a nod, smiling even wider. “Well, yeah, I’m definitely glad that the hunting dogs have arrived, but right now, I’m mostly happy because I’m getting to talk to you, Shumiral, so I kinda started smiling without even noticing it.”

“But we met, yesterday as well.”

“Yeah. I feel lucky to have been able to see you two days in a row.”

To that, Shumiral gave a bashful smile. “Thank you. I am happy, to see you, as well, Asuta. We did not get, to talk much yesterday, after all.”

“True. Still, that’s no surprise, considering what was going on.”

The two of us continued to smile at each other. However, I then noticed someone peeking at us from inside the covered wagon.

“I see you two are getting along as smoothly as always.”



“H-Huh? Vina Ruu? What are you doing there?”

“What do you mean? We’re just getting ready to go to work.” Vina Ruu said, with the sides of her plump lips turning down. Then she huffed and looked away from us. However, her younger sister then popped up beside her.

“Hey, Asuta! Good luck with your work too!”

“Oh, you were in there too, Rimee Ruu? What work are you going to be doing?”

“Vina and I are heading to the castle town with Shumiral! The nobles of Genos want to feed the dog merchants something with giba in it!”

I was surprised to hear that, so I asked her for details and learned that the proposal had come from Polarth. He had come up with the idea because he thought it best to clear up any misconceptions or prejudices now, if we wanted the merchants to keep selling hunting dogs to the people of the forest’s edge.

“If it’s nobles offering it, the merchants won’t be able to turn down the food! And they asked us to man the stove!” Rimee Ruu continued.

“That’s a really big job, then. What sort of food are you planning on making?”

“We don’t have much time, so we made traip cream stew and chatchi mochi at home! We’ll be grilling some meat and baking poitan once we get there too!”

It was a very sudden proposal, and since Reina Ruu, Sheera Ruu, and I were all going to be busy in the post town today, that was how the job ended up falling into the laps of Vina and Rimee Ruu. Bartha and Ryada Ruu would be going as well to guard them, which was pretty much the standard way of doing things at this point.

At any rate, I thought it was pretty fortunate that Vina Ruu had ended up getting tasked with this. She was currently still sulking in the wagon and stealing glances at us here and there. Perhaps she was thinking it was unfair that Shumiral was only talking to me, but she was the one shyly keeping her distance from him in the wagon. I sighed mentally at how complex the heart of a young woman could be, then turned back toward Shumiral.

“Anyway, there sure are a lot of people out in the plaza today. Are they really *that* excited about the hunting dogs?” I asked.

“No, that is because of, a different matter. Yesterday, I

borrowed Jidura and a wagon, to come here, with several members of the Rutim, joining me along the way."

"Huh. Morun Rutim and Tsuvai are supposed to be working in the post town today. Is something else going on with them?"

"Yes. Morun Rutim, Tsuvai, Gazraan Rutim, Dan Rutim, and Oura rode along. Oura will be taking, Morun Rutim's place," Shumiral said.

"They're switching their workers? Then what's Morun Rutim... Actually, what did Gazraan and Dan Rutim come for?"

"They're meeting with Papa Donda in the house. And from the sound of it, the topic of discussion is a pretty problematic one," Vina Ruu said, looking away sulkily and heaving a pained sigh.

I tilted my head, but then Rimee Ruu chimed in too.

"You see, Morun Rutim says she wants to marry into the Dom clan! Isn't that something else?! I was really surprised!"

Naturally, I was quite shocked too. In fact, this was as astonishing to me as Sufira Zaza's feelings toward Leiriss had been.

"Apparently, Morun Rutim has had feelings for the head of the Dom clan for some time," Reina Ruu explained on our way to the post town. She was riding in our wagon in order to provide me with an explanation, with Lala Ruu doing the same thing over in Fafa's wagon. "Back during our conflict with that noble, Cyclaeus, the Dom clan head visited the Ruu settlement several times. Not as frequently as the Zaza clan head, but often enough that I remember him very clearly too. That man stands out quite a bit. And Morun Rutim fell for him at first sight. That's why she volunteered to go when we were loaning women to the northern settlement."

She was referring to the time when some of the Ruu's women had stayed at the northern settlement in order to provide cooking lessons. In exchange, Sufira Zaza and Mei Jeen Zaza had come to stay at the Ruu settlement for a while too. That had been around the same time we had been planning our short trip to Dabagg around the end of the indigo month, over five months ago. "This goes without saying, but it's pretty hard to imagine a marriage between the Rutim and the Dom actually happening. After all, the Rutim fall under the Ruu while the Dom are under the Zaza."

"Right. They both fall under leading clans, and the two biggest

clans at the forest's edge at that. I definitely get how wild of an idea it is."

"Yes. That's why Morun Rutim didn't open up about her feelings, even as they kept growing stronger. She felt that it would never be permitted, and nobody would be happy to hear about her attraction to him."

"Yeah. She must have felt the same way as Sufira Zaza."

Morun Rutim was probably finding it a lot harder for her to give up on her love than Sufira Zaza had. While Morun Rutim had been suppressing her feelings for much longer, falling for a noble had obviously been a lot more problematic compared to falling for another person of the forest's edge.

"But when she saw Sufira Zaza and Leiriss yesterday, Morun Rutim changed her mind. She now thinks it would be wrong to give up without ever telling him how she feels. That's how she explained herself to her family yesterday."

"I see. So that's why the clan head Gazraan Rutim and Dan Rutim are visiting Donda Ruu this morning. How did the two of them seem?"

"Well…it seems Dan Rutim wants to grant Morun Rutim's wish."

I couldn't look over at Reina Ruu's face since I was driving Gilulu's wagon, but it was easy to picture how troubled she must have been. After all, it was only natural to find this troubling as a member of the main Ruu house. In fact, according to the traditional values of the forest's edge, the best thing for Morun Rutim to have done would have been to cast aside her feelings without ever opening up about them.

"But the current clan head is Gazraan Rutim, right? What's his opinion on all this?"

"I don't know, but he seemed to have a lot to say to my father about the future of our people and the leading clans."

"Hmm. I see."

The more I heard, the more complicated this whole situation sounded. Forming blood ties was a huge deal at the forest's edge. It meant having to treat all of your new relatives the same as your own family, which became more and more difficult the larger the clans in question were.

Currently, the Fou and Sudra were trying to establish blood ties between themselves. The Fou had a total of thirty-three people under them when their subordinates, the Ran, were

included. The Sudra lacked any branch houses or subordinates, so they only had nine members. With numbers like that, it wouldn't be all that difficult for everyone on both sides to interact. However, the Ruu had over a hundred relatives, and the Zaza had around that many as well. Furthermore, the clans were located quite far apart, so it would be nearly impossible for everyone to get to know one another. Truth be told, just looking at how things currently stood, the Deen and Liddo clans were located far enough away from their parent clan, the Zaza, that it was difficult for them to find opportunities to deepen their bonds, and they were currently searching for a convenient opportunity to do so.

On top of that, the Ruu and Zaza were both leading clans. If they established blood ties, that would be a serious deviation from the foundational principle Donda Ruu had laid down that the forest's edge should be governed from many different points of view.

Besides, if they joined together, even deciding which one would be the parent clan was guaranteed to be a huge issue. Since Donda Ruu and Gulaf Zaza were both in charge of so many people already, neither could step aside easily.

And then there was the fact that there were only somewhere around five or six hundred people of the forest's edge in total. If the Ruu and Zaza joined together, they would create a massive clan group with over two hundred members.

This actually is a big deal. I wonder how Donda Ruu and Gazraan Rutim are going to handle it.

While I was agonizing over that thought, we soon arrived at the post town. I brought the wagon to a stop, and Reina Ruu hopped down to the ground and smiled at me.

"At least for now, there's nothing for us to do. We just have to focus on our own work."

"Yeah, I guess that's true," I conceded.

Reina Ruu gave a bow, then headed over to Ruuruu's wagon.

From there, we split up into separate groups, one to pick up the stalls and another to deliver food to the inns. Shumiral parted ways with us at the same time, taking Jidura's wagon and heading straight to the castle town.

I started walking down the main road through the post town, with Toor Deen and Lili Ravitz riding in the wagon. Today, I was tasked with transporting goods to The Great Southern Tree and

The Westerly Wind. Our first stop was The Great Southern Tree, since it was closer.

“Thank you for coming by, Asuta. I’ve been eagerly waiting for you,” Naudis greeted us with a smile on his bearded face—one that was probably even wider than usual because today was the day for cubed giba meat stew. This dish was a special that I had agreed to provide on the first day after a day off, but I’d had to speed up the rotation by a few days due to the sudden break yesterday.

“Well then, here’s the cubed giba meat stew, and here’s the fresh meat.”

“Ah, yes. I’ll put it away now, just give me a moment, if you would please.”

He then transferred the stew into a series of pots in the kitchen, and the meat into jars filled with salt. I lent him a hand as well and took the opportunity to speak to him about a different matter.

“By the way, have you made a decision about continuing to use onda yet? I’d like to finalize an order soon.”

“Ah, yes. I discussed it with my wife, and we would have no problem buying three white coins’ worth on a daily basis.”

“I see. That’s great to hear. It sounds like you’ll be ordering the most out of all the inns I’ve got connections with.”

“Well, onda is an ingredient that originally came from Jagar, after all. Many of our customers from the south enjoy it, so we’re very grateful for the opportunity to keep serving onda even after the rainy season has ended.”

It seemed like I would be able to set up a reasonably stable contract for a regular order with Dora. That would allow me to expand my range of dishes, and Dora would earn greater profits, making for a real win-win.

“If we were to raise the question at a meeting, I’m sure a fair number of other inns would want to keep using onda too. You *are* planning to participate in the next inn meeting, aren’t you, Asuta?”

“Ah, yes. I kept deferring it during the rainy season, but I’d like to take part in the next one for sure.”

“I see. Well, the next meeting is actually set to be held here at The Great Southern Tree. Would you mind manning the stove for it?”

“Huh? You want to serve my cooking to a gathering of inn

owners?”

“That’s right. If you want to sell even more giba meat, this is a perfect opportunity.”

I was naturally quite grateful to him for suggesting that.

Having put away the giba meat, Naudis shook the salt off his hands and looked at me with upturned eyes, saying, “By the way…you just want to sell giba meat now, correct? You don’t intend to offer your cooking at any more inns?”

“That’s right. The main reason I’ve been selling you my cooking is to show people how delicious giba meat can be, so I don’t think there’s any need to expand further on that front.”

I was only offering my cooking to The Great Southern Tree, The Sledgehammer, and The Kimyuus’s Tail. The Westerly Wind had only ever bought raw giba meat from us, and they had managed to achieve plenty of success cooking it on their own, which I hoped would serve as the model moving forward.

“I’m glad to hear that. I was worried about you taking on too much work…and of course, it’s beneficial to us in terms of our business as well.”

“I won’t forget the debt I owe you as the first one to buy my cooking, Naudis.”

It was kind of embarrassing, but my cooking was earning a pretty solid reputation among the inns for being able to satisfy even nobles from the castle town. Still, while I didn’t want to hold back on offering my skills, I also wanted to be careful not to take on too much of a burden in terms of work.

“Well then, I look forward to seeing you again for the next five days.”

“Right, and I hope you do good business again today.”

Next up was The Westerly Wind. I was only delivering fresh meat there, but even though they didn’t purchase my cooking, the amount of meat that they bought was about the same as what was in our deliveries to The Great Southern Tree. The inn was in a slum located down a short little side path off the main road. It was far enough out of the way to drastically decrease the flow of traffic. However, the large number of outlaws who lived in the area tended to sleep at least until after the sun hit its peak, so you could walk around the area without bodyguards in the morning.

“Oh, you’re on delivery duty today, Asuta? Thanks!” Yumi greeted me with a smile.

We delivered three days' worth of meat to the inn at a time, and it wasn't like the task always fell to me, so I probably only came to this area once every ten days. I frequently saw Yumi at the stalls, but occasions like this one were my only opportunities to strengthen my connection with the owners, Sams and Sill. I glanced around, searching for them, but Yumi—who was standing behind the reception desk that looked like a bar counter from a Western—was the only person around.

"You're manning the shop alone today, Yumi?"

"Yeah. My dad's out back chopping firewood, and my mom's purchasing ingredients. There was a bit of a fight this morning, so she was late heading out."

"Fighting? Were some outlaws going at it?"

"Nah, they're all snoring up on the second floor in their rooms. This was something else entirely," Yumi said, sticking out her tongue in a mischievous manner. "Well, I guess I can tell you, Asuta. You see, my dad's been hounding me to find a husband. I'm seventeen now, so he's being a real nag about it."

Learning that there were even more arguments about marriage happening over here in town was giving me some complicated feelings. But, well, Yumi herself was smiling nonchalantly about it.

"Like I said before, I want to marry into the forest's edge, but I can't exactly come out and say that to my folks, you know? Having to keep dodging the topic has been a real hassle, though."

"I see. Sounds rough."

"Ugh, but I haven't had any chance to spend time with men from the forest's edge lately. I wonder when I'll be able to head there next."

"I'm not sure. Did you have less work to do around the inns during the rainy season? Dora and his people were so busy that we didn't think there would be any point in bringing that kind of thing up with them."

"Yeah, and it's hard to stop by without any sort of pretext. Last time around, I was sort of able to jump on the bandwagon with the excitement from the revival festival. But I can't just wait for the next one of those to come around," Yumi complained. But then she suddenly clapped her hands together. "Now that I think about it, aren't the Ruu going to have a festival soon? You don't suppose I could get an invite to that, do you?"

“Well, festivals of the hunt are meant for relatives. I’ve been invited to the Ruu festival of the hunt before despite not having blood ties, but that was a special case.”

“I see. That’s a shame.”

I still didn’t know what stance I should have on this. I knew how hard it was for an outsider to marry into the forest’s edge thanks to Shumiral, so it was hard for me to offer her my support without having some major reservations.

In fact, I didn’t even know how serious Yumi was to begin with. If it just came down to a bit of vague admiration, it would probably be best for her to give up before she wasted too much effort. But on the other hand, Yumi had once hated the people of the forest’s edge, so it felt like quite the accomplishment for her to have come this far.

“Well, whatever! Even if I can’t come to the festival, I’ll try asking the folks from the Ruu clan if I can stop by in the near future! Telia Mas and Tara have been wanting to visit too!”

“Yeah. I’ll be praying for you to be allowed to.”

With that, I left The Westerly Wind. Not long after, as we were heading to the spot where we would be meeting back up with the group who were getting the stalls, Lili Ravitz called out from within the wagon, “Asuta, that girl wishes to marry into the forest’s edge?”

“Yeah, that’s what she says. I’m not sure how serious she is about it, though.”

“I see. If her feelings are merely superficial, it would be best for her to give up sooner rather than later.” Lili Ravitz, who looked kind of like a small Jizo statue, was from a clan that opposed the actions of the Fa, so it was no surprise that she’d be opposed to us having any unnecessary interactions with the townsfolk. “Yesterday, there was that whole commotion with the nobles of Genos, and now that Rutim girl has gone and created a ridiculous mess as well. It feels like it’s just been one thing after another—all of it about marriage—ever since the vermilion month started.”

“That’s true. I guess now that the season of rain is over, the season of love has begun, huh?” I replied, trying to sound as casual and unserious as possible.

As for the matter with Morun Rutim, there wasn’t much to do about it except wait for Donda Ruu to make his decision.

2

After wrapping up work in the post town, we returned to the Ruu settlement, where we found yet another commotion waiting for us, though not the same one that we had encountered in the morning. A big crowd was gathered in the center of the plaza, and I could hear women and young children chattering energetically. Though I already knew the reason, I couldn't help but feel excited.

"Oh, you're back! Welcome home, Reina and Lala!" the keen-eyed Rimee Ruu called out, causing the crowd to part so we could see through them to where Shumiral was standing with an entire pack of hunting dogs surrounding him.

"Welcome back, Asuta. How did, business go?"

"Well, we were able to sell everything again by the usual time. But man, that sure is a lot of hunting dogs you've got there."

"Yes. There are, twelve of them."

I actually already knew that because Shumiral had stopped by the stalls on his way back from the castle town shortly after the sun hit its peak. He had also told us that he was heading back to the Ruu settlement to get started on retraining the dogs. Since he had known that it would be too late to go hunting after returning to the forest's edge, he had decided in advance to use the rest of his day on that.

I didn't know exactly what the retraining was for, but I assumed it had something to do with teaching them to hunt giba. Shumiral had a giba pelt and a hunter's cloak laid out in front of him, and the dogs were sniffing both thoroughly.

"I am currently, teaching them the difference, between these. If they make a mistake, and bite a hunter, it would be, a serious problem."

"Ah, I see. It does seem like it'd be pretty easy for them to get confused, with their masters and prey both wearing the same pelts."

"Yes. But the smells, are completely different, so it should be, no issue. When the hides, are tanned, sap and herbs, are used in the process, and the smell, of humans, also clings to them, so it is easy, for hunting dogs, to tell them apart."

The dogs kept sniffing away as Shumiral explained that to me. Just like the hunting dogs I had seen before, they reminded me of western breeds. All of them had dark-brown fur, though the

shades varied and there was even a spotted one in the mix, but they looked to be the same breed.

Their faces were square, and their ears hung down. They had big heads, thick necks, and sturdy builds. And yet, their expressions were calm and affectionate, and their round black eyes were incredibly cute.

These dogs had been thoroughly trained to never attack people or totos. It was crucial to be certain of that, so that if they got separated from their master and ran into another hunter, they wouldn't pose a threat. As a result, though, they wouldn't ever go after unknown intruders who entered their homes, so they would be of no use as guard dogs.

"So, when you include the original six, there are now eighteen, huh? Tripling the number of them we have all at once sounds like a really big deal."

"Indeed. The merchants, from Jagar, brought fifteen dogs, but we did not, buy three of them. They were old, and their eyes and ears, had grown weak. In all likelihood, they were brought along, to determine if, we are customers, capable of, discerning quality." That sounded rather nasty to me, but Shumiral was smiling with an expression that looked as affectionate as those of the dogs. "It is only natural, to test customers. They take pride, in their work, after all. And hunting dogs, are living beings. It is no surprise, they would not want to sell, the precious dogs, they raised, to just any customers."

"Ah, I see. It makes sense you could see through all that, given that you're the former leader of Silver Vase... So, did everything go smoothly with the merchants from Jagar?"

"Yes. I believe I was, able to earn their trust, by offering an oath, to Selva."

Shumiral then placed one hand over his heart and reached out with the other one. This was how westerners swore oaths to prove they were children of Selva. I remembered that I had previously seen Kamyua Yoshu posing in the same way. It seemed that people who looked significantly different from your average westerner had to prove themselves with such oaths pretty frequently.

"And they looked like they really enjoyed our cooking too! They even asked the nobles if they could eat giba meat again tonight!" Rimee Ruu added.

"I see. In that case, I'm sure they'll be having something with

giba sausage or bacon in it for dinner.” Those were the only two varieties of giba meat available in the castle town. The castle town ordered a fair amount of both as needed rather than having us make deliveries on a fixed schedule, so it was likely that you could find giba meat at any inn or restaurant there.

As we were talking, Mia Lea Ruu approached us from the direction of the main house. “Hello there, Asuta. You weren’t coming over to us, so I came to greet you.”

“Oh, sorry. I’ll get the study session started shortly.”

“There’s no need to rush. However, I do have a message for you from our clan head. The Fa clan wishes to take one of these twelve dogs, correct?”

“Yes, we’ve wanted one for some time now.”

“In that case, he would like you to choose one today, as we will be taking the rest around to the other clans tomorrow morning.”

Donda Ruu had purchased these dogs with the Ruu’s money so that the clans of the forest’s edge could give them a try. If they collectively decided that the beasts were unnecessary, then only the clans under the Ruu would be using them in the future.

However, we had already talked about the Fa clan’s desire to purchase one of them. I was certain that it would only take a single hunting trip for Ai Fa to become attached to our new dog, given her personality.

“Hmm, today, huh? If Ai Fa gets back late, would early tomorrow morning work?”

“I suppose with a wagon, it doesn’t take long to get from here to even the farthest northern reaches of the settlement. So long as you arrive earlier than you normally do for work, I believe it should be fine.”

“Got it. I’ll let Ai Fa know.”

“I wouldn’t think that Ai Fa would know how to judge the quality of a hunting dog any better than you, correct? So why not simply pick one now to bring back with you?”

“Well, she’ll be the one working with the dog, so I think it would be better for her to personally be here to choose the one she connects with best.”

“I see,” Mia Lea Ruu replied with a smile. However, I could see a great deal of exhaustion in her eyes. That was a pretty rare sight, considering how cheerful she usually was.

“Um, are you feeling okay? You look a bit down.”

“Huh? Oh, I’m doing fine. It’s just this whole matter with the Rutim.”

“Ah, yeah. Did Gazraan Rutim and the others manage to come to an agreement?”

“I’m not sure how to answer that. In truth, I’m a bit worried, because it looks like Dan Rutim’s position is gaining ground.”

“Wait, are you saying Morun Rutim is going to be allowed to marry into the Dom clan?”

“No, most certainly not!” Mia Lea Ruu replied, shaking off the idea with her hands. “I wouldn’t be as calm as I am now if they had actually come to such a crazy decision. But Dan and Gazraan Rutim don’t seem to be giving up. They’ve asked for Morun Rutim to be given a chance to confirm her feelings once again.”

“So they want her to be absolutely certain that her feelings are genuine? That’s definitely an important step, but how are they planning on doing that?”

“Well, we’re going to be sending some of our hunters to temporarily stay with the other clans when we distribute these dogs, so our plan is to have Morun Rutim visit the northern settlement at the same time.”

Obviously, we couldn’t expect the hunters of the forest’s edge to know how to handle the hunting dogs right off the bat. The Ruu had needed to have Shumiral on hand to tell them everything they had needed to know about what the dogs could do when they had started hunting with the animals, and it had taken quite a bit of time for that knowledge to be disseminated to all of their subordinate clans.

Therefore, hunters from the Ruu were going to be accompanying the hunting dogs when they were loaned out to the other clans. It was kind of similar to the temporary exchanges of hunters and women that the Ruu had done in order to teach the Zaza and Sauti about cooking and bloodletting.

The difference this time was the scale. After all, we were talking about every single clan at the forest’s edge here. Of course, the Ruu were only going to be teaching the parent clans directly, but even so, there were still nine of them: the Zaza, Sauti, Fou, Beim, Gaaz, Ratsu, Dai, Ravitz, and Suun. The Fa and Sudra were excluded from that list, but the Fa would be purchasing a dog of our own, while the Sudra would be joining either the Fou or the Suun for lessons.

Incidentally, the Ruu were going to be entering into a break period in the near future. While they were on break, it would be easy for them to lend out as many hunters as were needed. However, they had deliberately not taken that into account when making their plans. Instead, they were hoping to wrap things up before their break started, because it was important to use breaks to spend time with family, and Donda Ruu had decided that his people needed to be able to do so.

The lessons were going to begin early tomorrow. Two hunters would be sent out with each dog, and a similar number of hunters would be invited back here, where they would be learning the techniques as well.

The Fa, Fou, and Sudra had done something similar recently. We had gone out to teach the Dai, Ravitz, and Suun cooking and bloodletting despite the fact that we hadn't been closely connected to them prior to that. But that had only been us visiting them during the day. We had still gone home in the evenings. Essentially, we had used the mobility our wagons afforded us to just throw people at the problem.

However, it wouldn't be feasible to use the wagons to send people back and forth to nine separate clans every single day. Even with a wagon, the most distant clans still took over an hour to reach, and considering that hunters worked until the sun set, that would mean not getting home until late at night.

This time around, there would be an exchange of hunters who would stay at one another's settlements. The Ruu would send out eighteen hunters from their own clan and the clans under them, and then accept the same number of hunters back from the others. That would also help them form new bonds with the small clans they didn't know all that well. Donda Ruu had made a number of bold decisions since becoming a leading clan head, and this was undoubtedly one of them.

"The Ruu, Rutim, Lea, Min, and Ririn will be handling this task. The Ririn don't have many hunters, but since Shumiral is one of them, they're the most skilled at working with hunting dogs, so they'll be sending two," Mia Lea Ruu said.

"I see. So the remaining sixteen hunters will come from the other four clans, then? I suppose if you think of it in terms of being four hunters per clan, that doesn't sound like too much of a stretch. And Morun Rutim will be going with the hunters from her clan to the northern settlement?"

I didn't know how they were going to explain her presence, but they were definitely going to have to come up with something. In any event, it seemed like the hunting dogs had arrived at the perfect time.

"Well, I think having her make sure her feelings are real is definitely the right move. If she ends up deciding to stop pursuing it after all, that'll put an end to this whole issue," I said.

"So it would. And mind you, I'm perfectly fine with her going. If that girl is considering marrying into the Dom, she needs to think long and hard about her decision until it feels like her skull is going to crack open," Mia Lea Ruu remarked with a deep sigh. That was something else I wasn't used to seeing from her.

"So what's the matter? I still don't know what's got you feeling so down, Mia Lea Ruu."

"I don't know if I'd say I'm down, exactly. However, it seems the Rutim are planning to send Dan Rutim to the northern settlement with Morun Rutim."

"Huh?!" I suddenly found myself at a loss for words.

In response, Mia Lea Ruu listlessly shook her head. "Exactly my reaction. The thought of it is enough to give you a bit of a headache, isn't it? Dan Rutim is one of the most hotblooded people under the Ruu. He's usually cheerful, but when he gets angry, he tends to run wild. Of course, you know that very well yourself, don't you, Asuta?"

"Y-Yeah. I mean, I like him a lot and consider him an important friend, but..."

"I feel the same way. The northern clans were feuding with the Ruu for a long time before the fall of the Suun, so the more I think about him going there, the more worried I get."

"D-Donda Ruu really approved this?"

"Yes. Gazraan Rutim asked him to trust them. If it had come from Dan Rutim alone, I'm sure our clan head would have denied the request."

So Gazraan Rutim thought this was a good idea too? That made me feel at least a little bit better. No matter how explosive Dan Rutim might be at times, if Donda Ruu and Gazraan Rutim had given their approval, there wasn't any point in me worrying over their decision.

"Well, there's no point grumbling about it now. We'll just have to pray to the forest that nothing unfortunate happens. Now then, Rimee, isn't it about time to start the study session?"

“Yeah! I wonder which dog Ai Fa will pick? I’m really looking forward to finding out!”

Rimee Ruu was smiling cherubically, while Shumiral seemed to still be giving the dogs his full attention, but I was sure that both of them had been listening in on our conversation.

I also needed to focus on my own work rather than letting myself get flustered. The one who had it the worst here was Morun Rutim herself, followed by Donda Ruu and Dan and Gazraan Rutim. If by some chance they ended up needing my help sometime down the road, I would do whatever I could when it happened. For the moment, I had my own tasks that I needed to get started on.

After dinner that night, we spent the rest of our evening getting to know our new family member. Upon returning from her hunting work, Ai Fa had headed to the Ruu settlement right away and had chosen one of the hunting dogs for herself.

Currently, the dog was curled up into a ball on top of the rug in our main hall. He had been given giba meat and a bone for dinner and was looking quite satisfied now.

Ai Fa had picked a dog with a reddish pelt. His eyes were closed now, but they looked quite clever and had made me fall in love with him right away too. Gilulu was resting on the dirt floor of the entryway on the other side of the dog from me, and I thought the two of them were adorable together.

“He looks so peaceful now that he’s asleep. It’s almost hard to believe that he has the courage to face down a giba, seeing him like this,” I said.

“Indeed,” Ai Fa replied with a nod. Her gaze had been fixed on the dog for some time now. It was clear to me how much she already cherished him. It seemed the people of the forest’s edge really were universally drawn to totos and dogs.

“You’ll be taking handling lessons alongside the Fou, right?”

“Yes. Asking the Ruu to send us a hunter just to teach me would be unreasonable, and we also have no one to send back in exchange, so I will be going into the forest alongside the Fou and Ruu hunters for a few days,” Ai Fa said, and then she turned my way for the first time in a while. “It seems Ludo Ruu will be one of the hunters sent to the Fou clan. It feels a bit strange to imagine him sleeping among them.”

“You think so? Well, I’d be happy if Ludo Ruu and Aimu Fou

would become friends after this.”

“Yes, I would too,” Ai Fa replied with a nod and a gentle look on her face, and then she adjusted her sitting posture a bit. “By the way, Asuta, about our new clan member’s name…”

“Right, we have to give him a new name now that we’ve taken him in. Do you have something in mind?”



“No. I would like you to come up with the name.”

That was rather unexpected.

“But why? The dog is going to be your partner, and besides, shouldn’t you be the one to name him as the clan head?”

“It seems to me that Gilulu is *your* partner, and yet *I* was the one to name him. This time, I want you to do the naming,” Ai Fa said, fidgeting a bit. She had already let down her hair, which shone like gold in the dim light. “Besides…at the forest’s edge, the father is typically the head of the house and the one who names the children, but sometimes the mother does instead. It is not a rule that only clan heads do the naming.”

“Ah, I see.”

Ai Fa’s fidgeting was causing me to get a bit nervous too. I was starting to feel like I had randomly ended up in a parenting simulator, but I wasn’t completely certain why Ai Fa was so nervous. Thinking about it too deeply was just putting me on edge, though, so I tried to mentally force myself to switch gears.

“Still, that’s a serious responsibility. I don’t know much about how naming works at the forest’s edge.”

“Yes, I have been thinking about that as well. Why don’t you think of a few candidates and I choose one from among them? After all, you picked out Gilulu’s name from the two I came up with.”

“Yeah, all right,” I replied, feeling satisfied with that proposal. I was feeling a lot of pressure, but I didn’t want to turn her down. I just had to rack my brain to come up with a name for our new clan member.

“Well then, hmm… The people of the forest’s edge take the meanings of words into consideration when trying to name things, right?”

“Sometimes we do, but names can also be chosen based solely on what sounds right. My name, Ai, holds no special meaning, for example. What’s important is the emotions you imbue the name with.”

“Hmm.”

I pondered the matter carefully. Gilulu’s name incorporated the name of Ai Fa’s father, Gil Fa. Similarly, Saris Ran Fou had named her child Aimu Fou hoping that he would grow into a fine hunter like Ai Fa. And, needless to say, the totos Ruuruu and Fafa had gotten their names from clans. Jidura was also a Ruu clan totos…and from what I recalled, that meant “red” in the

language of Sym. That name had come from the color of the bird's plumage. As for the Rutim totos, Mim Cha, that name meant "tomorrow," also in the language of Sym. It was kind of embarrassing, but Dan Rutim had chosen it based on the meaning of my own name. I also knew that Raielfam meant "fangs of the fierce ape" in the old language of the forest's edge. It was apparently a vestige of the days when their people hunted black apes.

Taking all of those different examples into consideration, it seemed like there were many different meanings that could be baked into a name, and that made the responsibility of coming up with one feel all the heavier.

"Don't worry too much about it. Why not follow the traditions of your home country?"

"Huh? Would that be okay?"

"I do not mind. You are a proper man of the forest's edge, but your blood ties were not severed like those of the Suun clan. There is no need for you to cast aside the pride you feel for your old homeland."

"I suppose not." If Ai Fa was suggesting that, then I certainly had no objections. "Names for dogs in the style of my home country... The first thing that comes to mind is Pochi, I guess."

Ai Fa remained silent.

"Ah, he doesn't really look like a Pochi, though, so just forget that one."

"I'm glad to hear you say I can simply forget it."

Apparently, the sound of the name Pochi wasn't to Ai Fa's liking. I felt the pressure on me growing more intense.

"Er, in that case...how about Tarosuke or Musashi?"

Still nothing from my clan head.

"No, Japanese-style names really aren't clicking for you, are they? Hmm... How about Ricky or Ben?"

The silence was starting to become deafening.

"Ugh, it's hard to try to come up with something just based on what sounds right. I'd like to try to add some sort of meaning to it."

"Anything is fine, but I hope you won't go with a name as strange as those were."

"I'm telling you, I've got no clue which names will sound strange to you and which ones won't. Er... Since he's got reddish fur, maybe Red? Or Big, because he's large?"

Those were nothing but physical features, though. What about something more like a wish for what I wanted him to be like?

I'm sure my folks gave my name a lot of thought before they decided on Asuta.

I closed my eyes and considered the matter carefully. Eventually, a word popped into my head.

"What about Brave?"

Ai Fa's eyebrows twitched. "Does that hold some sort of meaning?"

"Yeah. It should be something like 'gallant' or 'hero.'"

I was pulling it from the title of a DVD a cinephile classmate of mine had once forced me to borrow. I had watched that movie a long time ago, so the contents were fuzzy in my head, but I recalled it being a pretty gloomy film set during the colonization of America. Putting the movie aside, though, I felt that the meaning of the word was a perfect fit for a hunting dog. And when I turned to look at Ai Fa, I saw that she was now smiling warmly.

"It's a wonderful name. Let's go with that."

"Okay. I'm glad you like it."

The red-furred Brave kept on sleeping away, ignorant of the fact that he had just been named. He was now the fourth member of the Fa clan, after Ai Fa, myself, and Gilulu. I promised myself that I would pray to forest daily from here on out for him and Ai Fa to always return home safely.

Take good care of Ai Fa, Brave.

Having completed that important task, I suddenly felt rather sleepy.

"Well then, I guess it's about time to go to bed. Today has been seriously tiring," I said.

"Hmm? What happened today aside from welcoming Brave into our home?"

"Oh, just some more developments on the Morun Rutim front. I know there's no point in me worrying, but I can't help it."

"Ah, that. I never would have thought that something like this would come up right after things were resolved with Sufira Zaza."

"Yeah. I hope it all gets settled smoothly."

We went ahead and got our bedding ready. With the cold of the rainy season gone, that just meant spreading out a couple

sheets for ourselves in the main hall. Ai Fa requested that I lay mine out beside Brave, so I did.

"Is it really okay for me to take this spot? I thought for sure you'd want to sleep next to him."

"It's fine. This way, I can watch over all of you until I fall asleep," Ai Fa said, slipping into a pose reminiscent of the recumbent Buddha. From where she was sitting, she could see me, Brave, and Gilulu all at once.

She then put out the candle, leaving us just the moonlight to rely upon. Thanks to the excitement of welcoming in a new clan member, Ai Fa probably wouldn't go to sleep for some time yet.

"By the way, there was something I wanted to ask you, Ai Fa."

"Hmm? What is it?"

"This happened a while ago...but back at the Daleim dance party, I thought you seemed a little worried when you were watching Sufira Zaza and Leiriss. Was that because you noticed their feelings for each other?"

After a moment of silence, Ai Fa quietly replied, "I wasn't certain, but they had that sort of feel about them. I never expected it to result in such a commotion, however."

"I see. You have a surprisingly sharp eye for that kind of thing."

"What do you mean, 'surprisingly'? I *am* a hunter, you know."

"I just meant that I didn't figure you would have such an eye for romance."

That comment was enough to get Ai Fa to stretch out and kick me in the leg.

Afterward, as I drifted off to sleep, I couldn't help but wonder what Sufira Zaza and Morun Rutim were thinking about as they did the same elsewhere in the forest.

3

The lessons the Ruu clan were giving on handling hunting dogs were going to last for the next six days. That was how long it would take to impart the bare minimum of knowledge that the other clans would need. After that, they would return home, leaving the dogs behind so that their students could continue to benefit from the animals' talents.

As Ai Fa had said, Ludo Ruu had been assigned to teach the Fou clan, along with another boy from a branch house, and in

exchange, one hunter each from the Fou and Ran had been sent back to the Ruu settlement. For the duration of the teaching period, Ai Fa and Brave were going out into the forest to hunt alongside them.

Every other day, a Sudra hunter would also join them. On the days when he didn't come to visit the Fou clan, he would be with the Suun, taking lessons with them instead. The hunters of the Sudra clan were still visiting the Suun settlement once every five days, so it seemed they had made additional arrangements to allow this.

Incidentally, there were northern hunters from the Jeen who also went to the Suun settlement to hunt periodically, and they had aligned their schedule to match the Sudra clan's visits a while back. That meant the Ruu, Suun, Jeen, and Sudra were all hunting together now, and personally, I thought that was pretty amazing. Each of those four clans had different standings, and their members had different temperaments, so I was definitely a bit curious as to how well they were getting along as they worked together.

As for the other clans, the Zaza and Ravitz had an exchange with the Rutim, the Sauti and Dai with the Lea, the Gaaz and Ratsu with the Min, and the Beim with the Ririn. What caught my attention the most was how the Gaaz and Ratsu were paired with the Min. All of those clans had sent women to help with the stalls, which meant they were now loosely tied to one another. It was definitely interesting to think about what kind of conversations they might be having over dinner.

The greatest point of concern was obviously the northern settlement. Dan and Deem Rutim had been sent there, with Morun Rutim accompanying them as planned, and they had asked to stay at the main house of the subordinate Dom clan instead of the main house of the Dom's parent clan, the Zaza.

"It's not that we're trying to snub the Zaza or anything. We'd just like to try to deepen our ties with the Dom this time around!" was how Dan Rutim had sold the idea. At the forest's edge, it was a sin to lie, so he had explained the reason for their request in a way that was basically honest. They hadn't revealed Morun Rutim's feelings yet, for obvious reasons. All of this was meant to allow her to have some time to confirm how she felt about Deek Dom one way or the other, after which the Ruu and Rutim would finally decide how they wanted to proceed.

If she couldn’t cast aside her feelings for Deek Dom, would she ask to marry into the Dom clan? Or would she tamp down her feelings in order to maintain peace and order at the forest’s edge? That was something I couldn’t help but be anxious about as I waited for those six days to be over.

During that period, Lem Dom made a single visit to the Fa house.

“The former Rutim clan head sure is a noisy one! It’s like we’re keeping a wild giba in the house!” Lem Dom grumbled. She’d had a nice quiet life alone with her brother up until recently, until their home had suddenly been invaded by three intruders and a hunting dog a couple days ago. And since one of those intruders was Dan Rutim, the disruption they were causing was undoubtedly much greater than their number would have suggested.

“Well, at least you’ve interacted with Dan Rutim before, right? But what about Deek Dom? Is he holding up okay?”

“He just keeps acting like everything is fine no matter what happens. Of course, Deek hardly ever lets anything get to him regardless, so I’m having more trouble with the situation than he is.”

“What about it is troubling you, Lem Dom?”

“Well, it’s more like I’m feeling on edge about all this,” she replied. Then she stared right at me. “Hey, what exactly are the Ruu up to here, huh? I’m sure you know something, don’t you, Asuta?”

“U-Up to?”

“Don’t play dumb. It doesn’t make any sense to me that they would ask to stay with the Dom rather than the Zaza, and it’s even weirder that they brought along some woman who isn’t even a hunter. We were told we didn’t need to pry into their reasons because Donda Ruu will explain everything eventually, but I’m sure Gulaf Zaza is feeling awfully suspicious about what’s going on.”

“I see… But, well, it’s the Ruu and Rutim’s business, so I really shouldn’t blab about it.”

“What a tease! Maybe I should get my revenge by giving Ai Fa some lessons of my own.”

“I-I’m sure Ai Fa wouldn’t be interested in that!”

“Oh? I’m not so certain. I imagine she’d gladly trample all over our customs if she thought it would make you happy.”

I felt a chill run down my spine. “I’m begging you, don’t go and do anything crazy. Donda Ruu *is* going to explain what’s going on and he isn’t planning to do anything a leading clan head shouldn’t, so please just trust me and put up with it for a while.”

“I certainly hope that’s the case. I’ve got no interest in fighting with the Ruu at this point,” Lem Dom remarked with a deep sigh. That was what I was the most concerned about too.

“By the way, how are things going with the hunting dog? The hunters of the Dom clan are all receiving lessons together, aren’t they?”

“Trying to redirect the conversation, eh? But yeah, it’s been working out amazingly. It’s hard to imagine a more useful beast for hunting with.”

“I’m glad to hear it. And I’m sure Deek Dom will be happy too if this makes hunting less dangerous.”

Lem Dom—who had needed to push past her brother’s objections in order to become a hunter—scratched her head with a sour look on her face. “But they cost even more than totos, don’t they? No matter how helpful they are, it’s not going to be easy for us to buy them.”

“Yeah, but if everyone from the forest’s edge decides that the dogs are worth using, the Ruu clan is willing to share some of their own fortune to help the other clans deal with the cost, and we can dip into the reward money from the castle town for this too. And I’d like to have the Fa clan offer our support too.”

“You’d use the money you earned for the sake of other clans?”

“That’s not *that* strange, is it? We’ve got more money than we know what to do with here.”

“If this is a plan to make allies of the Beim and Ravitz, I have to say, I am impressed.”

“It’s not like that. I’m not trying to manipulate them or anything. And the Fa aren’t trying to earn more money for its own sake. There’s no point in what we’re doing if our comrades don’t agree with us that it’s okay to build bridges with outsiders.”

Shortly after that, Lem Dom headed back to her clan’s settlement, not looking especially satisfied with my responses. Though the Fa and Dom houses were far apart, it seemed she had come all this way just to grumble at me. Basically, that little encounter had been me getting rained on by the edge of the storm the Rutim clan was stirring up.

At any rate, for now there didn't seem to be any issues with the lessons the other clans were taking on how to use their new hunting dogs. Ai Fa in particular seemed to be in a great mood day in and day out. She talked about Brave constantly, saying things like "Brave is so clever" or "Brave is wonderful." She was like a doting parent, but then, she'd always had a soft side that only came out around those who were close to her.

"By the way, we've only been giving Brave raw meat and bones. Can he not eat your cooking?" she asked one night.

"Well, it's not impossible for him to eat it, but I'd say it's best to only give him raw meat. Anything that's been steeped in pico leaves, we would have to wash thoroughly before giving it to him."

"I see. In that case, I'll have to hunt at least one giba every day so that he can always have fresh meat to enjoy."

That was pretty much always how things were with her. Brave was monopolizing her attention so much that I was starting to feel a little lonely, but seeing her so happy made me happy too.

As for the other clans, I was able to hear some stuff indirectly. After all, my work in the post town meant that I met with people from lots of different clans almost every day at the stalls, while handling prep work, or when I was leading study sessions at the Ruu settlement. We had also been purchasing giba meat from the Dai clan lately for our business, so there were few clans that I didn't have at least some connection to at this point.

Thinking it over, the only clans I didn't have direct contact with were those related to the Zaza, Sauti, and Suun. Out of all the parent clans, those were the only three that still hadn't gotten involved with the Fa clan's business, though, so that made sense. However, I was able to hear about the Suun through the Sudra, and the Jeen, who were subordinates of the Zaza, *did* work with us, so the Sauti were the only ones I still wasn't connected to yet.

Still, even if Dari Sauti tended to stay neutral, he had shown himself to be forward-thinking several times, so I doubted I had anything to worry about on that front. Even clans opposed to the Fa's actions like the Ravitz and Beim were very interested in the hunting dogs' potential, after all. They were the kind of people who hated significant change and placed a lot of value on old customs, but they had still quickly come to realize just how valuable our new canine comrades could be. Or at least, that's the impression I got from what Fei Beim and Lili Ravitz had to

say.

"So, when are we going to be able to get some hunting dogs of our own? I'm feeling kinda left out over here!" Radd Liddo grumbled one day. Since they weren't a parent clan, no hunting dogs had been sent to them. Most of the other subordinate clans were sending hunters to accompany those of their parent clans so they could see for themselves what the dogs were like on the hunt. However, the Liddo and Deen lived pretty far away from their parent clan—the Zaza—so that wouldn't work in their case.

"If they had been able to buy a couple more hunting dogs, they would have sent the Zaza and Sauti two each, since they have so many subordinate clans, but unfortunately there weren't enough on sale for that," I explained.

"Hmm, so we've got no choice but to wait until these six days are over and the Zaza come to teach us, eh? We really are being left out, then!" Radd Liddo said angrily. He kind of reminded me of Dan Rutim in some ways.

Regardless, there hadn't been any way to avoid this issue, as we simply didn't have enough hunting dogs. Out of the eighteen total dogs, two of them were remaining with Shumiral, and one had been taken in by the Fa clan. Then five of the six clans under the Ruu—all of them except the Ririn—had each taken one, and the remaining nine had been sent to various other clans.

It would have been perfectly reasonable for the Ruu to have kept all of the dogs for their own use, but instead they're essentially giving most of them away. Complaining about them not being generous enough feels like inviting divine punishment on yourself.

Each hunting dog cost sixty-five white coins, from what I had been told. In comparison, a totos cost fifty white coins, while an iron pot cost twenty-four. Converting that into giba horns and tusks (and boy, it had been a long time since I'd done that), we were talking about a price equal to roughly fifty-four giba.

Considering the cost of ingredients, my intuition was that a single white coin seemed to be roughly equivalent to two thousand yen. That meant the price of a single hunting dog was about a hundred and thirty thousand yen. I was really impressed that Donda Ruu would buy eleven of them at once, then send nine of them to clans that weren't even related to him. Even if the reward money from Genos Castle was being used to help buy them, it was still a pretty remarkable thing to do.

The Ruu had been at a loss as to how to spend their wealth, so they had decided that now was a good time to use up a ton of it all at once, and I wanted the Fa clan to provide at least a bit of assistance too. Without all the assistance so many of the other clans had given us, the Fa never would have been able to amass such a fortune, so I felt it would only be right to give some of that back to the forest's edge.

Still, for now we had to wait and see how the other clans reacted before bringing in more hunting dogs. Shumiral had told the sellers that as well.

All in all, those six days passed by quietly. Naturally, there were still a number of events that occurred that didn't involve the hunting dogs, such as Reina Ruu's birthday, Diel and Arishuna visiting the stalls, and the Fa house finally getting its own stone oven.

On top of that, Marth, our acquaintance from the guards who was still healing up, surreptitiously ended up becoming one of our regulars. Also, Lady Odifia sent some flowers and accessories to Toor Deen as thanks for the sweets the young chef had made for delivery to the castle town, and the Fou women found a new favorite topic of discussion: how adorable and reliable Ludo Ruu was. So it wasn't like those days were exactly dull.

Still, what concerned me most of all was, naturally, what was happening up at the northern settlement. I had gotten an early report from Lem Dom, but after that I stopped hearing anything. I saw Tsuvai and Oura pretty much daily around the stalls, and they were a part of the Rutim clan, but they had no way of knowing what was going on up north either. And it was the same for the members of the Deen and Liddo, who fell under the Zaza.

"I don't think Dan Rutim would start any trouble at the northern settlement," Oura told me. I hadn't seen her in a while, but today she was helping out at the stalls in Morun Rutim's place. She was a kind woman just under the age of thirty and had previously been Tsuvai's mother and the wife of the former leading clan head, Zuuro Suun, until both she and her daughter had had the Suun name stripped from them, after which the Rutim had taken them in. "I believe Dan Rutim and the northern hunters actually have a lot in common. They used to be at odds because of the Suun clan, but now that their feud has ended, I think they'll probably get along surprisingly well."

“Hmph, I’d be willing to bet that Dan Rutim has been challenging them to contests of strength every single day. Even though he’s so far away now, I feel like I can still hear his overly loud laughter,” Tsuvai grumbled.

Even if there was *some* violence involved, I was glad they were able to have that sort of friendly interaction. And, well, it was true that both Dan Rutim and the northern hunters hated pointless quibbling. Still, I felt like their temperaments were different enough to be at least a bit of a cause for concern.

“Really? It’s true that the northern hunters can be rather uptight, but I’m sure they still relax in their homes like anyone else. And Dan Rutim is an exceptionally strong hunter, so I can’t imagine them treating him with scorn. They value a hunter’s strength more than anything at the northern settlement, after all,” Oura said.

“Hmph. If that’s true, then I’m sure that Diga and Doddo have had a really tough time over there,” Tsuvai grumbled.

Now that she mentioned it, those two *were* also living at the Dom settlement now. Based on how Lem Dom had described their situation, it didn’t seem like they were living at the main house, but this did mean that they and Dan Rutim were actually going to be hunting together until this six-day period ended.

Well, that could definitely provide them with some valuable experience in its own way, I thought as I prayed to the forest that Dan Rutim wouldn’t cause any unnecessary problems.

And then, the twentieth of the vermilion month arrived.

It was the seventh morning since the hunting dog lessons had begun, when all of the hunters who had been exchanged between the clans would be returning to their respective homes. From what I had been told, Donda Ruu and Gazraan Rutim had headed to the northern settlement the evening before to learn what decision Morun Rutim had come to and also to explain the Rutim’s actions to Gulaf Zaza and Deek Dom.

Even if Morun Rutim decided to give up on her feelings, they still intended to open up about everything. They couldn’t simply leave the truth hidden about why they had chosen to stay at the Dom house rather than with the Zaza, or why they’d had Morun Rutim accompany them.

I was pretty on edge as I carried out the morning’s work, wondering how everything had worked out. My answer

eventually came right as we were wrapping up our preparations for work. That was when Gazraan Rutim showed up at the Fa house's kitchen, where a great many women were working.

"My apologies, Asuta, but could I have a bit of your time?"

"Oh, Gazraan Rutim. Are you on your way back from the northern settlement?"

"Yes. My father Dan and Donda Ruu are asleep in the wagon. We were up late yesterday speaking with Gulaf Zaza and Deek Dom."

Gazraan Rutim had found himself in the same circumstances as well, yet he still had his usual composed smile on his face. As Toor Deen and the others helped to clean up all the cooking tools, I stepped outside with him. Ai Fa had been chopping wood with Gilulu and Brave watching her, but she stopped when we came out and approached us.

"Would you mind listening as well, Ai Fa? The Fa clan *is* somewhat involved in this, after all."

"Hmm? What does an issue between the Rutim and the Dom have to do with the Fa?"

"It's not a direct connection. But you aren't entirely unrelated."

With that, Gazraan Rutim calmly began talking, and we were in for quite a surprise when we realized what he meant.

4

Ultimately, my younger sister Morun was unable to cast aside her feelings for Deek Dom.

After we finished dinner, we accompanied Deek and Lem Dom to the Zaza settlement. We had five of our people with us: Donda Ruu, my father Dan, Morun, Deem Rutim, and me. From the Zaza clan, Gulaf, Geol, and Sufira Zaza were in attendance.

"My apologies for hiding so much from you. I'd like to start by expressing my gratitude to the Zaza and the Dom for silently accepting our actions despite finding them suspicious," Donda Ruu started out by saying. My father Dan was smiling like always, while Morun silently hung her head. "It's already late at night, so there's no need to mince words. The youngest daughter of the Rutim has fallen for the Dom clan head, Deek Dom."

Gulaf Zaza and Deek Dom's expressions didn't shift in the least as they listened to Donda Ruu's words. Geol Zaza and Lem

Dom, on the other hand, looked positively shocked. Though they had found our actions suspicious, they clearly hadn't expected something like this.

"A-A member of the Rutim has fallen for Deek Dom? What in the world are you thinking?!" Geol Zaza shouted.

"Sh-She isn't planning to marry into the Dom clan, is she?!" Lem Dom asked.

Donda Ruu shook his head and replied, "No. Before asking to marry into Deek Dom's house, we first need to discuss whether or not such a thing could possibly be permitted."

"As if that would ever be okay! If the Dom and Rutim form blood ties, what will become of the Zaza and Ruu?! We're both leading clans, you know!"

"Do the Ruu intend to become subordinate to the Zaza?"

"Quiet, you two," Gulaf Zaza growled. "Donda Ruu is still talking. He and the Rutim clan head have obviously already considered every question you could think to ask."

"Right! It'd be one thing if I were still clan head, but Gazraan's a better thinker than anyone!" my father loudly added.

That caused Donda Ruu to mutter, "You need to be quiet too. You're nothing but a simple member of the Rutim now, so if you can't behave yourself, then wait outside."

"And how am I supposed to do that when we're talking about the future of my lovely daughter?! Just don't mind me and keep on talking!"

"I'm telling you, you need to behave yourself... At any rate, we'd like to talk about what happens from here on out. I've accepted what my subordinate clan head, Gazraan Rutim, has to say, so I'd like to start by having you listen to his proposal as well."

It was finally my turn. I went ahead and conveyed the thoughts I had expressed to Donda Ruu several days ago.

"I would like to find a way to grant the wishes of my younger sister Morun. I'm fully aware of how difficult that will be. However, I was able to arrive at my own conclusions about the matter after carefully considering her request."

"Hmph. So you're insistent on having that girl marry Deek Dom?"

"Yes. If Deek Dom accepts Morun as his wife, then as the Rutim clan head I would like to ask that she be allowed to marry into the Dom."

Geol Zaza looked like he was about to start shouting about something again, but Gulaf Zaza stopped him before he could.

“Your actions up until now have made us painfully aware of how quick-witted you are, so let us hear all of your thoughts on the matter.”

“Thank you. I imagine this may take a while, but I ask that you listen all the way until the end.”

As you know, I always accompany the leading clan heads to the meetings in the castle town with Melfried and Polarth, so I have earned a fair bit of trust from Gulaf Zaza.

Looking back, I have been asked to accompany the leading clan heads since Cyclaeus was still in charge. That man was a troublesome enemy of our people, but we were able to take him down together. Because of all the time we’ve spent working with each other, I have come to see Gulaf Zaza as an irreplaceable comrade, and I spoke with those feelings in my heart.

“It would be problematic for the Dom and Rutim to become blood relatives due to the fact that we are subordinate to different leading clans, the Zaza and the Ruu. This goes without saying, but if Deek Dom and Morun were to be married, the Zaza and Ruu would become related as well. That is what our customs say here at the forest’s edge.”

“Yes. That is only natural since we value blood ties above all else. Breaking that custom would be unthinkable.”

“Indeed. But that is exactly what I would like to do.”

Gulaf Zaza’s eyes had remained perfectly calm up until then, but a black blaze arose in them when I said that. Even so, he maintained a calm tone as he asked me, “What do you mean?”

“Well, saying I want to break the custom may not be quite right. Instead, I was thinking of changing the customs, the laws, of the forest’s edge.”

“Changing your wording doesn’t make any difference. Tell us the specifics.”

“Of course. The biggest issue is that a marriage between the Dom and Rutim would cause the Zaza and Ruu to become related clans as well. So long as that is the case, the only possible solution would be for Morun to cast aside the Rutim clan.”

“True. If that girl were to cast aside the Rutim name and become a Dom clan member before asking to marry, that wouldn’t break the laws of the forest’s edge. However, I have my doubts as to whether Deek Dom would be willing to accept a girl

who would cast aside her own clan.”

“Exactly!” Dan Rutim agreed. “And I wouldn’t let Morun cast aside the Rutim name anyway! That’s why I asked our reliable clan head to give the problem some serious thought!”

“Indeed. I don’t wish to sever my blood ties with Morun either, and I wouldn’t expect that to lead to her request to marry being granted. It would make more sense in that case for Deek Dom to choose a wife from a related clan in order to deepen his clan’s bond with theirs.”

Deek Dom remained expressionless, and he didn’t say so much as a word, nor did Morun.

“But think about it. How much meaning is there in maintaining our current laws?” I asked.

“What do you mean? You aren’t trying to deny the value of bonds of blood, are you?”

“No. Blood ties should be valued above all else. So much of our strength as people of the forest’s edge comes from them, from our feelings for those who are close to us. That is an undeniable fact.”

“So why do you say we should break or change our laws?”

“Because the state of the clans has changed quite a bit compared to eighty years ago.”

That is the conclusion I have come to. It’s a thought that’s been growing inside me since even before Morun opened up about her feelings.

“The thousand people of the forest’s edge from eighty years ago have diminished to between five and six hundred in number. But how many clans have vanished in that time? There’s no way of knowing, but in all likelihood, around half of the clans have died out, just like our population.”

“What are you trying to say, exactly?”

“Currently, there are only thirty-seven clans at the forest’s edge in total, with twelve of those being parent clans. And that number includes the Fa, who have only two members, and the Sudra, who have nine. On top of that, it seems likely that the Sudra will form blood ties with the Fou soon, which will bring us down to just eleven parent clans.”

“There being eleven or twelve parent clans does nothing to change our overall number, so what does it matter?”

“Really? Considering three of them are leading clans, I find it to be a very serious problem.”

It seemed that no one present had picked up on my concerns yet. Of course, my father Dan didn't seem to have any interest in the matter in the first place.

"Very well, let me put it a different way," I said. "What do you expect the leading clans to do going forward?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"Will you continue to form blood ties with the small clans and increase the number of your relatives? Or will you simply deepen the ties with the subordinate clans you have now? I cannot imagine an especially bright future coming from either choice."

This is a matter I had been obsessing over for the past several days, and even at the time of the meeting, I was still wrestling with how to convey it properly.

"Out of the thirty-seven clans, nineteen of them are related to a leading clan. In terms of people, that's over two hundred and fifty. Don't those numbers sound a little unbalanced to you?"

"But Donda Ruu is the one who proposed making the Zaza, Ruu, and Sauti leading clans, and we agreed as we found his thinking to be correct. We cannot simply change course now."

"You're right. But I do not think it's the proper state of things for half of our people to fall under the leading clans. Won't this one day lead to all of us falling under the leading clans?"

"That worry is overblown. We're already forming new ties with the clans around us. Not that the small clans should expect us to welcome them in as subordinates too easily, though."

"As the head of the Zaza, it makes sense for you to think as such. Your clan is in the midst of trying to deepen your ties with the far-off Deen and Liddo, so you won't have to worry about adding subordinate clans for some time."

"Are you saying that the Ruu and Sauti have some kind of issue along those lines?"

"It's nothing particularly serious at the moment, but they *are* going to run into trouble before the Zaza do. The first ones who will start to have problems will likely be the Sauti, who have sixty or so members across six clans. Soon enough, they will all become near relatives and have difficulties forming marriages."

"Hmm?" Gulaf Zaza brought his hand to his mouth, pondering my words.

"In the past, we have overcome such difficulties by forming new blood ties with other clans. Whether it's within the next several years or the next several decades, it is certain that the

Sauti will have to do so again eventually, and their only candidates would be the small clans between the Ruu and the Sauti…including those under the Dai, I suppose.”

“Hmm…”

“After that would come the Ruu. The Ruu welcomed in the Muufa twenty years ago and the Ririn several years back, but those were both small clans. They continuously married among the other five clans for a long time before that, and while that has led to them having some very strong bonds, the blood has gotten too thick among them. It will not be all that long before we need to bring in more people. The only candidates for that would be the Gaaz, the Ratsu, and the Beim.”

“Indeed, that is how it would have to work if they were to choose from the clans that live near them.”

“Yes. But all parent clans are proud of their status, and ones with many members like the Gaaz and Ratsu will not be willing to give that up lightly. However, they are going to have trouble finding marriage partners who aren’t too closely related far sooner than the leading clans, as could only be expected, given that they are significantly smaller, so by the time the Ruu start looking for new blood ties, the Gaaz, Ratsu, and Beim might have already combined into one.”

If that happened, they would form a group of seven clans with a number of members similar to that of the Ruu and Zaza, in which case, the clan that ultimately ended up in charge would undoubtedly be equal to the Ruu and Zaza in terms of their pride and sense of responsibility as well, and would find it even more difficult to relinquish them. Or at least, that is how it seems to me. It was an outlandish hypothetical, but it seemed to properly convey my meaning to Gulaf Zaza.

“I see… In other words, the parent clans will vanish one after another, starting from the smaller ones, until eventually they’ll all end up as one, eh?”

“Exactly. And in a way, that may be the best path for us to take. One leading clan with many children under them, with all of our people being related and valuing one another as much as our own families. In a way, you could even call that ideal.”

“All five or six hundred of our people, valuing one another like family…”

“Yes. If we can manage to reach that point, then the problem will vanish, though that would still leave us with the question of

who will be the parent clan."

I took a breath and organized the thoughts in my head. I figured Gulaf Zaza and the others needed a chance to do so as well. When it felt like enough time had passed, I started speaking again.

"Of course, everything I've been saying has been nothing more than my own guesswork. It will be quite some time before such a situation occurs, so there's no telling what will actually happen. But it feels like a very real possibility, and if we wish to put a stop to it, now is the time to slow the rapid decline in the number of clans."

"B-But clans don't only decrease in number," Geol Zaza said, chiming in for the first time in a while. "I mean, the Jeen split off from the Zaza a few decades ago."

It is true that the customs of the forest's edge allow clans to divide into two when they grow too big.

"How many new clans besides the Jeen were born during those decades, though? And even if a clan does split off, it doesn't change how closely related the members are. For example, the Ruu are likely heading toward a split soon, as they have nearly forty members, but that would not create any new candidates to marry among the related clans," I explained.

"Oh, right... So then, what are you saying we should do?!"

"As I said, I'm suggesting that we need to change our customs."

At last, the discussion had reached its climax.

"It is currently the law at the forest's edge that if one clan member becomes a blood relative, all of them do," I continued. "But what if we create a special exception? If we permit this exception, it will allow us to more freely bring new blood into our clans."

"And what is this exception you are proposing?" Gulaf Zaza asked.

"Well, using our current situation as an example, if Morun and Deek Dom do get married, what if we change things so that only the Rutim and Dom would become related, while their parent and fellow subordinate clans would not?"

Gulaf Zaza stirred a bit. "Hmm? I don't quite understand. You're not proposing that the Dom and the Rutim should cut ties with all of the clans they're currently related to so that their only relatives would be one another, are you?"

“I’m not. The Dom would remain under the Zaza and the Rutim under the Ruu, while they would have an independent bond of their own. The other Ruu subordinates—that is, the Lea, Min, Maam, Muufa, and Ririn—and the Zaza subordinates—the Jeen, Havira, Dana, Liddo, and Deen—would have nothing to do with it. Under my proposal, only the Dom and the Rutim would be forming a new bond.”

“But in that case…if this woman marries into the Dom, she would have two parent clans, would she not? So then, which parent clan would she prioritize, the Ruu or the Zaza?”

“Since she would be marrying into the Dom clan, it would naturally be the Zaza. That’s no different from an ordinary marriage.”

Using my wife Ama Min as an example, she is expected to obey the orders of the head of our parent clan, the Ruu, first and foremost. After that comes the head of the Rutim clan that she married into, followed finally by the head of the Min, the clan she was born into. In Morun’s case, the order would instead go Zaza, Dom, Ruu, and then Rutim.

“Of course, I did say that this should be an exception to the usual rules. The heads of the relevant parent clans will have to be the ones to determine whether or not the related clans should be involved when a marriage occurs on a case-by-case basis. And thanks to our totos, the entire forest’s edge can easily be informed of their decision to avoid any confusion.”

Gulaf Zaza’s mouth remained shut, and everyone else seemed to be pondering my proposal as well.

“If we allow people to marry without discarding their families as I have described, it will remove a barrier that separates our clans from one another. Then we will be able to bring in new blood more readily, which should also slow the rate at which parent clans disappear.”

“Hmm…”

“There are many different clans, but we are all people of the forest’s edge. If we continue to treat one another as we should in our interactions, it’s inevitable that love will blossom between those who are not related. But as things stand, marrying someone who is not related to you is an extremely serious undertaking, which forces most people who find themselves in that position to bury their feelings and forget about them. And if the number of parent clans ends up decreasing as a result, that

doesn't benefit anyone."

No one said anything in response.

"There were once over a thousand of our people. And from what I am told, there were twice as many as that when we lived in the black forest of Jagar. Back then, I'm sure our current laws functioned just fine. But now that the number of clans has decreased this much, the law as it stands is starting to make our lives more difficult."

It seemed they were all still deep in thought, so I continued.

"The laws of the forest's edge should bring happiness to our people as a whole and to each of us as individuals. We must be prepared to revise them every now and then when appropriate."

That was the conclusion I had reached.

A few moments later, Gulaf Zaza looked away from me to stare directly at Donda Ruu instead. "Donda Ruu, you acknowledge the Rutim clan head's words as correct, then?"

"Yeah. If I didn't, we wouldn't be here discussing them."

"I see. But we cannot bend the laws of the forest's edge simply because we will it."

"Of course. I was thinking of raising this matter at the next clan head meeting," I said.

Gulaf Zaza scowled. "What?"

"I thought all of this through for the sake of the future of our people, so I wish to hear all of the clan heads' opinions on whether my thinking is correct. There are about three months left until the clan head meeting is held in the blue month. That should be plenty of time for the clan heads to discuss the matter with their families and relatives and collect their thoughts."

"So you've even taken the time to consider that? You certainly are a shrewd one," Gulaf Zaza remarked, slowly shaking his head under the giba pelt he was wearing. "In that case, there isn't any point in discussing it further now. I'll also speak with my family and our subordinate clans so we can come to a decision about whether this is the proper path for us to take."

"Great! And there's one last request I'd like to make!" my father Dan chimed in, causing Gulaf Zaza to scowl in annoyance.

"What is it? Have you thought of yet another hassle we need to discuss?"

"I'm not sure if it will be a hassle or not, but I'd like to leave Morun in the care of the northern settlement until the day of the clan head meeting."

“What?” Gulaf Zaza questioned, taken aback. “You wish to leave your daughter with us for three months? Even though it’s far from certain that this marriage will even be permitted?”

“Well, you all need to determine whether Morun would be a good partner for Deek Dom, don’t you? She may be my precious daughter, but I’m not sure what a different clan will think of her!” Dan Rutim remarked with a hearty laugh. “And if you decide she’s not the right woman to be the Dom clan head’s wife, then you can send her back without waiting for the clan head meeting. Whether or not the other clan heads accept Gazraan’s clever idea, there won’t need to be a marriage if they don’t have feelings for one another!”

“Allow me to ask again. You really intend to send your precious daughter to the northern settlement all on her own?”

“Yup! And Morun wants this too!”

Morun silently bowed her head. Over the past few days, I had often noticed how mature she now looked.

“I was able to resolve myself and take action thanks to you, Sufira Zaza,” Morun said.

Sufira Zaza tilted her head and said, “Huh?”

“I believe you were in a more difficult position than I am, and yet you still opened up about your feelings. On top of that, you also found the strength to give up on what could never be. The anguish I’ve felt is nothing compared to your pain and sadness. That thought is what drove me to reveal everything I’ve been hiding.”

There was a slight smile in Sufira Zaza’s eyes. “I’m nothing but a complete fool who caused trouble for my precious family. But still…if it ended up giving you the courage you needed, then perhaps there was some point to it after all.”

“No, you most certainly aren’t a fool.”

“Oh, yes I am. But we were able to confirm how we felt, so I have no regrets. I’m sure you must feel the same way, correct?”

With that, Sufira Zaza’s gaze shifted over to Deek Dom. The man’s face was like a stone sculpture, unmoving and impossible to read.

“Deek Dom, neither of us has ever gone as far as to promise to marry the other,” she said. “And I, at least, have no intention to marry anyone for some time. But you should give some serious thought to who might be fit to be your partner.”

Deek Dom offered no response.

“Ignoring all the troublesome issues that have to be resolved, I believe you and Morun Rutim would suit one another quite well. I know you’re fond of kind and gentle girls, after all.”

Morun hung her head, noticeably blushing.

Deek Dom, meanwhile, remained expressionless, though he did scratch the scar on his nose.

“So, what do you say? Will you grant Morun permission to stay here for a while?” my father Dan asked again, causing Gulaf Zaza to sigh with a scowl on his face.

“If you’re that insistent, then I won’t deny you, but I don’t believe she should sleep at the main Dom house.”

“No, of course not! We wouldn’t want anything to happen before they’re married! But I’d like you to at least allow them to have dinner together! Lem Dom’s a hunter now, so they must be lacking in chefs, so this works out perfectly!” my father Dan declared. Then he smiled and added, “Also, the Ruu clans will be holding a festival of the hunt and a celebration for the birthday of our elder soon! So could you let her return home for just that one day?! Even if this marriage is allowed, I’d still like to have her join us for big celebrations or events with family!”

“Indeed. She will serve as an example of what it means to remain a part of the Rutim under the Ruu while also marrying into the Dom,” I said.

Morun looked up with a smile. “I look forward to staying with you. And I’ll try my best to not cause you any trouble.”

◇

“And that was how our meeting last night ended.”

After hearing Gazraan Rutim’s story, I sighed heavily. “Your ability to recall and recount absolutely everything is seriously impressive, as always. It feels like I saw it all with my own two eyes.”

“Ah, thank you.”

“So, what does all that have to do with the Fa clan?” Ai Fa asked.

Gazraan Rutim smiled gently at us. “There’s no direct relation, except that the Rutim’s actions are going to face a lot of scrutiny at the next clan head meeting, just like the Fa’s are.”

“Ah, so that’s what you meant. Indeed, your proposal could very well upend the customs of the forest’s edge every bit as

much as we have.”

“Yes. But we’re also both hoping to bring happiness to our people,” Gazraan Rutim replied, and then his gentle gaze turned my way. “If I hadn’t met you, Asuta, I’m sure I never would have let my thoughts take me this far. I’m once again deeply grateful that I know you.”

“Oh no, I’m the one who’s grateful to you. If it weren’t for you, I wouldn’t have accomplished much of anything.”

After all, I had relied on Gazraan Rutim’s opinions and ability to think things through when I was taking the first step toward opening the stalls. Still, if I hadn’t overturned so much of what was seen as common sense at the forest’s edge, Gazraan Rutim really might not have ever come up with his proposal. We were working hand in hand, searching for the proper path forward.

“So, if your proposed exception is accepted at the clan head meeting, then Morun Rutim will be allowed to marry into the Dom, right?”

“Yes. But first we’ll have to see whether Deek Dom thinks Morun is a good partner for him.”

“I’m sure it’ll be fine. Morun Rutim’s cute, and she can be really charming.”

She wasn’t a traditional beauty, but I thought there were a lot of things that made her attractive as a woman. She was bright and cheerful like the sun, and just being around her made you feel happier. That was the sort of woman Morun Rutim was. When she was angry, she could be as intense as Dan Rutim, certainly, but that simply added to her charm.

While I was thinking that, though, Ai Fa was glaring at me.

“You shouldn’t praise an unmarried woman for being cute so casually, Asuta,” she said.

“Ah, sorry. That goes against the customs of the forest’s edge, doesn’t it? I’ll try to do better from now on.”

My clan head’s glare did not let up, though.

“Seriously, I will! Come on, don’t be angry with me.”

If Gazraan Rutim hadn’t been there, I surely would have earned myself a kick.

The Rutim clan head was still smiling, though, the same as he had been before, as he looked between the two of us. “Morun’s marriage proposal is still a ways off, but the Ruu’s next festival of the hunt will be happening soon. Now that the rainy season is over, I’m sure that we’ll be seeing new discussions about

marriage popping up all over the place before long. Asuta, Ai Fa, you two will be participating in our festival again, correct?”

“Ah, yes. Though it’s more that we were invited to celebrate Jiba Ruu’s birthday,” Ai Fa said.

“I’m very much looking forward to it. Recently, we’ve had to deal with a number of rather challenging problems, both with Sufira Zaza and Morun, so being able to enjoy some time with our relatives would be extremely welcome right about now,” Gazraan Rutim said. But then his eyes narrowed as if he was thinking about something.

We were about to enter into the last third of the vermilion month, and Granny Jiba’s birthday was right around the corner.

Interlude: Reminiscence of a Banquet

There was a wedding banquet being held at the Ruu settlement. On top of a stage that had been erected in the plaza were a groom clad in a gallant hunter's cloak and a beautiful bride wearing a colorful outfit, both of them filled with joy as their relatives all congratulated them.

One of the people present, however, was a young man sitting in the dim light with a bored glare on his face. He looked to be around twenty and was slim and tall, with a fierce appearance like that of a wild wolf. He had a mane of disheveled blackish-brown hair, and his blue eyes shone vigorously. He had a handsome face, with a high-bridged nose and thin lips, but they were currently distorted by a look of serious displeasure. He was silently leaning against the trunk of a large tree, holding an earthenware container of fruit wine in his right hand.

"Hey, what are you doing in a place like this?" a young man with a jolly expression on his face called out, approaching with a mountain of grilled giba meat piled high on a plate. He looked to be roughly halfway through his teens and had long limbs that were likely still growing, though he was currently half a head shorter than the other youth. Even so, he had the well-trained body of a hunter, and a large number of tusks and horns dangled over his chest on the necklace he wore. His hair was long and dark brown, and his big round eyes were a lighter brown, with an impressive pair of eyebrows above them. He had an inviting smile, and combined with his somewhat childish appearance, it made him look almost cute.

"C'mon, have some meat. It's a banquet. Just drinking fruit wine won't make you any stronger, you know."

"Be quiet. You eat a ridiculous amount every single day, even when it's not a banquet, don't you?" the first young man replied without the slightest hint of friendliness in his voice, and then he took a giant swig of fruit wine. As he watched his companion's face from the side, the second young man tilted his head.

"Why are you looking so unhappy on such a joyous occasion? This is your precious little brother's wedding!"

"I *don't* look unhappy."

“You definitely do. Well, you always look that way, though.” The other young man then paused to take a big bite of giba meat, not being shy about interrupting their conversation to do so. “Oh, are you frustrated that your little brother beat you to it? You should hurry up and find a bride too. It’s not good for the heir to the main house to still be single at eighteen, you know.”

The first young man offered no response.

“A man’s got more responsibilities than just hunting giba. We’ve got a duty as hunters to leave behind strong blood too. And the two of us are eventually going to lead our clans, so it’s even more important in our case,” the second young man said, smiling like he was as happy as the bride up on the platform. “You know, my son’s so adorable I can hardly believe it! He’s only just been born, so I couldn’t bring him along, but the thought of going a single night without seeing his face is enough to make me feel like I’m gonna die of agony!”

“Hurry up and perish, then. I’ll be sure to bury you deep enough in the ground that the mundt won’t try to dig you back up,” the other youth retorted with a wild look in his blazing blue eyes.

A slender figure then approached the two of them from the direction of the bonfire. “What are you doing in a gloomy place like this? If you stand too far away from the light, a giiz might come and bite your leg.”

She was a very pretty young woman with sleek reddish-brown hair that flowed down to her hips. She had an innocent and youthful face, but she had to be over fifteen years old. The iridescent fabric and stylish metal and wood accessories of her banquet attire suited her wonderfully.

When the second young man’s eyes fell on her, he called out, “Wow, you’re really beautiful! I didn’t know there was such a lovely unmarried woman among our relatives. Which clan do you belong to?”

It was frowned upon at the forest’s edge to excessively praise the appearance of a person of the opposite sex. However, the girl seemed unperturbed by the boy’s tactlessness, simply smiling charmingly at him in response.

“I’m the eldest daughter of a Lea branch house, Mia Lea. You’re the eldest son of the main Rutim house, Dan Rutim, aren’t you?”

“Oh, you know my name?!”

“Of course. Even at the Lea settlement, people talk about how you’re a better hunter than anyone, and at the age of only sixteen too.”

“Nah, I’m not *that* good! My father Raa is undoubtedly the greatest Rutim hunter! I’m only the second best!” the younger hunter, Dan Rutim, remarked with a hearty laugh. “Still, it’s surprising to see a girl as pretty as you around! You’ve gotta be the most beautiful woman in all of our clans who isn’t already married! But my wife is the prettiest otherwise!”

“My,” the girl, Mia Lea, replied with an amused smile.

“You really are pretty! Don’t you think so too? Oh, and this here is the oldest son of the main Ruu house.”

“Yes, I know who he is, naturally. It’s been some time, hasn’t it, Donda Ruu?” Mia Lea Ruu said with a smile. But the young wolf-like man, Donda Ruu, just kept on drinking his fruit wine and didn’t even look at her.

“Oh, so you two were already acquainted?”

“Yes, we got to know each other a bit at the main Lea house’s wedding a little while ago.”

“Ah, that was the night Gazraan was born, so I wasn’t able to go celebrate with you! I feel bad for doing that to the Lea clan.”

“Oh, no, please, don’t worry about it. There’s no event more important than the birth of your child,” Mia Lea replied with a smile. Then Donda Ruu moved away from the tree he was leaning on and started walking toward the plaza where the banquet festivities were being held.

“Hmm? Where are you going, Donda Ruu?” Dan Rutim asked.

“I’m out of fruit wine. Don’t bother following me, you lot. Being surrounded by noise ruins the taste of the wine.” With that, Donda Ruu swiftly departed.

“What a grouch. This is why he still doesn’t have a wife at the age of eighteen.”

“No. I suppose I was being impolite to him. Donda Ruu is the heir to the main house of our parent clan. I should have treated him with more decorum.”

“Hmm? Nah, he’s the impolite one,” Dan Rutim started to say, but then his eyes opened wide. Mia Lea’s smile had vanished, and now she was hanging her head like a dejected child.

“What’s the matter? If you’re hungry, you can have this meat.”

“Ah, no, I’m fine. Sorry. I’m sure you two were enjoying your talk, but then I had to go and ruin it.”

“You didn’t ruin anything. That’s just the sort of guy Donda Ruu has always been. Still, it seems like he’s in an especially bad mood today.”

“I’m sure that’s because of me. He seems to hate me,” Mia Lea replied, gently wiping under her eyes with her fingertip. “Sorry. I still have work to do manning the stove, so please excuse me.”

“H-Hey, hold on.”

But Mia Lea didn’t stop and soon disappeared into the crowd.

Dan Rutim watched as her lovely figure vanished from sight. Then he muttered to no one in particular, “Is that really how it is?”

“The way I see it, the issue is that Donda Ruu still has a surprisingly childish side to him. He’s plenty strong as a hunter, and I think he’s capable enough to eventually lead the Ruu, but he can be oddly stubborn in all kinds of ways, you know?” Dan Rutim ranted.

“I suppose.”

“Yeah, stubborn and childish. Anytime he’s around women, he goes silent and acts all distant. *I* don’t mind because we’ve known each other for so long, but he’s going to keep scaring women away like that. And even if he doesn’t scare them, they’re still going to assume he doesn’t like them.”

“You think so?”

“The way he closes himself off around beautiful women keeps preventing things from working out with them! At this rate, he’ll end up never getting married, even if he does fall for someone! We’ve got a really serious problem here!”

“Uh-huh.”

“Also, if I’m not mistaken, Mia Lea seems to have feelings for Donda Ruu! Being so harsh with such a lovely girl who cares about him… That’s just disgraceful behavior for a hunter! A Lea woman would make a fitting bride for the main Ruu house, so why hesitate?! In fact…”

“Um, Dan Rutim, could I interrupt?”

“Hmm? What is it?”

After finally managing to interrupt Dan Rutim’s impassioned tirade, the listener—a younger boy—adjusted his posture apologetically.

“I get what you’re saying, of course. But why are you talking to me about this?”

“I mean, you’re Donda Ruu’s younger brother, aren’t you, Ryada Ruu? As a member of the main Ruu house, what do you think about this whole mess surrounding your brother?”

“I have no idea what you want me to say. I’m only eleven years old.” The boy had dark-brown hair like his older brother, though his eyes weren’t quite as wide. He had a deeply troubled expression on his face, complete with drooping eyebrows.

And then, a young girl of less than ten ran over to them. “What are you two talking about, Ryada Ruu?”

“Oh, Tari Ruu. It’s nothing.”

“See, look! The second son just turned fifteen and has already taken a wife, and you, the youngest son, have already won over your future bride. That’s the kind of proactive attitude we expect from the main Ruu house that leads our clans!” Dan Rutim declared.

“Could you please stop, Dan Rutim?”

The boy’s calm face—which didn’t resemble his older brother’s all that much—had gone red with embarrassment. The girl in her children’s banquet attire, meanwhile, didn’t seem to get what was going on and simply kept smiling.

“You sure are noisy. What are you making such a fuss about?” a middle-aged woman asked as she approached. She had a robust build, looked to be around forty, and had dark-brown hair.

“Hey, Tito Min Ruu, perfect timing. I was just talking about that ill-mannered son of yours.”

“I’m not sure which son you’re talking about, but tonight’s celebration is for my second son, you know,” Tito Min Ruu remarked with a smile on her plump face as she stared over at the center of the plaza. While Dan Rutim had been giving his impassioned speech to a child, the festivities had started to head toward their conclusion.

The bride and groom had gotten down from the stage and were standing in front of a stove that was giving off thick steam. The elder Jiba Ruu awaited them there, and she politely removed the grass crowns the two wore. Then she cleansed the accessories in smoke that came from burning herbs and exchanged the bride’s crown for the groom’s and vice versa. Finally, the pair took a bite of the meat that had been prepared for the celebration, and dozens of their relatives erupted into cheers all at once.

“May my son and his wife find happiness,” Tito Min Ruu said,

bringing her fingers together and praying to the forest.

"Yeah, this is very much something to celebrate. It really is. But don't you think that clod of an oldest son of yours should hurry up and find his happiness too, Tito Min Ruu?" Dan Rutim began again after cheering for the married couple a bit.

Narrowing her eyes happily, Tito Min Ruu nodded to him. "I'm grateful that you're so concerned for Donda's future, Dan Rutim. Finding a bride is a matter of fate, though. I myself got married when I was twenty and only gave birth to Donda two years later."

"Yes, but—"

"Fate isn't something you can force. It all comes down to the forest's guidance. Now look, the celebratory dance is starting."

The wedding banquet was finally reaching its climax, and for the last part of the celebration, the unmarried women were going to dance.

The men and older women picked up giba leg bones and began beating them together. Those without any stomped their feet on the ground, and then a grass flute melody joined in. The music they made had a powerful and yet somehow sad tone to it. The women in their banquet attire gathered in the center of the plaza and began dancing, each in their own way.

One stretched out her arms elegantly, while another wildly bent backward and leaped through the air with a look of joy on her face. Colorful outfits, silver bracelets, and dark brown limbs were all illuminated by the light of the bonfire. And Dan Rutim's gaze was fixed on one particular girl who was dancing more energetically than any other.

"Wow. That's really something."

It was Mia Lea.

Her graceful arms were stretching into the air, and she was kicking her legs out with great force as her long reddish-brown hair whipped this way and that along with her shimmering clothes. She was dancing so passionately that it was as if the flames themselves had taken on the form of a beautiful girl.

"Oh right, Donda Ruu!" Dan Rutim shouted as he came back to his senses, dragging his eyes away from Mia Lea. Donda Ruu was once again standing in the darkness well away from the crowd, absentmindedly staring at the dancing women. "That idiot! Who does he think Mia Lea is dancing for?" After giving his brown hair a rough tussle, Dan Rutim hurried through the crowd toward Donda Ruu. "Hey, you rude jerk! This is a big moment for

the women, you know! If you're going to watch, then watch properly!"

Donda Ruu offered no response, which made Dan Rutim even angrier. He was about to start shouting again, but then he noticed the red blaze reflected in Donda Ruu's blue eyes and held his tongue. Even from this far away, one could see the dancers quite clearly, and Mia Lea still looked lively, vivid, and beautiful.

"Well, whatever," Dan Rutim said with a sigh as he resumed watching the women dance. With one last shrill sound from the grass whistle, the music came to a stop, and in its place, cheers filled the night air. The dance was over, concluding the ceremonies. The only thing left to do now was to drink enough wine that you could bathe in it and then go to sleep.

"It was a wonderful ceremony," Dan Rutim remarked, snatching the fruit wine container from Donda Ruu's hands as the young man remained as still as a statue.

And then, Mia Lea approached once more from the plaza.

"Donda Ruu…" Mia Lea came running straight toward Donda Ruu, not paying Dan Rutim any heed. Her face was still flushed red, her skin was shining with sweat, and her eyes were watery with tears of passion. "Donda Ruu…that dance was for you."

The young man offered no response.

"I danced for you and you alone."

Mia Lea brought her fingers together in front of her chest and stared up at the face of the young man, who was a full head taller than her. Her tears started flowing down her cheeks as she did so.

"Hey, I know you're a rude jerk, but at least give her an answer," Dan Rutim scolded him, kicking the motionless Donda Ruu in the leg.

Donda Ruu didn't even seem to notice his old friend. But before long, in the same annoyed tone as always, he quietly said, "I was only watching you too."

◇

"And, well, that's how it went. The next morning that rude jerk told the Lea clan he wanted to marry her, and the year after that, they had their first child," Dan Rutim recounted with a hearty laugh.

Ai Fa had been forced to listen to him reminisce along with me, and I could tell that she was holding back a lot of annoyance as she replied, “I see.”

“Everyone has their history, I guess. But why exactly did you want to tell us that story anyway?” I asked.

It was still very early in the morning, not even an hour after sunrise, on the day after they had gone to talk with Gulaf Zaza and his people at the northern settlement and entrusted Morun Rutim to their care. Dan Rutim had just shown up here at the Fa house first thing in the morning and started telling us that long story out of the blue.

We had finished doing our washing and had been preparing to head out to gather firewood and herbs, so his unexpected arrival had left the two of us a little irritated, but Dan Rutim didn’t notice that at all as he energetically nodded and replied, “Well, maybe that old story came back to me because my youngest daughter has finally fallen in love, and I really wanted to tell it to someone, but I couldn’t tell my relatives, so I came here to visit my friends in the Fa clan!”

“Huh? Why couldn’t you tell your relatives?”

“Well, the only other time I’ve told anyone that tale was back when Jiza Ruu was getting married. I shared it with Jiza Ruu and his brothers…but when Donda Ruu heard, he got so furious it was hard to believe! You know when people say that someone was so angry, their hair was standing on end? It was like that, but for real.”

“Th-Then you probably shouldn’t be telling us either, right?”

“But it’s human nature to want to tell someone once you remember something, isn’t it? And it’s not like it’s something that needs to be kept hidden!” Dan Rutim replied with another hearty laugh. “So now, only we and Donda Ruu’s three sons know the tale! But if you don’t want to make him angry, you shouldn’t tell anyone else!”

“That’s what I’m trying to say—it feels like a burden when someone tells you that kind of secret.”

“No need to worry! No matter how mad he gets, Donda Ruu won’t lay a hand on you since you’re not a hunter, Asuta!” Dan Rutim replied with a hearty laugh once again, then he started slapping me on the back with a hand that was as big as a catcher’s mitt. He was hitting me hard enough that it was difficult for me to breathe, and it seemed like Ai Fa was about to

warn him to stop, but he pulled his hand back before that could happen.

"At any rate, if not for all my hard work that night, the Ruu clan of today wouldn't exist! Donda and Mia Lea Ruu would never have gotten together and had their seven children. You really can't predict where the bonds between people will take them!"

"It sounded to me like all you did was run around making a fuss, though," I noted quietly.

"Hmm? Did you say something, Asuta?"

"No! I was just impressed, Dan Rutim! You did a really good job as a member of a clan under the Ruu!"

"You've got that right! But you know, it's kinda amazing how similar family members always seem to be. Out of their seven kids, five of them are over the age of fifteen, and yet the oldest son is the only one who's married! That's one way that it would really be better if they *didn't* mimic their ill-mannered father," Dan Rutim grumbled, though despite that, he still had a triumphant look on his face.

However, then Ai Fa finally interjected, "Does that really matter? Now, Asuta needs to prepare for work, and we have to go and gather firewood and herbs soon so he can get started. If your story is finished, could I ask you to excuse yourself?"

"How cold of you, after I came all the way out here to the Fa house! But oh well. I'll be looking forward to seeing you again at the festival of the hunt!"

Shortly after that, Dan Rutim took off atop his totos, Mim Cha.

After letting out the sigh I had been holding in for a while, I turned toward Ai Fa. "Dan Rutim seemed to have even more energy than usual, didn't he? I didn't figure him for the sort of guy who would get up this early, no matter the reason. He must be pretty worked up over the whole thing with Morun Rutim."

"Well, it's only natural that he would feel something about his youngest daughter entering into marriage talks," Ai Fa said with a surprisingly calm look on her face. She didn't seem all that concerned about the fact that Dan Rutim had interrupted our morning work.

"Still, that story he told us was...really something. It was kinda awkward, like hearing how your parents fell in love," I muttered, and Ai Fa tilted her head in confusion.

"It was awkward? What do you mean?"

"Huh? I mean, he was talking about Donda and Mia Lea Ruu. I

don’t know how to look at the two of them after hearing that.”

“I see,” Ai Fa replied, her gaze drifting downward a touch. “I thought it was a wonderful story.” As I kept staring at her, though, her face soon went red and she kicked me in the leg. “What’s that look for?! If you have some sort of issue, then just say what it is!”

“Ah, no, I don’t have any issue with what you said. I just thought your reaction was a fresh and new one for you.”

“Quiet, you! Hurry up and get to work!”

As Ai Fa launched a follow-up assault on my leg, I went ahead and picked up the woven basket we used for gathering herbs.

And so, a joyful morning at the Fa house kicked off with an unexpected commotion.

Chapter 3: Yun Sudra’s Melancholy

1

It was currently the twenty-first of the vermilion month, the day after Gazraan Rutim had recounted the events at the northern settlement to us. Aside from the sudden visit from Dan Rutim, nothing out of the ordinary had happened yet. After we finished gathering firewood and herbs, the women who lived nearby came to help out, and we set about handling the prep work for our business in the Fa house’s kitchen.

However, there was something off about that morning. Everyone seemed to be talking less than usual. The atmosphere wasn’t *extremely* quiet, but only a few people were speaking to one another. No one seemed to be slacking off on their work, though. They were clearly all putting in an effort, so I tried not to let it bother me as I handled my own work. But eventually, a woman with the same concerns as me whispered in my ear.

“Asuta, things seem different today. Did something happen around here?” She was a member of the Matua, who fell under the Gaaz, and had been working at the stalls for two and a half months now. She was only thirteen years old.

“No, not that I know of. There was that huge meeting at the northern settlement the day before last, but I don’t think this is about that.”

“Oh yeah, that thing with the Dom and Rutim. That certainly was a surprise. But every single clan will have heard about that by now. I don’t see why only the women around here would be so untalkative because of it.”

“It’s *only* the women from around here?”

“Yes. They’re the only ones who are like this.”

I observed the other women a little more carefully, and it soon became clear that she was absolutely right. I had women from lots of different clans helping out with our morning preparations, but mornings were so busy that we always had a core group made up of women who lived nearby and could just walk over to join us. The Matua, Beim, and Ravitz had each sent one of their people who would continue to work with us at the

stalls for the remainder of the business day, but everyone else came from nearby.

"Fei Beim and Lili Ravitz are being quiet too, but they're always like that. With our neighbors not talking much either, the air around here is starting to feel a little heavy."

"Heavy?"

"Not to the point that it feels awkward. But it's still a bit of a worry. I wonder if there was some sort of fight."

Looking carefully, I saw that it was women from the Fou, Ran, and Sudra who had gone quiet. That combination caught my attention.

Naturally, Yun Sudra belonged to the Sudra clan. As her clan had continued to hold meetings and banquets in the hopes of pairing people up for marriage, she had been getting more and more down. And the clans the Sudra were trying to get closer to were none other than the Fou and Ran. It was definitely a bit concerning for the members of those three clans in particular to become so quiet all at once.

"Hey, Toor Deen…everyone else seems a bit down. Do you know anything?" I asked the young chef from the Deen clan.

However, she just sadly shook her head. "No. But you're right that things are a bit different around here today. I'm kind of worried about it too."

"Yeah. I hope there hasn't been some sort of quarrel between the Sudra and the Fou, but…I'll ask them about it later."

"Okay. Thank you for taking the time to look into this."

With that decided, I returned my full focus to my work without rocking the boat, and after two hours of prep, we were ready to head out to the Ruu settlement.

"Yun Sudra, why don't you leave driving the totos to someone else and ride in our wagon this time?"

Today, the Fa clan was sending out two wagons, and Yun Sudra had been taking the reins quite often lately, so I had to go out of my way to ask her to join us in order to make sure we'd have a chance to talk.

Yun Sudra fidgeted and looked a little troubled.

However, the rather perceptive Matua girl then energetically called out, "I'll handle Fafa's reins! I haven't had a chance to drive lately, so I'd be happy to take over for you!"

Then she called out to Fei Beim and Lili Ravitz to come join her. That just left me, Yun Sudra, and Toor Deen in Gilulu's

wagon. That meant the passengers in the two wagons were now separated into those who lived near us and those who didn't.

"Okay, then we're off to the Ruu settlement. Be careful on the road."

After saying farewell to the Matua girl, I got Gilulu moving. When we made it to the Ruu settlement, a number of other women would be joining us, so I had about fifteen minutes to talk.

"Yun Sudra, you seem really down today. Is everything okay?"

"Yes. I don't believe it will negatively impact my work."

"I'm sure it won't, but the Fou and Ran women weren't talking much either, so I'm a bit concerned. I know it isn't exactly proper to pry into other clans' business like this, but would you mind telling me about it?"

"Mmm... Well, I suppose I should tell you what happened. You do pay me to work for you, after all," Yun Sudra said, sighing heavily. I couldn't see them, but I was sure Toor Deen was sitting very close to her, looking terribly concerned. "You see...the talks of marriage between the Fou, Ran, and Sudra are finally starting to bear fruit."

"Ah, is that so? You've been having banquets to deepen your bonds for some time now, haven't you?"

The first one had been delayed when I had fallen ill, but two months or so had already passed since then. That was how much time those clans had spent getting to know one another.

"It's been decided that Cheem Sudra will take a bride from the Fou. A woman from the Ran is going to marry into our clan as well. In return, the Sudra are going to send the Fou and Ran clans one woman each."

"I see. And you got mixed up in all that, didn't you?"

"Yes. There are only two unmarried women in the Sudra to begin with," Yun Sudra replied, sighing again. "So it was decided that I would marry into the Ran. But then..."

"Yeah? Did something happen between you and them?"

"Yes... Last night, I... I slapped my intended with all my might."

"Huh?!" Toor Deen loudly exclaimed. "Y-You hit a man? But he's a member of another clan, and he could become your husband, right?"

"Yes," Yun Sudra replied, her voice almost getting lost in the breeze.

"Wh-What in the world happened? It must have been serious

for you to hit someone from another clan," I said.

"Please don't ask me that. Thankfully, we were able to settle things, and the man has acknowledged that he was the one at fault."

"All right, I'll drop it. But did you at least explain everything to the rest of the Fou and Ran clans?"

The people of the forest's edge greatly valued etiquette. Violence against a member of another clan would never be excused unless there was a seriously good reason for it. The only people I knew of who would act like that were...well, the Lea clan head, Rau Lea.

However, Yun Sudra replied, "No. That man and I haven't said anything about why it happened, and because of that, the Fou and Ran women are completely dissatisfied with the situation. I'm so sorry for causing you trouble."

"This isn't really a problem for us, but are you okay, Yun Sudra? I mean, this is the man you were supposed to marry, right?"

"Yes. I gathered my resolve to do my duty for the sake of the Sudra. However, now that this has happened, I may not be able to marry into their clan at all. Besides, that man had no interest in taking me as his bride in the first place."

"Who exactly is he, anyway?" Toor Deen asked, and Yun Sudra sighed once more before answering.

"The eldest son of the head of a Ran branch house, Jou Ran. The man who won the pole tugging event at the festival of the hunt."

We met up with the members of the Ruu not long after that, so we weren't able to talk any further about what had happened. However, Yun Sudra's situation was the only thing on my mind for the rest of the trip. I did know who Jou Ran was. He was the one who had told Ai Fa on the night of the festival of the hunt that he'd like her to eventually be his bride. Of course, she had immediately turned him down flat, but that wasn't something I could simply overlook.

On top of that, Yun Sudra had long ago fallen for me of all people but had been forced to suppress her feelings. Now she was supposed to marry Jou Ran, but for some reason she had ended up slapping him. I couldn't overlook that either.

What in the world happened? I remember having trouble figuring

out what kind of guy Jou Ran was, but he seemed friendly and polite enough. But whatever he did, he admitted he was at fault. Just how rude was he to Yun Sudra, exactly?

It was hard to imagine a man of the forest's edge being rude to a woman. As I mentioned before, they greatly valued etiquette as a people—especially when it came to relationships between men and women. Their customs were so stringent that it was even frowned upon to praise someone's appearance without a good reason.

Now that I thought about it, that was another way Rau Lea was outside the norm. He casually praised both Ai Fa and Yamiru Lea for their looks all the time, even though both of them disliked it. But Rau Lea was atypical in many ways. I couldn't imagine Jou Ran acting as carelessly as he did. That went for Yun Sudra too, so I had no idea why such an unfortunate incident had occurred between them.

And it's an even bigger deal if it's making things awkward between the Sudra and the Fou and Ran. The Fou and Sudra are planning to become blood relatives soon, but now I really don't know if this is going to turn out okay.

I was still working at my stall as I kept agonizing over that thought, until eventually Dora and Tara showed up to buy something.

"Hey there, Asuta. What sort of dish do you have today?"

"Ah, welcome. Today, I have a stew with tarapa, tino, and pula."

We had been able to start getting our hands on those vegetables again as of yesterday, so I was selling an Italian-style stew using tomato-like tarapa, cabbage-like tino, and bell pepper-like pula. The Ruu clan had also gone back to making giba burgers with tarapa sauce, so to make this feel different, I had prepared it with lots of myamuu and chitt seeds to make it spicier. I had also added zucchini-like chan and potato-like chatchi, and had used shoulders and ribs for the cuts of meat.

"Sounds great. Your dishes with traip and reggi were delicious too, but smelling tarapa again for the first time in a while is really making me smile."

"It looks tasty! I want this one!" Tara chimed in.

"Ah, but our other stalls have overhauled their dishes quite a bit, so think carefully before making a decision, okay?" I said.

In addition to getting all of our old vegetables back, poitan

was also readily available once more, so Toor Deen's stall was selling carbonara pasta for the first time in a while.

On top of that, Yamiru Lea's stall was finally selling the revised version of myamuu giba. It had been a long wait, but at last we had access to shredded tino again so we could make it the way we wanted to. On top of that, I had used the opportunity to revise the name to keru giba. After all, we used more of the ginger-like keru root than the garlic-like myamuu in it now, so it was now a dish more similar to ginger pork. Changing the name just made sense at this point.

Meanwhile, the Ruu clan had started using tarapa sauce instead of nenon sauce again with the giba burgers. Apparently, they would be alternating between the two sauces daily from now on. And once their giba burgers sold out each day, they would start selling the herb grilled giba they had introduced during the rainy season. They were keeping the number of giba burgers they brought to town on the lower side, since the patties took a fair amount of effort to prepare, which meant the burgers would always sell out before the sun hit its peak.

As for the other soup dish, since we couldn't use traip anymore, we had switched to a regular cream stew. That one would be alternated with the giba offal stew and the teriyaki stew.

Myme's stall was the only one that hadn't changed its menu, but that didn't stop her from doing as well as she always had. A lot of her customers seemed happy to see her still serving the same dishes as before. It looked like she had a pretty good collection of solid regulars at this point.

"Hmm, this is a tough one! Thanks to you guys, we can have cream stew at home whenever we want now. But giba and kimyuus are delicious in totally different ways," Dora said.

"I like dishes I've never had! I'll go with that keru giba you have, Asuta!" Tara declared.

"Then should I have the cream stew and giba burger? Ah, but I'd also like to have pasta again since it's been a while!"

"Jeez, hurry up and pick something! I'm starving!"

Seeing Dora struggle like that kinda made me happy. Despite how worried I had been all morning, I couldn't help but feel soothed now.

"Okay! In that case, I'll get the cream stew and giba burger! Asuta, could you serve us enough of this stuff for Tara?"

“Thanks for your continued business! It’ll just be a moment.”

I had been frying up some fresh keru giba, so I needed to finish that first. In the meantime, Dora smiled and continued speaking to me.

“By the way, thanks so much for ordering the onda. It must have taken a lot of coordination with all those inns, right?”

“It wasn’t too bad. At least a couple of us visit the inns daily regardless, and the inn owners were really happy to have a chance to keep using onda.”

“My uncle was overjoyed too. Not that you could tell by looking at him—his face was as gloomy as always—but it’s his job to grow onda, so now he won’t be bored for the next several months.”

Apparently, Dora’s uncle had chronic injuries in his lower back and knees after many long years as a farmer, so he couldn’t work out in the fields for long periods of time. But it didn’t take much strength to grow and harvest the bean sprout-like onda, so he could handle that without issue. Though he was nearly seventy, it brought the folks who lived in Daleim great joy to work for the sake of their family.

“They hold a gathering of inn owners at the start of each month. I’m planning to attend the meeting in the yellow month, so I could ask if any of the other inns want to keep using onda as well. Would that be helpful to you?”

“My uncle would be thrilled. We can grow as much of it now as we did during the rainy season, so we would definitely appreciate any new orders you could get us.”

In that case, I’d be sure to use plenty of onda in the food I’d be making for the big meeting. It would be such a waste for a versatile vegetable like that to only be available during the rainy season.

“By the way, Yumi’s been saying she’d like to visit the forest’s edge again,” Dora mentioned.

“Oh. Yeah. So she talked to you about it too, Dora?”

“Indeed. But all of us old folks are gonna be busy back at home. If it’s okay with all of you, I’d like to just have Tara go along. So long as there are hunters of the forest’s edge around, I’m sure she won’t be in any danger.”

“I wish all of you could come too,” Tara said.

“I do as well. But I guess we’ll have to wait in anticipation until the next new year comes around.”

With that, the father-daughter pair headed over to the restaurant space with their food.

Not long after, Marth arrived to take their place. He had become a reliable regular over the past month or so.

“You’ve really changed things up again today.”

“Sure have. I’d gladly recommend any of our dishes to you.”

Marth was a platoon commander for the guards, but he was on leave because he had fractured his left arm. Thanks to the nature of his job, he wouldn’t be allowed to return until he was fully healed. I felt bad for him, but I was incredibly grateful that he was now stopping by daily to buy food.

“That dish there has an awfully strange appearance. Is it truly okay to eat?”

“Yes. It’s called pasta, and it’s made by mixing fuwano and poitan together. To eat it, you wrap it around this spoon with the split end.”

“Hmm… Setting aside how it looks, its aroma is decent enough. Did you use karon milk?”

“Yes. That cream stew dish over there also uses karon milk. Oh, and on my other side, the giba burgers use tarapa as their core flavor, so please consider which two dishes you’d like carefully.”

Without his helmet on, Marth just looked like an ordinary westerner. I had always known him to be a straightforward and honest person. Sure, he could be a bit overbearing at times, but that was probably necessary for a guard who helped manage the post town.

As Marth pondered his decision, we had lots of other customers pouring in to order as well. It had been half a month now since the rainy season had ended, and the post town was back to being around eighty percent as busy as its old maximum. And we had increased the number of servings we prepared to about eighty percent of our maximum as well. Including the stuff that Myme brought, that added up to around seven hundred meals, and we were still consistently getting enough customers to sell it all in a timely manner.

There were a lot more people on the main street too. Once again, travelers from Sym, Jagar, and elsewhere in Selva were coming to Genos in droves. This was, after all, the second most prosperous domain in the entirety of the vast western kingdom, falling only behind the capital region. Things had slowed down a

bit during the rainy season, certainly, but now every last corner of the post town was bustling with renewed activity.

Eventually, however, something happened that caused quite a stir on the road: A large totos carriage was approaching us from the north. It came to a stop at the entrance to town, and some well-dressed individuals then stepped out of it. Two of them were older men, and the rest were officers from the house of Genos who were acting as their guards. They started walking directly toward us, making Marth's eyes go wide. However, we were already well accustomed to these people visiting us, considering they had been doing so regularly for the past month.

"Pardon us. We have come to accept today's goods, Lady Toor Deen."

"O-Of course. Thank you for always coming all this way."

Toor Deen left her stall to Fei Beim and hurried over to Gilulu's wagon, then quickly returned holding a box wrapped in a pretty cloth. Inside were the day's sweets to be delivered to Lady Odifia.

"Thank you. Here is the packaging for next time, as well as the payment for today."

"O-Okay. And thank you too."

"Also...the lady instructed us to hand this to you," one of the older men stated, holding out a small bundle. Like the boxes of sweets, the outer wrapping was made of stylishly embroidered silk, and when the man pulled it open, a silver hair accessory was revealed inside.

"U-Um, you've given me a gift each time you've come. Last time, it was a bouquet of flowers..."

"Yes. The lady instructed us to do so."

"Th-The payment we agreed on is already plenty. Could you ask Lady Odifia to not worry about sending anything more in the future?"

"Very well," the man replied, still holding the accessory out. It seemed it would be a problem if she didn't at least accept this gift, so Toor Deen took the accessory from him, looking quite embarrassed.

"Thank you. Well then, we shall see you again three days from now."

"Oh, we'll be taking that day off from the stalls, so could you make it four days?"

"Very well. In that case, it will be the twenty-fifth of the

vermilion month, correct? You may expect us to return four days from now."

With guards surrounding them on all sides, the men returned to the totos carriage.

It was then that Marth leaned in with a look of astonishment and said, "Hey. Th-Those were retainers and knights of the house of Genos, weren't they? How in the world did you lot end up having dealings with the duke's house?"

"Well, you should try not to spread this around too much, but that box was a delivery of sweets that Toor Deen sends to Lady Odifia once every three days."

"By Lady Odifia, you mean the daughter of the duke's first son?"

"Yes, that's right."

Marth brought a hand to his forehead and breathed a deep sigh. "I swear, everything you people do is completely absurd. So the lady has been sending retainers all the way out here to get them?"

"Yep. We can't really visit the castle town that often, because there's all these hurdles we have to clear every time we do."

"Those 'hurdles' are problematic enough for you to be able to summon members of the duke's household out here instead? Unbelievable."

Well, as I recalled, the nobles had actually been the ones to propose this solution. They had said that they wanted to avoid troubling Toor Deen, though they probably had other reasons for it as well, like concerns about what people would think if people of the forest's edge kept visiting the castle town so frequently.

On top of that, Melfried and the others still hadn't attempted to have passes issued to any people of the forest's edge. When the leading clan heads had urgent business to discuss, they needed to head to the gates to pass along a message and wait for a carriage to come get them. The only person of the forest's edge able to enter and leave the castle town freely was Shumiral, as he was a member of the merchant group known as Silver Vase.

And apparently, even Shumiral isn't allowed to spend the night in the castle town. It seems you need to be very well trusted and have a high social status in order to stay there for a long period of time like Diel.

None of the nobles I had encountered so far seemed to look down on the people of the forest's edge, at the very least. Otherwise, they wouldn't have summoned us again and again to prepare food. Even so, they still had to be mindful of social rules and public order in their dealings with us.

"Well, there's no point in griping about it to you, I suppose. Just try not to make any elites angry with you, okay?" Marth finished. Then he finally got around to placing his order, getting one serving of my dish and one of the cream stew before taking a seat in the restaurant space to eat.

Business was going incredibly smoothly. However, I soon found my thoughts returning to my worries about Yun Sudra, who was currently working in the restaurant space. I considered the Sudra, Fou, and Ran to all be equally important friends of mine, so the tension between them was weighing on me heavily. And I got the feeling that the Fa were much more involved in this particular issue than we had been in the incidents Sufira Zaza and Morun Rutim had caused.

2

It was now nighttime, and Ai Fa was in a great mood yet again. The reason for that was obvious: Our hunting dog Brave had once more proven to be extremely helpful to her at her job.

The lessons the Ruu clan had been providing wrapped up two days prior, so starting yesterday, Ai Fa had been heading out into the forest with only Brave accompanying her. Hunting with Ludo Ruu and the Fou and Sudra hunters hadn't been as stressful for her as working with the Ravitz had been, but it was no surprise to me that she seemed to prefer the freedom of acting on her own. Of course, Brave was an exception to that.

"I took down two giba again today thanks to Brave. Even though I failed at bloodletting one of them, it was still a very good result," Ai Fa remarked as she vigorously devoured the dinner I had prepared. Brave was down by the door to the house, gnawing on a massive giba thigh bone. He had already finished the big pile of meat we had given to him on a plate. Though it was meat that hadn't been properly bloodlet, he didn't seem to have any problem with eating it. "It's starting to seem like the mundt are going to starve, with so little rotten meat for them to eat. In the last year, the amount we've been leaving

behind in the forest has fallen dramatically."

"Yeah. I've been a little worried that it might be impacting the ecosystem."

"Ecosystem...?"

"I mean that it's just as you said. If there's any chance that this could cause starving mundt to start attacking people, that'd be really bad, wouldn't it?"

"Starving mundt would head deeper into the forest rather than toward our settlement. When we're out hunting, we can't go so deep into the forest that we wouldn't be able to make it home within half a day, so there are undoubtedly countless giba corpses there."

Mundt were scavengers that were too weak to hunt giba themselves. When I really thought about it, though, I realized that before the people of the forest's edge moved here eighty years ago, the mundt would have only had giba that died of natural causes to eat. In that case, when the people of the forest's edge had started discarding the meat they didn't need eighty years ago, they had probably started overfeeding the mundt.

"So then, maybe the way things are now is actually more natural? Hmm, it's hard to say for sure. Maybe it's best to just leave everything to the will of the forest."

"That's right. We people of the forest's edge, the giba, and the mundt are all children of the forest," Ai Fa agreed, slurping down some giba soup. Then she shot me a rather dubious look. "I can't help but notice that you're still looking rather disheartened. Are you worried about Yun Sudra, perhaps?"

"Well, yeah. I mean, this time it isn't something we can treat as someone else's problem, is it?"

"Oh? I turned down Jou Ran's marriage proposal as soon as he made it, and Yun Sudra never actually proposed to you at all. Of course, it upsets me as well when I think about how Yun Sudra must feel. But even so, this is ultimately a matter between the Ran and the Sudra."

Viewed through the lens of the values and ethics of the forest's edge, it was definitely sensible to think that way. Even so, I couldn't simply write it off as not being our problem that easily.

"Well, it's really eating at me, especially because we don't know what really happened. Why in the world did Yun Sudra slap Jou Ran?"

“I do not know. Jou Ran must have done something terribly improper, I suppose.”

“You think so? He didn’t seem like the kind of person who’d do something like that, though.”

“I wouldn’t know. All I can say about him is that he must be a weird person, to want someone like me as a wife.”

I felt that I definitely had grounds to raise an objection against that. “Well, putting me aside, Darmu Ruu, Rau Lea, and several men from the Gaaz and Ratsu have all asked you to marry them, haven’t they? I don’t think you can say that every single one of them is weird.”

“Don’t go dredging up such old and tired stories.”

“But it’s true, isn’t it?”

Ai Fa placed a hand on the floor, leaned forward, and slapped me, causing my cheek to go a bit red.

“At any rate, Jou Ran seemed somewhat foolish to me. It isn’t impossible for me to imagine him saying something that goes against the customs of the forest’s edge and angering Yun Sudra. And he did acknowledge that he was at fault, did he not?”

“Yeah, apparently.”

“Then he must have been in the wrong. The Fou and Ran will simply have to trust and accept his words for what they are and let go of their ill will.”

Still, it definitely seemed to go against the customs of the forest’s edge for Yun Sudra to slap a man from another clan and then refuse to explain why. Was Jou Ran covering for Yun Sudra, perhaps? I figured that must’ve been what the Ran and Fou were thinking, and that was what had led to the current discord.

Now that I think about it, there was a lot of cheering for Jou Ran back during the festival of the hunt. He’s highly skilled as a hunter, has good looks, and is young and unmarried to boot. I’m sure he must be pretty popular among the Fou and Ran clans. I could see why Yun Sudra was facing such harsh treatment from them if that was the case.

I sighed heavily, right before someone knocked on our front door.

“I am Jou Ran of the Ran clan. Is the clan head Ai Fa home?”

I almost dropped my plate when I heard that.

Ai Fa’s expression instantly turned displeased, and she scratched her head. “Does he not know proper manners? I mean, showing up in the middle of dinner.”

She walked over to the door, stroking the heads of the confused Brave and Gilulu as she passed them before removing the bolt.

“I’m sorry for stopping by so late, but there’s something I wish to discuss with you, Ai Fa. May I come in?” Jou Ran asked.

“We’re in the middle of eating dinner.”

“Oh, you were still eating? My apologies.” This was the first time I had heard Jou Ran’s voice in a good while. Though he lived nearby, I didn’t have many chances to interact with men from other clans. “Would you mind if I wait around until you are done eating? If I go home now and come back here later, it will only cause even more confusion for everyone.”

“You’re free to wait, but where do you intend to do so?”

“Anywhere would be fine. If I’m in the way, I’ll wait outside.”

Ai Fa rustled her hair once more, then said, “Come in” and stepped back.

Jou Ran stepped inside with a bow. “Thank you. And I see your hunting dog is eating as well. That’s a splendid giba bone.” He smiled at Brave as he unstrapped his sandals. Our dog simply continued to chew his bone, his tail wagging happily. “Well then, pardon me… Oh, hello Asuta. It’s been a while.”

“Yeah, it has, Jou Ran.”

After handing his blade to Ai Fa, Jou Ran stepped into the main room of the house. He was a fairly tall young man, with a rather handsome face and straight hair that came down to his shoulders. He also had a rather calming aura about him, which was a bit rare at the forest’s edge. If I recalled correctly, he was currently sixteen years old.

“Well then, I will wait here. Please, don’t mind me and continue with your dinner.”

“We will hardly be able to ignore you if you’ll be sitting right over there. Just hurry up and say what you came here to say. We’ll continue eating as you do,” Ai Fa replied with open annoyance, returning to her original position and sitting cross-legged. As she had declared she would, she immediately resumed eating her meal.

Jou Ran had sat diagonally behind me, so I shifted in order to be able to see him. He was also sitting cross-legged, with his back completely straight. His expression was composed, but it somehow looked like he was always just about to smile. “All right. I’m sorry for intruding on your meal, but I’ll begin. You

already heard about me from Yun Sudra, correct?"

"Indeed. You did something wrong, and Yun Sudra slapped you," Ai Fa stated.

"Yes. From what I heard, the Fou and Ran women refused to speak to Yun Sudra this morning. Is that true, Asuta?"

"Yeah. Or at the very least, things seemed really awkward between them."

"I knew it. I'm the one at fault, but since we haven't explained that properly, everyone is pulling away from Yun Sudra. I'm afraid I've wronged her very badly." Jou Ran placed his fists on the floor and leaned forward a bit. "Ai Fa, my intention is to reveal everything to my relatives soon. Would you allow that?"

"Why in the world would you need my permission?"

"Well, it involves both me and you."

With that, things grew a bit more tense. After swallowing a bit of cold shabu-shabu meat, Ai Fa shot Jou Ran a glare.

"That's odd. I can't remember there being much of anything connecting you and me."

"That's true. What I did was truly foolish, and I regret angering Yun Sudra that way from the depths of my heart. That's why I want to let everyone know that she did nothing wrong."

"That's enough of a preamble. What exactly did you do to Yun Sudra?"

"Well…I told Yun Sudra how I fell for you, Ai Fa, and that I still haven't been able to cast aside those feelings."

That was hardly unexpected, yet it was still shocking to hear. In particular, I couldn't just laugh off the fact that he said he still had feelings for my clan head.

"And that upset Yun Sudra enough for her to hit you?" Ai Fa asked, looking incredibly annoyed.

"No," Jou Ran replied, shaking his head. "What I said next was where I truly went astray. I…asked Yun Sudra if she would cooperate with me so that we could both see our true desires fulfilled."

"Your true desires?"

"Yes. Yun Sudra has feelings for you, does she not, Asuta?"

This time, I almost flipped my plate over. "H-Hold on a moment! Where did you hear that from? I can't imagine Yun Sudra would have brought it up herself."

"She didn't. But I overheard the women of my clan gossiping about it. They said that she must have been holding back her

feelings so that she wouldn't cause you trouble."

I felt as if I was going to faint.

And then, Ai Fa angrily interjected, "Hey. So you're saying you asked Yun Sudra to work with you to fulfill those desires?"

"Yes."

"Your duty as a member of the Ran was to welcome Yun Sudra as your bride, was it not? And yet *that* was what you said to her instead?"

"Yes. It was extremely foolish of me."

"Foolish doesn't even begin to cover it! What were you thinking?!" Ai Fa demanded, slamming her fist into the floor hard enough to make her soup shake. "The forest's edge would never permit such a thing! You deserve to be smacked over the head for what you've done, and not just once or twice! If it were permitted, I would strike you across the face myself!"

"I regret my actions. Even I want to hit the man I was when I said those things," Jou Ran replied. He had been sitting up straight, but now his shoulders slumped down. "When my clan head told me to determine whether Yun Sudra would make a fitting partner, I strayed from the proper path. I thought it might have been the forest's guidance that I was paired with a woman with feelings for Asuta when I had fallen for you, Ai Fa. I was completely enamored with that foolish notion."

"How could you possibly believe *that* was legitimate guidance?! Are you trying to sully the name of our mother forest?!"

"I'm sorry. When Yun Sudra slapped my cheek, I realized just how foolish I had been. Even I can't understand how I could've thought such a thing now."

Jou Ran was a fine young hunter taller than I was, but at that point he was so dejected that he looked like a puppy getting soaked in the rain. However, that did nothing to quell Ai Fa's rage.

"I can't even believe that someone like you is a fellow person of the forest's edge! My apologies to the Ran clan, but I haven't been this outraged at one of our people since Diga and Doddo, and all the villainous things they did!"

"I know. I regret it with all that I am."

"There's no point in telling me that! You should be apologizing to Yun Sudra and the heads of the Sudra and Ran clans!"

"A-Ai Fa, I get how you feel, but let's try to calm down a little," I

said.

My clan head was positively furious, like a cat with its fur standing up. Her blue eyes were filled with a blazing light, and it felt as if she might punch Jou Ran at any moment.

I hurriedly kept talking. “So, you want to tell everyone what happened, Jou Ran? And since that would mean revealing your feelings for Ai Fa, you’re asking for her permission?”

“Yes. And I don’t believe I’ll be able to properly convey the tale without also revealing Yun Sudra’s feelings for you, Asuta.”

That was probably true. Still, never mind me; what about Yun Sudra? She had been keeping this almost entirely to herself, even if it meant making things awkward between her and the members of the Fou and Ran.

“But the Ran women already know how Yun Sudra feels, so I don’t believe that will be an issue. That’s why I decided the most important thing I needed to do was to get permission from the two of you,” Jou Ran explained.

“Hold on! You shouldn’t treat Yun Sudra’s feelings as a secondary concern!” I shouted as I felt another angry rant coming from Ai Fa. “Besides, there’s no need to worry about our permission. On our side, all that happened was that Ai Fa and I couldn’t reciprocate your or Yun Sudra’s feelings, so there’s nothing for us to feel embarrassed about no matter who hears about this. But it’s different for Yun Sudra.”

“Perhaps. But the Ran women already realized, so I’m sure the Sudra and Fou women did as well.”

“There’s a big difference between speculating without proof and actually knowing something,” I countered. “Besides, why didn’t you just open up about this yesterday?”

“Well…because Yun Sudra insisted we shouldn’t tell anyone.”

“See! You should respect her feelings! You should talk it over with Yun Sudra and then decide together whether or not to tell everyone.”

“Yes… I suppose you may be right.”

What a vague response. Ai Fa, meanwhile, was still half standing with a look of rage on her face.

“It seems I’ll need to hit him a couple times before he’ll come to his senses,” she said. “It won’t damage our relationship with the Ran as long as we explain the circumstances.”

“H-Hey, calm down. If he needs to be hit, then leave that to the Ran clan head.”

Jou Ran stared at Ai Fa with a terribly sad look in his eyes.

“So I angered you that badly, Ai Fa?”

“That attitude of yours is the thing I can’t stand most of all! You should be thinking of Yun Sudra’s feelings first and foremost, not mine! If you have time to study my expression, then you should spend it apologizing to her over and over again!”

“I see. I’m sure you must be thoroughly sick of my lack of tact,” Jou Ran said, firmly shutting his eyes before staring back up at my clan head with a resolved look. “Ai Fa, I would like to make a single request of you.”

“Silence! I have no interest in hearing any request from the likes of you!”

“Nonetheless, I still have to ask. I cannot cast aside my feelings for you on my own, so would you tell me just one thing, to help me try?” Jou Ran asked firmly, even with all of Ai Fa’s rage bearing down on him. “Who exactly is it that you have feelings for?”

“What?”

“The night of the festival of the hunt I told you I wanted to take you as my bride, and you responded that you already had feelings for someone. You said that even if you lost your strength as a hunter and had to live as a woman, you already knew who your partner would be. I’d like you to tell me who you meant.”

Even though I was sitting, I felt as if I was about to tumble over. Naturally, Ai Fa had told me what she had said to Jou Ran that very same night, but it seemed he didn’t have the foggiest idea who Ai Fa had been referring to.

“I’m certain that any man who has earned your approval must be a hunter I could never hope to compete with. If you would just tell me his name, I’m sure that I’ll be able to recognize how vast the gap between us is, and then I think I’ll finally be able to cast aside this foolish fixation.”

Ai Fa didn’t say a word.

“Is he a Ruu clan hunter? Or perhaps someone from the north? You have ties with many different clans, so...”

“Silence!” Ai Fa interrupted, cutting Jou Ran off. Her shoulders were trembling with rage by this point. “Why should I have to do anything to soothe your feelings?! All I have to say to you is that I would never, ever, in all of eternity wish to marry a complete fool

like you! Cast aside that fixation with your own strength! If you can't, then you have no right to call yourself a person of the forest's edge!"

Jou Ran shrank back in the face of Ai Fa's intensity. But then he seemed to rebound a bit, and he lowered himself into a deep bow. "Understood. I am ashamed of my own ignorance. From now on, I will work as hard as I can to live as a man of the forest's edge should."

"I don't give a damn about that! If you're done, then hurry up and leave!"

"Understood. I'll be off. And I'll try to talk to Yun Sudra first thing tomorrow morning," Jou Ran said, standing and bowing once more. "Excuse me. Oh, and could you return my blade?"

Ai Fa immediately tossed his sword to him, with a fair amount of force behind it, and the Ran hunter calmly caught it.

"Let me say before I leave…my actions have been extremely foolish, but they were mine alone, so I hope that you will continue to interact with the rest of the Ran as you have in the past."

With that, Jou Ran removed the bolt on our front door himself and exited the Fa house. Ai Fa immediately stomped over to replace the bolt, and then stood there for a while with her shoulders heaving up and down. Unsurprisingly, Brave and Gilulu were staring up at her in confusion.

"Well, that was really something. Jou Ran actually turned out to be a much weirder guy than I expected him to be," I noted.

"Weird doesn't even begin to cover it! I'm questioning if he was even truly born here at the forest's edge!" Ai Fa angrily growled. Her back was to me, though, so I couldn't see the expression on her face.

"At any rate, I guess there's nothing more to be done except to wait for him to talk it out with Yun Sudra. If that doesn't settle things, I'll talk to Yun Sudra too and try to help her handle this however she feels is best," I said.

"Good. Yun Sudra's feelings should be prioritized above all else."

"Yeah. And I'd also like to make sure the relationship between the Sudra and the Ran doesn't sour." After letting my head droop a bit from exhaustion, I called out to Ai Fa again. "So, how about we finish our dinner? It's gotten cold, but I don't want to let it go to waste."

“Right…” Ai Fa quietly replied before finally returning to the main hall.

When she sat back down, though, I quickly noticed something. “Huh? What’s the matter, Ai Fa? Your face is bright red. In fact, I think it’s even worse than it was before!”

My clan head did not respond.

“I get that you’re upset. But Jou Ran is gone, so you can calm down a bit now. It’s not good for you to let your blood pressure get too high.”

“I’m not especially angry,” Ai Fa replied, pushing her remaining meat and vegetable stir-fry around a bit. Then the bottom half of her face disappeared behind her plate, though she did continue to stare at me over it. “But hearing someone else take my words about who I have feelings for and repeat them back to me like that… It made me feel strangely out of sorts.”

Was she referring to the part about how she already knew who she would marry? I was unable to stop a blush from spreading across my face at the thought of that.

“B-But that’s already been settled, hasn’t it? We told each other how we felt a while ago.”

“You say that, but your own face is turning red, is it not?”

“Y-You just got me worked up too.”

“You’re thrusting the responsibility onto me? How heartless,” Ai Fa said with her plate still guarding her face as she shot me a reproachful look. “So, how do you feel now?”



“Huh? What do you mean?”

“We haven’t had many chances to talk lately, but…do you still feel the same way?”

“Y-Yeah, of course. Do I look like I’ve had a change of heart or something?”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

I wondered if I should use my plate to hide my face too.

I seriously hadn’t expected the sparks from this particular incident to come flying toward the Fa clan the way they had. Still, the thing I needed to be most worried about was the tension between Jou Ran and Yun Sudra. Jou Ran had turned out to be a lot more troublesome than I had ever expected, but all I could do was hope and pray that he would work things out properly with Yun Sudra in the morning.

3

“I’m so terribly sorry!” Yun Sudra said, apologizing out of the blue the following morning. It was currently right before we were about to start the prep work for the stalls. She had come here to the Fa house ahead of the other women and was bowing deeply to me and Ai Fa.

“Y-You don’t have to do that, Yun Sudra. There’s nothing for you to apologize for.”

“Well, I mean, I never expected that Jou Ran would tell you everything that happened. I had a really hard time stopping myself from slapping him again!” Yun Sudra said, looking up at me and Ai Fa. Her face was as red as ours had been the night before. “I-I’m sure it must have been a terribly unpleasant conversation for the two of you, and I am deeply sorry for that.”

“That fool was the one who made things unpleasant. There isn’t the slightest need for you to apologize,” Ai Fa replied.

“Oh, but… But one of the causes of all this was the improper feelings I had for Asuta,” Yun Sudra protested, fidgeting and causing her gray-brown side ponytail to sway. “Still, I made the decision to cast those feelings aside. I’m sure Asuta’s told you already, Ai Fa, but I hope that you won’t doubt me about that.”

“I have no doubt that you’re being truthful, and regardless, that is still no reason for you to apologize.”

“But I want to have a proper relationship with you and Asuta, so I really do feel bad that this has become such a serious issue,”

Yun Sudra insisted, shrinking in on herself more and more.

Ai Fa's expression was hard to read as she stared back at the girl. "Regardless, our feelings are unimportant. Have you made up your mind to reveal everything to the Sudra and the Ran?"

"Yes. I was worried that I might cause the two of you trouble if I did so. But I changed my mind after talking to Jou Ran this morning. Besides, it's now painfully clear to me that he isn't capable of keeping this secret in the first place."

Yun Sudra seemed to resent the fact that Jou Ran had opened up to the two of us, which was only natural. He should have conferred with her before he visited the Fa house.

"I'm on duty for work in the post town today, so my intention is to explain myself to the clan heads when they return from the forest this evening. Sorry to ask, but could you please keep this to yourselves until then?"

"Understood. As I've said again and again, I don't believe you have done anything wrong. You were simply unlucky enough to end up involved with that complete and utter fool."

"I cannot help but feel guilty as well, but it still makes me very happy to hear you say that, Ai Fa," Yun Sudra replied with a smile, her cheeks still a little red. "I'll get to work now. Sorry for taking up your time."

With that, Yun Sudra vanished into the kitchen, and Ai Fa gave a small sigh.

"Yun Sudra certainly has an earnest heart," she said. "I cannot understand why that fool wasn't able to discard his attraction to me after being paired with such a fine woman."

"Well, I sort of get it." I couldn't stop myself from making an unnecessary comment, and it earned me an instant kick to the leg from Ai Fa as her face went red.

"That's entirely different. You live with me, while I've only ever met Jou Ran a handful of times, so it's nonsensical to think of him as being the same as you in any way."

"Well, I pride myself on knowing your charms better than anyone— Ow! Ow! Okay, I'll stop!" After that, I went ahead and retreated to the kitchen before she seriously injured my leg.

However, Yun Sudra was the only person awaiting me there. As she was preparing to boil a big potful of curry ingredients, she shot me a bashful smile and said, "I really am sorry, Asuta."

"Like Ai Fa said, there's no need for you to apologize. I'm certain everyone else will feel the same way too."

“I’m not so sure. If nothing else, it was definitely rash of me to slap Jou Ran.” Yun Sudra sighed heavily. “As I’ve told you before, I believe you and Ai Fa belong together. There’s no space for me between you. That’s why I decided to cast aside my feelings. But then he just had to go and say what he did. It made me so mad that I lost control of myself.”

“Well, it’s only natural to feel angry about that. His words made a complete mockery of your resolve.”

There were some points I could sympathize with Jou Ran on, sure, but that didn’t mean it was in any way acceptable for him to have acted so rudely toward Yun Sudra. No matter what he had been thinking, trying to drag her into his scheme had been absolutely wrong.

“What will the Ran and Fou clan heads think? Even if my crimes are forgiven, will my relationship with Jou Ran be able to survive?” she wondered aloud.

“Huh? I can’t imagine them deciding that you should still take Jou Ran as your husband after what he said to you.”

“They might. Even if you commit a crime, if you accept punishment for it, you will be forgiven, so we may be told to simply reassess whether we are fit to be partners.”

“In that case, can’t you just say that he isn’t right for you? I mean, I don’t think you should force yourself to marry someone you don’t get along with.”

“I certainly do hope that I won’t have to. But I shouldn’t let my personal feelings endanger our bond with the Fou and Ran.”

As the contents of the pot started bubbling, Yun Sudra sighed once again. At this point, all we could do was wait for the evening to come, to see whether she would be freed from this anguish.

Not much happened at work. The flow of customers was the same as always, and we burned through our stock of meals in no time. The post town was getting more and more lively again with each passing day. The only noteworthy thing that did happen was that Yumi and a few of the other townsfolk were given an invitation to the Ruu’s upcoming festival of the hunt, surprisingly enough.

“Huh?! Seriously?! I had totally given up because I figured we couldn’t come to an event like that!” Yumi excitedly asked back.

“Yes, we’re serious,” Reina Ruu replied with a smile. “We were

thinking about holding a separate event on a different day instead, but since Mikel and Myme are staying at the Ruu settlement as guests anyway, we decided that adding a few more people wouldn't be an issue. We figure this'll help the two of them feel more comfortable too."

"Hooray! I'm not sure if I should say this, but your dad is a really generous guy! He looks really scary and stubborn, but he's nothing like my old man!"

"Yes. Though, it *is* true that my father can be both scary and stubborn at times," Reina Ruu replied with a giggle. "Also, it won't just be a festival of the hunt. It's going to be Jiba Ruu's birthday celebration as well. If you wouldn't mind, could you tell each guest to bring a single flower?"

"A flower? Can we bring just any flower we find growing on the ground?"

"Yes. As long as they aren't poisonous, any kind will do. What's important is the emotions of the person giving the gift."

"Got it! I'll be sure to tell Telia Mas that, and whoever else I bring too! Oh, and how many people would it be okay for us to invite?"

"Hmm, well, three or four shouldn't be any issue."

"Then I'll definitely have to go with Telia Mas and Tara. I'm sure they'll be really happy. Seriously, thanks so much!" Yumi said, before walking over to the outdoor restaurant space, radiating joy.

I spoke up then, having been listening in from two stalls over. "Sounds like she's really thrilled about this."

"Yeah. If it weren't also Granny Jiba's birthday, I don't know if my dad would have decided to let them come. I think he only changed his mind because of how they bonded with our elder during the revival festival."

"You might be right about that. And I really appreciate you guys inviting me and Ai Fa too."

This was kind of a big deal. The Ruu clan must have already heard about how Yumi wanted to marry into the forest's edge. Shumiral and Sufira Zaza had both made it painfully clear how difficult it would be to do that. Even so, Donda Ruu had still given his permission for her to be invited as a guest. That was probably because he trusted that so long as they acted appropriately, as Shumiral and Sufira Zaza ultimately had, any problems that arose would eventually work out fine. It was a

decision that showed his determination to not shy away from forming bonds with outsiders simply because of what *might* happen.

And Yumi is going to have to prove that her determination is equally strong.

She still didn't know about the incident with Sufira Zaza and Leiriss. She probably hadn't heard too much about Shumiral or Morun Rutim either. I figured I would need to explain to her how much weight marriage held at the forest's edge before the day of the festival of the hunt arrived. Of course, I was planning to get approval from the members of the Ruu clan before I made such a move.

Even so, if Yumi is really serious about marrying into the forest's edge, I'd definitely be glad if she can pull it off, I thought while wrapping up business for the day.

And then, night rolled around.

Unsurprisingly, there was a knock on the Fa house's door shortly after we finished dinner and started relaxing. Our visitors were none other than Raielfam Sudra, Baadu Fou, and the head of the main Ran house. After handing over their swords and stepping into our main hall, the first thing they did was apologize.

"Jou Ran and Yun Sudra told us everything. We'd like to start by apologizing for this unnecessary commotion."

"Hmm. I don't see any need for you to apologize to us," Ai Fa told them.

"It did cause a disruption between the women working for Asuta, did it not? And Jou Ran interrupted your meal last night as well. I believe that's more than enough to count as troubling you," Baadu Fou said.

Even though it had been members of the Sudra and Ran clans who had caused this most recent incident, the Sudra were going to become a clan under the Fou soon, so he was being proactive about taking the lead on this as the head of the parent clan.

"The root cause of all this was the feelings the two of them individually had for members of your clan. We want to let you know that we of course do not feel any misplaced resentment toward either of you," he continued.

"And we appreciate that very much. We thought that *we* might need to apologize for that, but didn't know how to go about it," my clan head responded.

“There’s nothing to apologize for. They had feelings for you, but that isn’t your fault in any way.”

Then the Ran clan head bowed his head. “I should be the first one to apologize. That fool Jou Ran asked you to marry him, Ai Fa, without even giving me any notice. That goes against our customs here at the forest’s edge.”

“He did make that request of me, but it was in regard to the distant future. He simply said that if he eventually surpassed me as a hunter, he would like to ask me to become his bride. I don’t think that is anything to find fault with him for,” Ai Fa calmly replied, speaking as solemnly as the other clan heads. “However, last night *did* upset me somewhat. What he said to Yun Sudra was truly unbecoming of a person of the forest’s edge. I would like to know what you have decided to do because of his actions.”

“You’re right. That was unforgivable. As the head of the Ran clan, I feel truly ashamed. He can be a bit hard to read, certainly, but I never thought that Jou Ran had strayed so far from the proper path.”

Ai Fa nodded. “Yes, he trampled over Yun Sudra’s feelings and the trust you three clan heads gave him. I was worried that you might feel as indignant as I do, head of the Sudra clan.”

“I don’t feel any indignation. I’m more astounded than anything else,” Raielfam Sudra replied. The wrinkles on his forehead looked deeper than usual. “Besides, no matter how rude Jou Ran was, it doesn’t change the fact that Yun, a member of my clan, struck him. That also goes against the customs of the forest’s edge, so we have no choice but to acknowledge that there was some fault on both sides and move on.”

“I’m truly grateful for your kindness,” the Ran clan head said with a bow.

Raielfam Sudra patted him on the shoulder and said, “It’s the natural thing to do. We already have a Fou woman marrying into the Sudra, so our clans will be linked by blood before too much longer regardless. The best thing for us to do would be to overlook the discord of the last few days and work to deepen our bonds instead.”

“So, what will happen with Yun Sudra and Jou Ran?” I interjected.

“Hmm?” Baadu Fou tilted his head questioningly. “Nothing at all. It’s true that both of them violated our customs, but it’s

nothing that requires serious punishment. They just need to be sure not to make the same mistakes again in the future."

"So do you still expect the two of them to get married?"

"No," Baadu Fou bluntly replied. "Neither of them wants that, after all. Jou Ran and Yun Sudra don't see one another as fitting partners. We've accepted that."

"I see."

At last, I could breathe a sigh of relief. The planned marriage was off, and neither side would be punished. The issue seemed to have been fully resolved.

"We should still have a Fou woman and a Ran woman marrying into the Sudra, as well as a Sudra woman marrying into the Fou, so we don't need to pressure Yun Sudra to get married right now. The rest will have to wait until the clan head meeting."

"The clan head meeting? What do you mean?"

"The matter with the Rutim and the Dom. At the next clan head meeting, a decision will have to be made about whether they'll be permitted to form blood ties without involving their related clans, right? I don't think there's any need to force marriage talks to go forward before that's sorted."

"Indeed," the Ran clan head agreed. "If they *are* permitted to go ahead with that, we'll be able to consider forging ties with other clans while still keeping the Fou as our parent clan. That will allow us to gain more strength than we've ever had before."

"Then you're all in agreement with Gazraan Rutim's proposal?"

The answer, apparently, was yes.

"We're thinking of holding a festival of the hunt with the Deen and Liddo to allow new pairings to form between our clans."

"Nowadays, we can interact with other clans much easier thanks to our wagons. We invited the Ruu hunters to our settlement not long ago too."

"Yes, and our women are getting closer to those from the Gaaz and Ratsu as well. If even holdouts like the Beim and Ravitz come to approve of the Fa clan's actions, we'll have many more opportunities to forge strong bonds with other clans," Baadu Fou said, and then he turned toward Raielfam Sudra. "If the three proposed marriages go through, the only unmarried person left in your clan will be Yun Sudra. That being the case, it seems like you would be well justified to wait until after the clan head meeting, to give the Sudra more time to form bonds with other clans."

“Quite so,” Raielfam Sudra agreed. “To be honest, Yun has told me that she would like to take her time selecting a husband, so I’m sure that she’ll be much happier if we give her more leeway on that.”

“There are a lot of men at the forest’s edge, so I’m sure she’ll find an ideal partner eventually.” Baadu Fou had been looking solemn for the entire conversation so far, but now he suddenly broke out in a grin. “Though, considering the last guy she fell for was Asuta here, I’ve got no idea how long she’ll have to search.”

“Yes, and the same is true for Jou Ran. Out of all the women in our tribe, very few are like Ai Fa,” the Ran clan head noted.

“I ask that you all refrain from teasing us about that,” Ai Fa said with a sour look.

Baadu Fou’s smile softened in response. “We’re all friends here. Surely you can allow us to joke around with you a bit? Besides, it’s undeniable that there aren’t many people out there like the two of you.”

“That’s right,” the Ran clan head chimed in. “I mean, the two of you are a woman who’s an exceptional hunter and a man who is a fantastic chef. I can’t imagine it would be easy to find anyone like either of you.”

“Even so, Yun did cast aside her feelings for Asuta. She may no longer be marrying Jou Ran, but she won’t cause the Fa clan any trouble either,” Raielfam Sudra remarked, his small eyes staring straight at Ai Fa. “Ai Fa and Asuta, I would like to ask you something as a friend of the Fa clan: do you two have no intention to ever marry anyone?”

“We don’t. Why do you feel the need to ask about that, Raielfam Sudra?” Ai Fa asked.

“Obviously, because there will continue to be no shortage of people falling for the two of you in the future,” Raielfam Sudra replied while stroking his flat chin. “It’s understandable that you cannot take a husband as a hunter, Ai Fa. But Asuta, you also don’t intend to marry any other woman?”

“I-I don’t. I’m sorry, but that’s just what I want.”

“Hmm. So your feelings haven’t changed.” I had discussed this with Raielfam Sudra before because of Yun Sudra’s feelings for me. “If that is what you have decided, then we have no right to argue, as we are not related by blood. Still, we cannot help but think that it’s a real shame that the Fa clan’s bloodline will soon die out, when you are the ones who carved open a path forward

for us."

"Be that as it may, *this* is the path we have chosen for ourselves," Ai Fa calmly retorted.

"Hmm." The Ran clan head scratched his head with a pensive look. "Now that I think about it, there's something I need to ask as well. Jou Ran has been insistent about wanting to know who you have feelings for, Ai Fa. What are your thoughts on that?" the clan head asked, still maintaining his solemn expression.

A slight blush appeared around Ai Fa's eyes. "I cannot see any reason for me to answer that."

"No, there's certainly no need for you to do so. I was asking if it would be all right for us to tell him."

At that point, Ai Fa's face turned red enough that it would be impossible for anyone in the room to miss. "Y-You couldn't possibly know that for sure, could you?"

"True enough. But I can only think of one possibility."

Ai Fa went silent.

"I'm closer to the two of you than Jou Ran is. And he didn't visit the Fa house when Asuta fell ill, did he? Anyone who saw you then would be able to hazard a guess, even if they didn't know anything else about the two of you."

Ai Fa scratched her head for a moment, but didn't lower her arm when she was done, as if she was trying to use it to hide her glowing face.

Baadu Fou and Raielfam Sudra both looked a little puzzled.

"Jou Ran fell for you, and yet he doesn't even know that, Ai Fa? I don't see any problem with simply being open about it."

"Yeah. Honestly, I don't think you could hide it if you tried."

Now even the other two clan heads were talking about it, causing Ai Fa to give a loud, flustered, "Hold on! I-I don't recall ever discussing this with anyone! H-How are you all talking as if my feelings are completely obvious to you?!"

"Well, I'd imagine most people who know you have noticed by now."

"Yeah, I mean, even we picked up on it."

"If anything, Jou Ran's a real fool for not realizing it."

I felt like I was being publicly embarrassed too as I sat there beside Ai Fa. I felt hot from my neck on up, and I was even sweating a bit.

"We've all seen just how much the two of you care for each other. Even putting aside the state you were in when Asuta fell ill,

there was also the clan head meeting at the Suun settlement, and the time when Asuta was abducted by that noble girl. Not to mention the way you two act around each other normally. To be perfectly frank, it feels strange that you still aren't married yet."

"I-I understand, so let's please stop talking about this!"

"There's no need to get so flustered. Besides, I don't think this will mean the end of the Fa clan's bloodline," Baadu Fou said, looking at me and Ai Fa with a kind gaze. "Ai Fa, you turned eighteen last month, correct?"

"Yes. What of it?"

"Even ten years from now, you'll still only be twenty-eight. It's entirely possible to have children at that age. Working as a hunter for ten years might be enough to satisfy you. And if it is, then no one would object to you getting married at that point."

"Wh-What nonsense are you—?!"

"People's hearts can change. It might only take five years rather than ten. Or even just one. No one can tell how you will feel in the future until it becomes the present. It all depends on the will of the forest, Ai Fa."

"Right. Ai Fa's one of the best hunters our people have. In five years, she could very well hunt down as many giba as an ordinary hunter would in a lifetime," the Ran clan head said.

"No matter which path you take, we'll remain friends to the Fa clan, so do whatever you believe is right," Raielfam Sudra added.

Still holding her head in one hand, she called out in resignation, "That's enough! S-Sorry, but my head is starting to hurt! So if you're finished discussing Yun Sudra and Jou Ran, then please leave!"

Baadu Fou nodded in acknowledgment. "Very well. Sorry for stopping by so late at night. All of our clan members have been told about what happened between Yun Sudra and Jou ran, so the women should start acting normally again tomorrow."

With that, the three clan heads headed back to their own houses.

Ai Fa wasn't moving, so I went ahead and bolted the door myself. Then, when I glanced back at the main hall, I found that my clan head was already lying on her side atop the floor.

"Th-That was quick. I didn't sense you moving at all."

Ai Fa said nothing in response.

"Isn't that uncomfortable, with your hair still up?"

"Quiet!" Ai Fa grumbled, her back facing me. Well, she had just

weathered a pretty rough surprise attack, so I understood how she was feeling. Honestly, I hadn't expected the clan heads to go as far as they had either.

I guess it's simply proof of how important the Fa clan is to them, I thought as I quickly got ready for bed myself.

I prepared my bedding and blew out the candle, and as I waited for my eyes to adjust to the darkness, I lay down. The sky seemed to be clear that night, judging from how much pale moonlight was streaming in through the window.

"Good night, Ai Fa," I quietly called out, and she seemed to whisper something back. "Hmm? Sorry, I couldn't quite catch that."

"Even I don't know how I'll feel five or ten years from now."

As I stared at Ai Fa's smooth back, I found myself smiling before I knew it.

"It all depends on the will of the forest, right? As long as I'm with you, though, I'll be happy."

Ai Fa seemed to squirm a bit in protest.

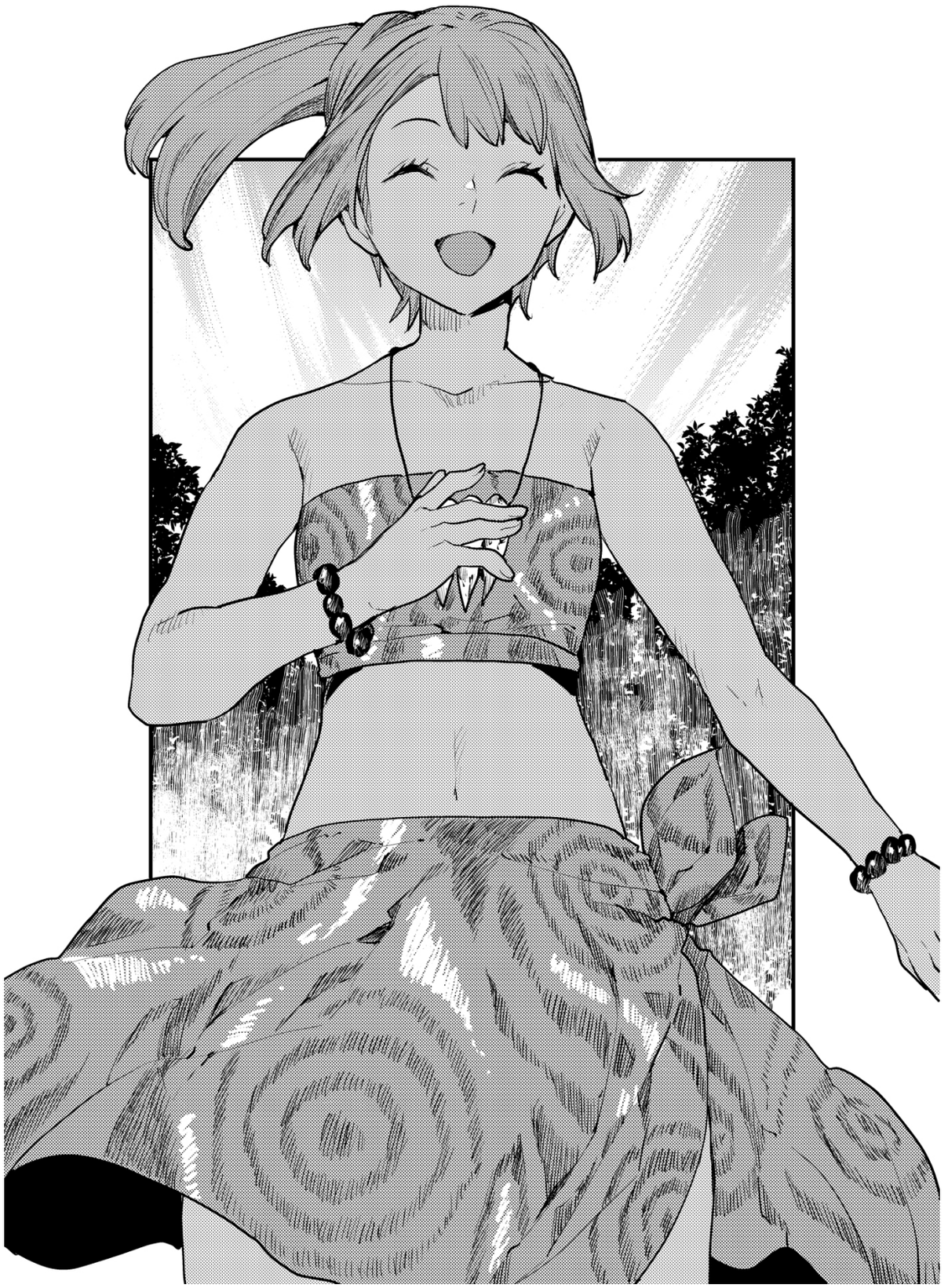
With gentle bliss washing over me, I once again said, "Good night."

There were a few more developments worth noting after that. The next morning, Yun Sudra showed up at the Fa house before anyone else again, with a bright smile on her face completely unlike what I had seen from her the day before.

"Good morning, Asuta! I heard our clan head stopped by your place last night!"

"Y-Yeah, good morning. You look like you're feeling a lot better, Yun Sudra."

"I am! I feel like all my troubles have been blown away! The world around me looks as if it's sparkling!"



Yun Sudra was a cheerful girl by nature, but it was rare to see her this excited. That just went to show how heavily the events of the last few days had been weighing on her.

"Did you hear everything from the clan heads? Not only are they not going to pressure me to marry, I was even told I could take my time finding a partner!"

"Yeah, I heard. Still, that's going to depend on the result of the clan head meeting, won't it?"

"Yeah. But I'll be praying to the forest daily for every single clan to accept the Rutim's proposal when the time comes!"

The strength of Yun Sudra's desire to not get married was a little surprising to me.

Then she smiled bashfully at me with a hint of red on her cheeks. "I mean, I fell for *you*, didn't I? It's going to be hard to find a man more charming than you are. In fact, I bet it'll probably take until I'm twenty or so, like the folks from the Ruu clan."

"I-I see. But you're still only fifteen, aren't you?"

"Five years will be plenty of time for me to go around to all of the other clans and meet every single one of their men," she replied, teasingly sticking out her tongue. It felt as if Yun Sudra had been freed from all the frustration she had been feeling, not only for the past few days, but for the past few months. "Honestly, I'm jealous of Reina Ruu. She doesn't pay any mind at all to talk of marriage and just focuses on polishing her cooking skills. I think that really makes her shine brilliantly."

"I see. Well, I can definitely get how you feel. But I'm sure your clan members must worry about it."

"Yeah, but I'll take a husband eventually. I mean, I'd like to eventually marry someone I love and hold my child in my arms, but I don't mind if it takes a few years for that to happen!" Then Yun Sudra smiled at me and narrowed her eyes like she was staring at something dazzling. "I'm sure that someday I'll find a man I adore even more than you. I just hope that we'll be able to keep being friends like we are now."

"Yeah, thanks. I look forward to continuing to work with you too."

Yun Sudra really was a strong, earnest person. Comparing Jou Ran to her almost felt unfair. I actually felt kind of sorry for the guy, though I hadn't told anyone that, since I didn't think it was my place to say anything, according to the customs of the

forest's edge.

Jou Ran had fallen for someone who was out of his reach, spiraled out of control, and made an unbelievable mistake. At the forest's edge, that was considered to be his fault alone, but I saw things a little differently. There were plenty of people back where I was born and raised who screwed up like he had.

It's all too common for matters of love to not go the way people want them to. When you have a burning passion inside of you, it can sometimes run out of control, and that could lead to you losing sight of good manners or morality. After all, we human beings are far from perfect.

However, the people of the forest's edge valued manners to a stifling degree. They had an overwhelming sense of responsibility to their family, their clan, and their people. Honestly, I thought that those among them who lived pure lives with an unbreakable spirit that always kept them on the right path—like Yun Sudra—were truly amazing. And not just her, but Sufira Zaza and Morun Rutim as well. The moment when the former cast aside her feelings for the sake of her people was really burned into my memory.

Since I had been acknowledged as being one of the people of the forest's edge, I strongly felt that I needed to lead a proper life like they did, which meant that I had to find the right way to live so that my happiness overlapped with theirs. Still, it wasn't like I had changed at my core. I was confident that my happiness could be found at Ai Fa's side and nowhere else.

In one year, or five, or ten…if the day comes when Ai Fa feels like she's fulfilled her duty as a hunter and can marry the person she loves…wouldn't that mean she could live a happy life as both a hunter and a woman?

Up until she had met me, Ai Fa had lived all on her own. For two whole years, she had hunted alone, eaten alone, and completed all of her work without anyone to help her. In effect, she had been doing both a man's work and a woman's work entirely by herself. So then, shouldn't it be possible for her to find happiness as either a hunter or a woman?

In that case, I…

I would have to keep supporting her in her role as a hunter. And…I had to become a man worthy of being her husband. The numerous incidents that had happened over the last half month had made me more keenly aware of that than I had ever been

before.

Chapter 4: Festival of the Hunt and Birthday Celebration

1

On the twenty-ninth of the vermilion month—Granny Jiba's birthday—a festival of the hunt would also be held at the Ruu settlement.

The Ruu Clan held festivals of the hunt several times each year, with one of them being larger—where everyone who fell under their umbrella attended—and the rest being smaller—in which case only about seventy percent of them would be there. Normally, this would have been a smaller festival of the hunt, but since they were also celebrating Granny Jiba's birthday, they had decided to have all of their people join in. On top of that, they would be taking the day off from running the stalls so they could start preparing for the banquet in the morning.

They were really putting a lot of effort into this celebration. However, I was still planning to open the Fa clan stalls that day, figuring that the Ruu clan not being available wouldn't be any issue for me. I would also be preparing a modest amount of food for the banquet myself later, but I could get that ready after we closed. Also, coincidentally, the day after that happened to be our day off, which we took every six days and which was yet another reason I was looking forward to the party.

We rented a fourth stall for today alone and sold four different dishes. We also increased the number of servings we brought for each dish, preparing a total of seven hundred meals. All of the chefs we had on duty were highly experienced. In charge of the stalls were me, Toor Deen, Yun Sudra, and Fei Beim. Acting as assistants and handling the restaurant space were the Gaaz, Ratsu, Matua, Meem, and Dagora women, as well as Lili Ravitz, bringing our group to a total of ten people.

Preparations were a bit of an issue, so we kept giba manju off our menu. Instead, we were going to sell giba curry, carbonara pasta, keru giba, and giba soup with tau oil. I took care of the pasta as it required the most effort, Toor Deen handled the keru giba, and the easier giba curry and giba soup went to Yun Sudra

and Fei Beim respectively. The Gaaz and Ratsu women had been working with us for two and a half months now, and I was going to have one of them work the restaurant space while the other assisted me. Lili Ravitz assisted with the curry and soup, while the other three worked in the restaurant space like always.

"Amazing... This kind of reminds me of the revival festival," the Ratsu woman remarked with a smile while assisting me. Since we had fewer stalls, each of them were getting significantly more customers. Myme was taking a break today as well, so our usual six stalls had been reduced to four, each of them being about fifty percent busier than yesterday. "By the way, Asuta, would you say the Matua and Meem women are full-fledged workers now?"

"I would. Most of their training period was during the rainy season, but they seem to have fully mastered their duties at this point, so I raised their pay to the same amount as everyone else."

"In that case, why not start rotating us all in and out each day from now on?"

"Yeah, I'd say that sounds like a fair way to handle things."

For the past two and a half months, I had been going with a rotation in which I had three women from among the Beim, Dagora, Ravitz, Matua, and Meem working with me each day. Out of that group of clans, the Beim and Dagora were relatives, so I thought it would be a good idea to have them work the same amount as the other related pairs—the Gaaz and Matua, and the Ratsu and Meem.

"In that case, we would be contributing three workers out of seven, so, um..."

"Each of you would work a shift once every two or three days. Honestly, I don't think it should make that big of a difference."

"Indeed. In any event, I'm just happy to be able to work alongside all of you."

I felt much the same way, naturally. Besides, it was reassuring to be able to have ten people work the stalls without any help from the Ruu clan. I was getting a bit ahead of myself, perhaps, but it seemed to me that with the way things were going, the next revival festival was thankfully going to be a lot less hectic for us.

But as for the present, our stock of meals steadily decreased as the sun started to descend in the west. With the number of

customers we were getting, we would probably be able to sell out of everything by our regular time.

While I was calculating that in my head, Yumi stopped by the stalls.

“Sorry I’m so late! Do you still have anything left?”

“Yeah, although we’re almost out of giba curry… Um, you seem pretty excited for tonight, Yumi!”

“Huh, do I? I don’t think this is too different from what I wore during the revival festival.”

It was true that Yumi normally wore a lot of accessories, so her current getup might not have actually been that big of a change, but it did look a tiny bit extravagant. Her hair was done up on one side, instead of letting it fall naturally like she usually did, and she had a translucent shawl draped over her shoulders.

“It would be embarrassing if they thought I was trying too hard,” she explained. “Think I should remove some of the accessories from my hair?”

“No, it looks good on you. Besides, everyone from the forest’s edge will be dressed in banquet attire too.”

The women of the Ruu clan didn’t break out their banquet attire for most festivals of the hunt, but they would be celebrating their elder’s birthday today too, so from what I had been told, they’d be dressing the same as they would for a wedding.

“In that case, I’ll just keep it like this! Since I’ve got the opportunity, I want to show them my good side!” Yumi remarked with an earnest grin. I had already told her how difficult it would be to marry into the forest’s edge, so she knew that unless she was fully committed to her ambition, it would only lead to heartbreak. But even so, I could see nothing but excitement behind her smile. “Once I’m done eating, I’ll go wait over there! Ooh, I’ve really been looking forward to this!”

After ordering giba curry and keru giba, she headed over to the restaurant space.

The Ratsu woman sent me a confused look. “Asuta, was that the girl who was invited to the Ruu clan’s banquet?”

“Yep, that’s her. Her name is Yumi, and she ran an okonomiyaki stall during the revival festival.”

“Yes, I remember. I suppose it makes some kind of sense for that girl to say she wants to marry into the forest’s edge.”

She didn’t look particularly concerned or anything. The Ruu

had already welcomed a foreigner like Shumiral as a clan member, after all, and she seemed to trust the leading clan heads to handle this correctly.

It's all down to the forest's guidance, huh?

Just how would this whole banquet play out? I felt a wriggling sense of anticipation and excitement run down my back as I boiled the last of the pasta.

And then, the lower second hour rolled around. We sold out right on schedule, and after cleaning up, we headed to The Kimyuus's Tail.

Along the way, we stopped by Dora's stall, where Tara shot up to her feet and called out to us, "Hey there, Asuta! I'm leaving now, dad!"

"Okay. Be careful not to cause any trouble for everyone at the forest's edge. And Asuta, take care of Tara, all right?"

"I'll be sure to keep an eye on her and bring her back safely tomorrow morning."

Ai Fa and I were going to spend the night at the Ruu settlement too, and would be in charge of bringing all of our guests back to town the following morning. Tara had her usual orange dress on, and she looked really adorable with flowers and metal accessories in her dark-brown hair.

"Also, could you give this to everyone in the Ruu clan?" Dora asked.

"Huh? What is it?"

"Some vegetables from us, of course. I don't like how we keep imposing on them without giving back," Dora replied, pulling out a bag large enough that he needed both arms to hold it.

"I'd feel bad about accepting all that, though. I mean, we've visited your place plenty of times too."

"But when you did, you always brought ingredients along with you. Just take them, okay?" he said with a big smile. "Besides, this is a gift for the Ruu clan. Donda Ruu is the one who gets to decide whether to accept them or not. I can't imagine he'd be so unfriendly that he'd send it back."

"Yeah, all right. I'll try delivering this to the Ruu clan," I said with a bow, accepting the bag and loading it into the wagon. "Hop on in, Tara. Yumi's already riding along with us."

"Okay!" Tara energetically replied, clambering up into the wagon with a hand from Yun Sudra.

Dora smiled with narrowed eyes as he watched his daughter go. “It’s a shame I can’t come along too. It sounds like it’s going to be a lot of fun.”

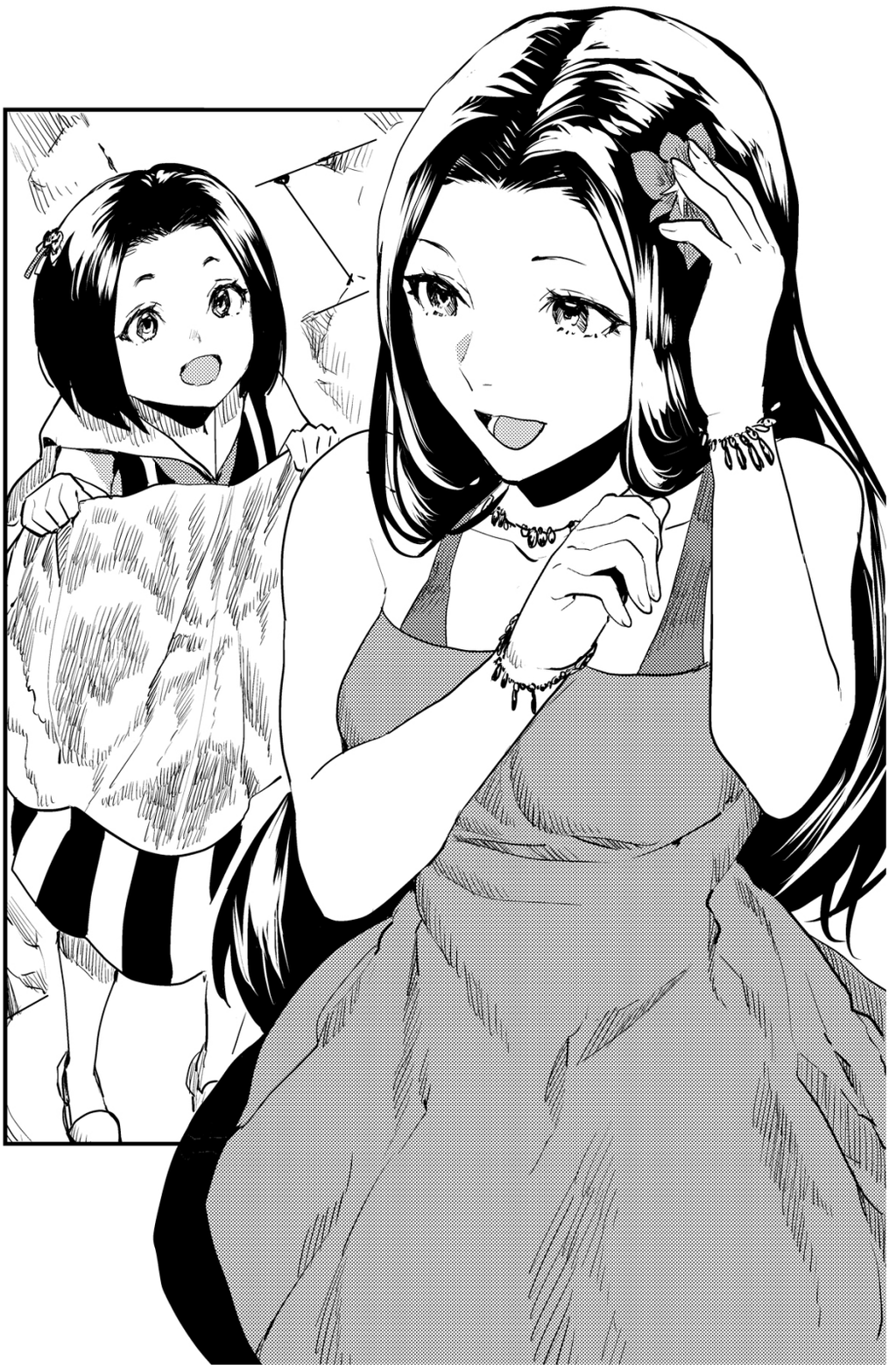
“Yeah, for sure.”

We had gone to Dora’s house last month, and today Tara was being invited to the Ruu’s festival of the hunt. It felt really great to know that we were still making time to visit one another after the revival festival had ended.

“Well then, take care. And I hope you all enjoy the festivities too, Asuta.”

“We will. See you tomorrow.”

With three wagons and four stalls in tow, we headed over to The Kimyuus’s Tail, where we met up with Telia Mas. In the same vein as Tara, she had removed her apron from her usual outfit and was wearing a flower in her hair.



“Aw, you’re dressed the same as always too, Telia Mas? You’ve got to get at least a little dressed up at times like this, don’t you?” Yumi said.

“Uh, well…I don’t own any fancy clothes.”

“Wait, seriously?! If you’d told me, I could’ve loaned you something!”

Yumi was wearing clothes similar to those the women of the forest’s edge wore, which showed off a fair amount of skin. In town, they’d typically call it a Sym-style outfit. Meanwhile, Telia Mas had on a short-sleeved top and a long skirt that came down below her knees—the perfect picture of a town girl. Her top had a circular collar, so one could say it was an outfit in the style of Jagar. Still, even if it wasn’t exactly banquet attire, if an innocent-looking girl such as Telia Mas dressed the same way they did, with wraps around their chest and waist, and not much else, what would that look like on her? I found it a little difficult to imagine.

“Why not borrow an outfit at the forest’s edge? If we ask around a bit, there should be someone there with a spare,” Yumi suggested.

“Th-That’s okay. Having that much exposed skin… I’d look pathetic.”

“That’s not true at all. This style would look great on you, I’m sure of it.”

Even if they had very different personalities, Yumi and Telia Mas were close in age and got along well. I finished returning the stalls as I was listening to them happily chatting away, then bowed my head to Milano Mas.

“I’ll be sure to keep an eye on your daughter and will have her back by the upper fourth hour tomorrow.”

“Hmph. Just don’t get too carried away.”

Milano Mas saw us off with the same sour look on his face as always. After heading east down the main road, we eventually reached the path to the forest’s edge, at which point I got up into the driver’s seat and we were off.

We had a large group of thirteen with us including the guests, and Gilulu’s wagon would be staying at the Ruu settlement tonight, so we had brought three wagons to town today. I had Toor Deen and the three guests from town in mine.

As we climbed the steep path to the forest’s edge, Yumi cheerfully called out to the driver’s seat, “It’s finally time! They

should already be preparing for the festival at the Ruu settlement now, right, Asuta?"

"Yeah. Their women are probably cooking the food now, and it should be about time for the preliminary matches in the contest of strength."

"A contest of strength, huh? That sounds amazing! You must've gone to these things several times already, haven't you?"

"This will be my third Ruu clan festival of the hunt. They're usually held once every four months."

The first one had been at the end of the blue month. That was shortly after the clan head meeting with the Suun clan and the whole commotion with Zattsu Suun that followed. At that point, I had pretty much only been on casual speaking terms with the Ruu and Rutim clans, as well as Rau Lea. Donda Ruu had asked me to cook something for the winner of the contest of strength. And of course, it was none other than Donda Ruu himself who had emerged victorious. Ai Fa's right elbow had just recovered from a serious injury at the time, and she had lost to Dan Rutim, while Dan Rutim had lost to Donda Ruu in the finals.

The Sauti had been taking lessons on bloodletting at the time, so I recalled Dari Sauti staying at the Ruu settlement and attending the festivities. I also remembered Rau Lea being frustrated with his loss to Ai Fa, and Lala Ruu cheering Shin Ruu up after he lost as well. Oh, and Darmu Ruu had questioned me about whether I was going to try to convince Ai Fa to quit hunting.

The next festival of the hunt had been held in the middle of the violet month. The sun god's revival festival had been fast approaching, so that had been an extremely busy period. Shortly before that, Yumi and some of the other townsfolk had set foot in the settlement at the forest's edge for the first time. Since Dora and his family had been about to become very busy with the harvest once the revival festival kicked off, we had chosen to throw an extra banquet for them. The Fa house had never hosted that many visitors before, nor had it done so again. We'd had six guests from town, and Rimee and Ludo Ruu had been there too, making things incredibly lively. The festival of the hunt had been a few days after that.

Since that had been not long after the Sauti's battle against the lord of the forest, several of the hunters had been seriously injured at the time. That had meant that Ai Fa, Donda Ruu,

Darmu Ruu, and Dan Rutim (due to a separate incident) had all been unable to participate in the contest of strength.

Jiza Ruu had been the winner that time. For the previous ten years or so, either Donda Ruu or Dan Rutim had always been the ones to come out on top, but with both of them removed from the running, the next leading clan head, Jiza Ruu, had claimed a stunning victory. Shin Ruu had also been getting a lot stronger around then, so he had managed to take down Rau Lea, Ji Maam, and the second Rutim son. The top eight had also included Jeeda—a guest at the settlement—and Giran Ririn, whose true talent had remained hidden up until that point. Honestly, that had been a really chaotic night.

A number of women from the north, such as Sufira Zaza, who had been staying with the Ruu in order to hone their skills as chefs, had also participated in the festival of the hunt. Morun Rutim and several others had also gone to the northern settlement for a month to teach more of their women, but they had returned for that one night. That was probably when Morun Rutim's feelings had started to blossom.

In the roughly four and a half months since then, all sorts of stuff had happened. We had gotten to know the mysterious members of the Gamley Troupe during the sun god's revival festival. Then there had been the friendship banquet with Dora and his family. Lem Dom had been accepted as a hunter in training. Next, we had held a combined festival of the hunt with the clans near the Fa, and following that had been the Genos swordsmanship tournament and the Daleim dance party. And the time when I had become terribly ill... It was impossible to even list it all out. We really had done so much during those four and a half months, including dealing with both the revival festival and the rainy season.

"Hey Asuta, are you listening to me?" I suddenly heard Yumi call out.

"Ah, sorry. I spaced out a bit. What were you saying?"

"So you really weren't listening! I was asking what sort of dishes you're making today!"

"Today's dishes? Well...you'll just have to wait and see, okay?"

"Aw, what a tease! Should I try to guess, then?"

"You'll never get it. It's something I've never shown off in the post town or at the Ruu settlement before."

"Really?!" Yumi excitedly asked. "I'm really looking forward to

it, then! What sort of dish do you think it is, Toor Deen?"

"Ah, well...sorry. I helped out at the Fa house, so I already know."

"Wait, really?! Oh yeah, you live near Asuta, don't you?! You know, it's a shame that you guys are going to be leaving. I would've loved to have a sleepover with you again!"

"R-Right. But festivals of the hunt are supposed to be held with blood relatives...so I wouldn't be invited to another clan's without a good reason."

"Hmm... But this is the third time for Asuta and Ai Fa, isn't it?"

"Yeah, but that's because this time the main event is the elder's birthday."

That said, Ai Fa *had* been invited to participate in the contest of strength. She hadn't been able to join in last time due to her injuries, but a large number of hunters were asking for her to do so now.

Well, Ai Fa did make it to the semifinals the first time she participated. And hunters of the forest's edge take pride in facing strong opponents, so it's only natural she'd be invited.

Even so, I couldn't help but feel a bit uneasy. I mean, I had trouble even imagining Ai Fa facing off with Jiza Ruu or Gazraan Rutim. I felt a strange mix of concern about what would happen if she won, and dread over the frustration she'd feel if she lost. These sorts of competitions really weren't my thing.

I feel like the kind of festival of the hunt we held with our neighbors, where there were lots of different events, made it easier to deal with winning and losing. Still, it's the Ruu clan's custom to prioritize combat, so there's no helping it.

While I was thinking about that, our three wagons arrived at the settlement at the forest's edge. Now we had to keep heading north up the path toward the Ruu settlement.

"Ooh, what a nostalgic sight! The air just feels different here at the forest's edge!" Yumi said.

"Yeah. With all the foliage around, the temperature and humidity are pretty different," I noted.

"I really do love this place! Maybe because I was born in those squalid slums? I feel like my heart can run free here, you know?!"

I might have felt similarly when I had first appeared here, but after nearly a year, this place felt like home to me. Nowadays, I had more trouble remembering things like the convenience of electricity and gas, or the smell of things like car exhaust or hot

asphalt…

“Well then, we’ll be excusing ourselves here.”

We stopped our wagons in front of the Ruu settlement and said farewell to my coworkers. Toor Deen descended from Gilulu’s wagon and moved over to Fafa’s where Yun Sudra was holding the reins.

“Yun Sudra! Toor Deen! We should talk more! You can come by our place next time!” Yumi called out.

“Okay! I’ll be looking forward to it!” Yun Sudra replied with a bright smile before departing. That left me, Yumi, Tara, and Telia Mas. I could hear enthusiastic cheering from beyond the trees that surrounded the Ruu settlement. The men must have already begun their contest of strength.

“Well then, shall we head on in? Just try not to let the excitement of it all overwhelm you.”

With three eager, smiling guests in tow, I stepped into the Ruu clan’s plaza.

2

The Ruu settlement had become a cauldron of feverish energy. A crowd of loudly cheering people filled the entire space, undoubtedly watching the contest of strength.

“Whoa, amazing! They’re as fired up as people get for the swordsmanship tournament!” Yumi said exuberantly. Tara clung tightly to my side while looking all around, while Telia Mas was holding Yumi’s arm, looking just a bit worried. It wasn’t strange for them to be a bit overwhelmed at the sight of people of the forest’s edge acting this lively. Polarth had looked like he was about to faint the first time he had seen something similar.

“Hey, it’s Asuta! And Tara too! Welcome to the Ruu settlement!” Rimee Ruu called out, appearing from within the crowd.

Tara let go of my clothes and immediately ran over to her. “We’re here! Everyone’s so spirited right now!”

“Yeah! Ai Fa’s fighting Ji Maam! He’s trying really hard, but—” Her voice was then drowned out by an explosion of cheering. Apparently, the match had reached its conclusion somewhere on the other side of the wall of bodies. “Aw, we missed it! I wonder if Ai Fa won.”

I was really curious myself. However, we couldn’t leave the

wagon where it was to join the crowd, so I just stood where I was. But then the crowd opened up like Moses parting the Red Sea, and Ai Fa came into view.

"So, you're finally here, eh, Asuta?"

"Yeah. How'd your match with Ji Maam go?"

"I won. But Ji Maam has definitely gotten stronger."

Ai Fa had faced Ji Maam during our first Ruu festival of the hunt as well. Perhaps it was fortunate that I had missed the frightening sight of the two of them facing off this time around.

"H-Hold on! Isn't Ji Maam that crazy huge guy?" Yumi suddenly asked, catching me off guard.

"Yeah. Ji Maam's exceptionally big—the largest man under the Ruu... How do you know his name, though, Yumi?"

"We talked a bit at the last banquet. He beat that huge performer in a contest during the sun god's revival festival, didn't he? How in the world did you beat a guy like that, Ai Fa?"

"I'm not sure how to explain," Ai Fa said as she looked over the guests. "It seems you are as loud as always, Yumi. I'm glad to see you looking well, though. Now that you've made it here, you should greet Donda Ruu...or actually, Mia Lea Ruu."

"Yeah! Papa Donda's busy with the contest of strength, after all!" Rimee Ruu chimed in.

The contest of strength had only just begun, so no one had made it past the preliminary matches yet. Because the Ruu clan had so many relatives, hunters had to get through this stage in order to qualify. The first eight people to win three matches advanced, but if you lost two you were out. The rest of the contest was a simple tournament bracket.

A new bout had begun in the center of the plaza, but we circled around the crowd in the direction of the main Ruu house.

And as we did, Yumi suddenly said, "Whoa! What's that? I didn't see anything like that last time we were here."

"That's the stage. The winner of the contest of strength will sit there."

The wood structure had been set up in front of the main house like always, but this time, it had a rug laid out on top of it and a leather canopy hanging over it. Granny Jiba and a number of other old folks were already seated there.

"It's rare to catch a glimpse of Jiba Ruu this early in a celebration. Is it because it's her birthday?" I asked no one in particular.

“Yeah! But Granny Jiba’s doing a lot better these days anyway, so she might start coming out to watch our festivals when it’s still bright out all the time!” Rimee Ruu energetically replied, still holding hands with Tara. I was glad to hear that, but we had to wait until after the contest of strength to give Granny Jiba our gifts of celebratory flowers.

We parked our wagon in front of Shin Ruu’s house, then headed straight over to the main house. White smoke was coming from the kitchens of the eight houses. There were also several simple stoves set up around the plaza, where giba were being roasted whole. Though the women were still dressed in their normal clothes, at this point it already felt like a festival.

We eventually made it safely to the front of the main house while avoiding the cheering crowd and the children running all about. When we arrived, Mia Lea Ruu was there to greet us.

“Welcome, dear guests, to the Ruu house.”

“Long time no see, Mia Lea Ruu! Thanks for inviting us today!” Yumi greeted her back as energetically as Rimee Ruu had been when welcoming us. Tara and Telia Mas also smiled and bowed their heads.

“Mia Lea Ruu, this is a gift from Dora,” I said while holding out the bag I had been given.

“Oh my,” Mia Lea Ruu replied, narrowing her eyes. “A vegetable seller is giving us his precious goods for free? I wonder if we should send him some giba meat in return…”

“I’m not sure. We should definitely consider it for our next visit to his house.”

“I agree. I’ll consult with our clan head about that. For now, could you tell your father we say thank you, Tara?”

“Yup! Got it!” Tara said with a smile and a nod.

Mia Lea Ruu then turned her gaze toward Yumi and Telia Mas. “We’re busy manning the stoves and can’t talk too much right now, but please, make yourselves at home. If you wish to take a rest inside, simply let someone nearby know.”

“It would be such a waste to stay inside on a day like this! We’ll just wander around for a while, so don’t mind us!” Yumi declared.

“Of course. Well then, please enjoy yourselves.”

The women took turns cooking, and watched the contest of strength when they weren’t. The contest was also a chance for the men to show off their strength as hunters, so unwed women were given as much time as possible to spectate.

“I’m going to get to work too, so you all take care,” I told the girls. “Rimee Ruu, I can borrow the kitchen at Shin Ruu’s house, right?”

“Yeah! Make something awesome, Asuta!”

Rimee Ruu seemed to be free, so I left the guests in her care. After that, Ai Fa and I headed over to Shin Ruu’s home.

“Er, is it okay for you to be wandering around like this, Ai Fa?”

“It’s fine. As I am not related to them, I feel it would be improper for me to be the one to issue challenges. I plan to simply accept whatever challenges happen to come my way.”

“Gotcha. By the way, isn’t there a custom that says hunters who make it to the top eight shouldn’t offer challenges anyway?” I felt like I had heard something like that from Rau Lea or Ludo Ruu at the last festival of the hunt—that people who made it to the top eight had to wait for others to challenge them.

However, Ai Fa shook her head and replied, “I made it into the top eight at the festival of the hunt before last, so that custom does not apply to me.”

“Ah, I see… So, remind me, who made it into the top eight last time again? Jiza Ruu won, and Gazraan Rutim finished second. And then there were Shin Ruu, and Giran Ririn…”

“The others were Ludo Ruu, Rau Lea, Mida, and Jeeda. And incidentally, Ludo Ruu beat the second son of the Rutim a little while ago.”

“I see. That sounds like a really amazing group. And now you, Donda Ruu, Dan Rutim, and Darmu Ruu are back in the mix.”

I remembered Rau Lea telling me that Darmu Ruu was supposed to be one of the most skilled people under all the Ruu. But two festivals ago, he had lost to Ai Fa, and the time after that, he hadn’t been able to participate due to his injuries. I was really interested to see how well he’d do this time.

“Oh yeah, Giran Ririn never made it into the top eight before because he always challenged Donda Ruu and Dan Rutim, right? But he made it into the top eight last time, so I guess he can’t challenge them in the preliminary matches this time.”

“Yes, I’m sure he will make it to the final eight once more.”

If the folks who made it into the top eight last time didn’t get to fight, the preliminaries would probably go to whoever acted quickest. It was apparently normal for the most skilled hunters to get a lot of challenges, but this time there was a chance that finalists from the previous contest like Giran Ririn and Shin Ruu

would miss out on that compared to the extremely strong hunters who hadn't gotten to participate at all.

So I guess it really is a system that makes it easier for those who are seen as strong to make it into the top eight. I'm sure that's because it just happened to work out that way, but it's a pretty effective setup.

I figured Giran Ririn and Shin Ruu would probably end up not advancing due to time running out. That meant they would be able to challenge whomever they pleased next time. If they managed to make it into the top eight again, that would be unmistakable proof of their skill, and they'd earn plenty of challenges from then on.

Those who make it into the final eight again and again are recognized by everyone around them as truly strong.

Donda Ruu, Dan Rutim, Jiza Ruu, and Gazraan Rutim. Those four were well established as true champions. Two festivals ago, they had all passed the preliminaries with ease.

Ludo Ruu, Rau Lea, and Mida had also made it into the final eight twice in a row, but that might have been due to the fact that the usual champions had been missing last time because of their injuries. Mida in particular was a newcomer, so he would likely not be most challengers' first choice.

Well, regardless of the circumstances, those three have made it to the top eight twice in a row now. I'm sure a lot of folks will challenge them this time. That'd result in seven spots being filled. Of course, that was dependent on all of them swiftly defeating their three challengers. But with skilled individuals like Shin Ruu, Giran Ririn, and Jeeda unable to issue challenges, how many hunters would be skilled enough to truly threaten them? Honestly, I found it difficult to imagine any of them losing.

All in all, Darmu Ruu seems like he's in an ideal position here, being the center of a lot of attention while also having the ability to issue challenges on his own.

Then again, if Ludo Ruu or someone else somehow managed to take down Darmu Ruu, that could lead to the winner receiving more challenges from others. This system they used that favored the quick could definitely result in some strange twists and turns.

Well, not that I think even a single one of these hunters is taking anything like that into consideration when they're deciding who to challenge. I was basically just imagining fringe cases. These

hunters were only interested in one thing: challenging strong opponents. Who ultimately made it into the final eight really did come down to the will of the forest.

“I just finished a match, so I’m sure no one will choose me for a while yet. You’re going to go work at Shin Ruu’s house?” Ai Fa asked me.

“Yeah. But I’m going to be using the stone ovens in a number of houses, so I’ll probably be moving all around.”

“Then for the time being, I suppose I’ll watch you work,” she said. She was bad at dealing with large crowds, so she was choosing to tag along with me instead. Gilulu had been freed from the wagon, and was currently munching on some leaves from the trees beside Shin Ruu’s house. After petting his neck a little, we circled around to the back where the kitchen was.

“By the way, where did you leave Brave?”

“Brave is staying at the house where the young children have been placed. The Ruu clan hunting dogs are all there too.”

“Oh yeah, since their related clans are leaving their houses empty, they must’ve all needed someone to take care of their dogs, I guess.”

“Indeed. There are nine of them including Brave. He looked quite happy, but of course Brave never makes a fuss without a good reason.”

This would be Brave’s first day off since he had arrived here at the forest’s edge. Him getting to spend time with all those other dogs sounded like an adorable scene.

When we arrived at the kitchen, I found that it was as hot as I expected inside. Naturally, there were women using this kitchen to cook as well.

“Pardon me. Is it okay if I do some work here too?” I said through the open door.

A small woman placing a pot on a flame greeted us with a gentle smile. “My, you’re here, Asuta? Is it really that time already? Welcome to the Ruu settlement. Please, come inside.” She was a member of this house—Shin and Sheera Ruu’s mother, Tari Ruu.

Sheera Ruu was farther inside, slicing vegetables. She smiled and called out, “Thanks for coming, Asuta.”

“Hey there. So you’re working here too, Sheera Ruu?”

“Yes. Reina Ruu is in charge of the main house’s kitchen, so I’m handling things here.”

It went without saying that Sheera and Reina Ruu were the core of the Ruu clan's complement of chefs. Having the two of them acting as leaders in separate locations was definitely an efficient way to make use of their talents.

There looked to be five or six women in the kitchen, with the majority of them being older women who were already wed. However, there was one particular unwed woman among them who was gracefully approaching me.

"Welcome, Asuta. My mother told me to assist you."

"Hey, Vina Ruu. So you'll be the one helping out today? I'm glad to be working with you."

I was planning on making a number of dishes for the festival, so I had asked in advance if I could borrow a little help from the Ruu clan.

"If you need more than just the two of you, feel free to ask us for assistance," Tari Ruu said.

"Thank you," I replied, bowing my head.

Vina Ruu, who had continued to draw closer to me, then whispered, "Are you okay with me being your assistant, though? Reina and Sheera Ruu are busy, of course, but there are plenty of chefs around who are more skillful than me."

"Oh, I'm not concerned about that at all. I mean, you're a great chef in your own right at this point, so it shouldn't be any kind of issue."

"I see," Vina Ruu responded with a listless sigh. She seemed a bit down for some reason.

"Well then, shall we get started with preparations? Er, I left the ingredients here yesterday..."

"Yes, your things are over there," Tari Ruu said, pointing. "Feel free to use that workstation."

"Thank you."

As she had said, the ingredients I had brought were sitting on top of the station. Since Ai Fa and I were participating in the festival despite not being relatives of the Ruu, I had wanted to provide all of the materials I would need myself. Personally, I considered this to be something of a celebratory gift.

"Okay, so we'll start with the fuwano and poitan," I started to tell Vina Ruu, but then Ai Fa swiftly and suddenly turned toward the entrance.

At the same time, I heard Tari Ruu say, "My, what brings you here, Darmu Ruu? Are you feeling hungry, perhaps?"

“No. I have business with Ai Fa.”

The tall figure of Darmu Ruu was standing in the entrance, his eyes shining like those of a daring wolf. Sheera Ruu turned toward him with a look of surprise, while Ai Fa suspiciously furrowed her brow.

“What sort of business do you have with me? It should still be too soon to challenge me to a match.”

“Yeah, I’ve got to wait until everyone else finishes their first rounds. But I’d like to keep an eye on you until then.”

“Keep an eye on me? What do you mean?”

“That should be obvious. I want to challenge you before anyone else can.”

It was easy to see that Ai Fa was growing more and more suspicious of him. “Darmu Ruu, allow me to ask…do you harbor some sort of ill will toward me?”

“Ill will?” Darmu Ruu repeated, furrowing his brow. However, he quickly shook his head and said, “Oh, of course. I suppose it’s only natural to think that, considering how things have been between us. But no, I don’t feel anything of the sort. I just want to challenge the hunter who beat me once more.” He was standing there quite calmly and naturally. The look in his eyes was as sharp as ever, but he didn’t seem to be especially emotional at the moment. In fact, he looked even more composed than usual.

After silently staring back at him for a while, Ai Fa finally replied. “Darmu Ruu, I have one more question to ask you. You challenged Donda Ruu before, did you not?”

“Yeah. Sure enough, I still couldn’t beat my old man.”

“And now you wish to challenge me?”

“That’s right.”

“In a Ruu clan contest of strength, if you lose twice you can no longer make it into the top eight, correct?”

“Hmph,” Darmu Ruu snorted. “You talk as if you’ve already beaten me. You’re quite confident, aren’t you, Ai Fa?”

“No, I wasn’t trying to imply anything like that.”

“Being honored as one of the top eight only matters when everything is said and done, and anyone who would run away from a strong opponent isn’t worthy of that honor anyway.”

Ai Fa gave a small sigh, then looked back at Darmu Ruu with her usual calm expression. “You’re a splendid hunter, Darmu Ruu.”

The Ruu hunter's eyes widened in surprise. That only lasted for a moment, though, before he furrowed his brow again and turned away, muttering, "What'd you say that for...? Anyway, I'll be keeping watch to make sure that no one else approaches you. Don't accept a match from anyone else, even if they call out to you through a window or something."

"Hmm. If someone challenges me, I can't simply refuse."

"Ugh, that was just a hypothetical," Darmu Ruu said, leaving the kitchen while pointedly not looking at any of us.

Tari Ruu turned to Ai Fa with a smile while chopping some tino. "Darmu Ruu always challenges the people who beat him. That's why he doesn't make it into the final eight, despite his strength."

"I see. He is undeniably worthy of the honor, though."

"Oh, yes, certainly. He can be a bit ill-tempered, but he's an excellent hunter. In that way, he's very similar to how Donda Ruu used to be when he was young."

Tari Ruu had originally been a member of a different Ruu branch house, and she had married Donda Ruu's younger brother Ryada Ruu. I found it a little difficult to imagine, but she must have been close to Donda and Ryada Ruu when they were young.

"Shin Ruu always challenges Ludo Ruu, and Giran Ririn does the same to Donda Ruu and Dan Rutim, doesn't he? Everyone related to the Ruu clan seems to be really willful like that, huh?" I interjected.

"So they are," Ai Fa calmly replied.

Vina Ruu let out a sigh. "They're all so wonderful. I should be glad they're enjoying themselves."

She had spoken so quietly that I was probably the only one close enough to hear her. And so, I whispered back, "Um, you seem kind of down. Is it something to do with Shumiral?"

"Could you stop trying to tie every little thing back to that man?"

"Ah, sorry. I'm just worried because you seem out of sorts."

Vina Ruu squirmed a bit, then leaned in close to my ear. "Inexperienced hunters from the clans related to us are tested in advance to determine whether they're qualified to participate in a Ruu contest of strength. Meaning, the Ririn clan had to test *his* strength as well."

"Oh, is that how it works? So, what happened with Shumiral,

then?”

“Obviously, he failed. Up until a few months ago, he was simply a merchant. He’s apparently skilled at fighting on totosback and using poison as a weapon, but he could never defeat a hunter of the forest’s edge with his bare hands.” Vina Ruu sighed listlessly again. I felt a shiver run down my spine as her breath tickled my ear. “He couldn’t do anything, even when facing the youngest Ririn hunter, so he wasn’t allowed to participate. Of course, I knew it would turn out that way from the start, but still…”

“I see. That’s a real shame.”

Vina Ruu stepped back, her plump lips frowning as her eyes turned down, and she began running her finger around in loops on our workstation. “It’s just so dull. I mean, I’ve never had any interest in the men’s contests of strength, but it feels even duller than usual this time.”

“O-Oh. But nobody can beat Shumiral when it comes to handling hunting dogs, so even if he can’t compete in the contest of strength, I’d say he still has a way to prove that he’s an excellent hunter.”

“I know that, but still…” Vina Ruu looked seriously displeased. As bad as I felt for her, though, I was kinda happy about it at the same time. It showed how much she cared about Shumiral, and I thought she looked cute when she got all childishly sulky like this. And besides that, I appreciated the fact that she didn’t feel the need to hide anything from me.

I could still clearly remember the sight of her standing in the rain, saying she wanted to live properly as a person of the forest’s edge. She was doing her best to deal with both her feelings and Shumiral’s. This festival of the hunt was an opportunity for the two of them to deepen their bond, and I was really glad to be here for it.

“Sheera, how are preparations going on your end?” I heard Tari Ruu say behind us.

“Once I finish these nenon, we’ll be at a good stopping point for now,” Sheera Ruu calmly replied.

“I see. In that case, why don’t you go watch the contest of strength for a while after that?”

“Huh? But I only just got back.”

“It’s fine. This is a Ruu clan custom, you know.”

Among this group, Sheera and Vina Ruu were the only unwed

women, so Tari Ruu next turned her gaze toward the eldest Ruu daughter with a smile.

“Vina Ruu, if you’d like to watch too, I can help Asuta in your place.”

“No, I’m fine. I appreciate the sentiment, though.”

I stole a glance over at Sheera Ruu, and saw that the expression on her face hadn’t changed one bit. She simply continued to chop nenon with as much care as she always did. I had to wonder how she felt about what was happening around her, considering that I knew she had hidden feelings for Darmu Ruu, but I wasn’t able to read her at all.

3

A short while later, Ai Fa exited the kitchen. However, Sheera Ruu had left sometime before her. It seemed like she had spoken to Darmu Ruu about something outside, but I had been unable to hear what they’d been discussing.

Then, a few minutes after my clan head had departed, Sheera Ruu returned and told me, “Ai Fa won.” She looked quite calm, but also a little sad at the same time. “She really is an unbelievably strong hunter. I imagine she’ll make it into the final eight this time as well.”

“Well, I guess we’ll see how it goes.”

I had some seriously conflicted feelings about that. Darmu Ruu had now lost twice, so he was out of the contest of strength. It was a competition where men fought in order to show themselves to be proud hunters, so a chef like me had no business commenting on how they chose to go about it. But even so, I was sure he must have been left with some major regrets.

Well, I probably wouldn’t be thinking that if I didn’t know how Sheera Ruu felt.

Looking back, the festival of the hunt before last had been when I had first picked up on Sheera Ruu’s feelings for him. It had been just the two of us cooking alone at the time, and I had noticed her face go unusually red when the topic of Darmu Ruu came up.

At the time, Darmu Ruu was still fixated on Ai Fa. He challenged her and lost, and that was how he got knocked out of the contest of strength that time too.

Remembering how Sheera Ruu had squatted down behind the stove in a desperate attempt to hide her beet-red face, I couldn't help but smile. Ever since then, I had observed Sheera and Darmu Ruu interacting many times, gradually becoming closer and closer to each other. There was one time at the Sauti settlement, then another at a Ruu clan banquet, and it happened again at the castle town. Each time I saw them, it felt like the distance between them closed a bit further.

But maybe I only think that because that's how I want things to be.

Sheera and Darmu Ruu were related. Their fathers were brothers, making them cousins. That meant they had been close from a young age, and from what I had seen, Darmu Ruu was kind to those close to him. At the very least, his younger sisters Rimee and Lala Ruu were quite fond of him, and I had no reason to think that he had been mean to his cousin growing up. Perhaps the friendly attitude he took with Sheera Ruu was simply the way he naturally acted around family, but personally, I hoped there was a bit more to it than that.

Darmu Ruu's already nineteen. If he's given up on his feelings for Ai Fa, it would make sense for him to get married soon. I wonder what he's planning on doing.

While I was thinking about that, Ai Fa returned to the kitchen. She looked a little worried, but Sheera Ruu just shot her a kind smile and got back to work.

Not long after, Vina Ruu announced, "All done."

"Ah, good work. Next, let's head over to the house where Bartha and Jeeda are staying, then," I said, before stepping out of the kitchen of Shin Ruu's house with Ai Fa and Vina Ruu.

As we walked along, Vina Ruu asked me, "Hey Asuta, weren't we going to use the stone ovens?"

"Not yet. Sunset is still a good way off, so we'll light them up later. We need to get all the prep work done before that."

All of the houses in the Ruu settlement were equipped with stone ovens now, but since they had a limited capacity, I needed to go to several different houses and do prep work at each of them for what I had planned.

The plaza was buzzing with excitement, as expected. There were dozens of Ruu clan hunters gathered there, pairs of them brawling one after another. I had no way of knowing which of them were racking up wins, but I could at least tell how worked

up everyone was from the cheers.

"Hey, Asuta. There you are," Ludo Ruu called out to us as we were walking to Bartha and Jeeda's house. I turned to greet him, but before I could say anything, I suddenly broke out laughing when my eyes fell on him.

"Hey there, Ludo Ruu. Looks like you're having a good time."

"Not even remotely. These runts keep running around everywhere, and I'm worried they're going to get themselves trampled."

Rimee Ruu had a firm grip on Ludo Ruu's right arm, while Tara was holding his left. Both young girls had huge grins on their faces.

"I've won twice now, by the way," he told me. "Still, that's to be expected, since none of the really strong guys are challenging me."

"I've heard that Shin Ruu can't challenge you, since he made it into the top eight last time."

"Yeah, Shin Ruu's gotten pretty darn strong. So long as someone else doesn't beat him to it, I'm sure he'll make it to the top eight again." Ludo Ruu's gaze shifted over to Ai Fa. "You know, if you keep dawdling, you'll get passed over too. You can challenge anyone you please since you didn't make it into the top eight last time, so why not hurry up and just do it?"

"No, I think it would be best for me to yield that right to your hunters. As I've had to tell multiple people already, this *is* a Ruu clan event."

"Hmm, well, there are plenty of folks out there who'll want to challenge you, so I guess it doesn't matter. I'll be praying that I'll get to fight you myself, though," Ludo Ruu remarked before heading back into the crowd.

Now that he mentioned it, he hadn't really ever fought with my clan head before. Ji Maam and Darmu Ruu were both opponents she had already faced in the contest of strength before last, and aside from them, she had only faced Dan Rutim, Rau Lea, and another Lea clan member whose name I didn't know.

With the way this is going, is she going to make it into the top eight again?

I stole a glance over at Ai Fa, and found that her face was completely expressionless. Though she had seemed disappointed about not being able to participate in the last event

due to her injuries, now that she was taking part, it seemed like she was more inclined to avoid standing out.

Regardless, I had my own work I needed to complete. When we made it to the next kitchen, I found Myme and a number of other women there stewing meat and baking poitan.

“Hey there, Asuta! How did things go in the post town?” Myme said with a smile.

“Well, we got the same number of customers as always, and we sold everything we prepared.”

“I see. I’m glad to hear it.” The young girl was stirring a pot full of something or other, and I immediately became interested in finding out what it was.

“Is this one of your recipes, Myme?”

“Yeah! Reina Ruu told me that she wanted me to cook something!”

“That’s some kind of soup instead of your usual karon milk stew, right? I’m looking forward to trying it.”

“Heh heh, if the Ruu clan didn’t already sell soup at their stalls, I probably would have tried to sell this instead. Well, assuming I could prepare that much of it, of course.”

It sounded like Myme was very confident in the dish, and that made me all the more excited for the start of the banquet.

“Well then, mind if I use this workstation? I’ll need to ask to use the stone oven as well, but not until later.”

“Of course! I’m pretty sure we’ll be done baking poitan soon!”

With that sorted out, Vina Ruu and I got to work on the second thing we were making. But as we did, the eldest Ruu daughter once again sighed.

“Myme’s so little, but she’s skilled enough as a chef to make Reina jealous. I really can’t stand how inept I am.”

“You aren’t inept. Reina Ruu, Myme, and Sheera Ruu are just exceptionally skilled. You shouldn’t worry so much about that.”

“But I can’t even measure up to Rimee. And then there’s Uru Lea Ririn too.”

That was a name I hadn’t heard in a while. She was the wife of Giran Ririn, the Ririn clan head.

“Oh, right, you’ve been spending a lot of time at the Ririn house, haven’t you? Is Uru Lea Ririn’s cooking that good?”

“Yeah. She’s a member of the Ririn clan, so I guess you haven’t interacted with her much, but I’d say she’s about as skilled as Rimee.” If that was accurate, then she really *was* pretty good.

Rimee Ruu's greatest specialty was making desserts, but her general cooking skills were only a little behind Reina Ruu's and Sheera Ruu's. "On top of that, she doesn't get worked up no matter what happens, and she's one of the most considerate people I know. I doubt there are many women as wonderful as her to be found here at the forest's edge."

"Oh, really think so? I thought she was kinda hard to get a read on when I met her."

"Yes. And she's really pretty too. She's not fat like I am," Vina Ruu remarked, looking very much like a sulking child. Even if it wasn't as bad as it sometimes had been in the past, she seemed rather emotionally unstable at the moment.

"You aren't fat, Vina Ruu. I'd say it's more like Uru Lea Ririn is overly slender by the standards of the forest's edge."

"Yeah. You may be right. But still..."

In Sym, people considered slenderness to be beautiful, a fact that seemed to still be weighing on her.

Vina Ruu raised her head. "I know I shouldn't be so weak-spirited all the time, but Uru Lea Ririn really is such a wonderful person, and I can't help but see her as the ideal woman."

"You think so? I've only talked to her briefly, so I can't say I know her very well."

"Well, I suppose I just have to aim to become a fine woman in my own right," Vina Ruu replied, and then she looked straight at me. "Hey, Asuta...there's something I've wanted to ask you for quite some time now."

"Huh? What is it?"

"I've asked you something similar in the past, but, well...do you think I'll ever become a better chef?"

That was kind of a difficult question. However, there was only one answer I could possibly give her.

"Your skills will improve as you gain more experience. And that applies to life in general, not just to cooking. You've already become a much better chef than you used to be over the last few months, haven't you?"

"But I've never been especially fond of cooking, and it's never been my specialty. In fact, I still think I'm the most useless woman in my family."

"It only seems that way because everyone in the main house is so skilled. Reina, Rimee, and Mia Lea Ruu are some of the best chefs in all of the forest's edge. But you and Lala Ruu are still at

least as good as any of our other chefs, I'd say." That was how I truly felt. They had the advantage of having learned under me for a long time now, so they had definitely picked up more knowledge than the women from the other clans had. "And if you have the motivation to keep improving, I'm sure you'll see results. The main reason Reina and Sheera Ruu became as good as they are is that they were passionate about becoming better chefs."

"Passion... I guess that *would* be the reason, huh?" Vina Ruu placed her hands on the workstation and leaned toward me. "Helping you out like this is an important source of experience for me, right?"

"Yeah, exactly."

"Got it. I'll try my hardest to learn from Reina's example. I'm sure this is exactly the sort of thing she did to improve so much."

I couldn't help but smile. I never would've expected to hear Vina Ruu say such a thing.

"There's one more key advantage you have, Vina Ruu. The most important thing to have as a chef is the desire to feed someone delicious food. Reina and Sheera Ruu, as well as Rimee Ruu and Toor Deen... They all have that desire in them, more than most people do."

"You're not making fun of me, are you?"

"Of course not," I replied. Honestly, I figured the personal desire to work hard at improving would be all the motivation she needed, and with that desire motivating me as well, I got back to work along with Vina Ruu.

It was already approaching the lower fourth hour, which meant we had two and a half hours left. Since we were going to need to use the last hour for baking, I felt like we needed to pick up the pace a bit. After all, we were going to have to head over to a third house once we were done here.

"Oh, right. Myme, where are the containers I left here yesterday?"

"Ah, they're in the pantry. I was worried we might ruin them if we tried to take them out."

I had bought several containers that could handle a stove oven's high temperatures. Fortunately, it hadn't been too difficult to purchase them from the castle town, thanks to Yang serving as a go-between for us.

"Guess we should bring them out now. Ai Fa, would you mind

helping me?"

"Not at all."

Ai Fa and I headed over to the pantry. There were two huge boxes stacked on top of one another sitting in there, each of them heavy enough that lifting one on my own would require quite a bit of effort. When she saw them, Ai Fa's eyes opened wide.

"These are all containers?"

"Yeah. We need this many if we're going to feed over a hundred people. There are six large plates in them, packed in a sort of straw so that they wouldn't break in transit. That's why the boxes are so big."

"Hmm. So despite their size, each box only contains three plates?" Ai Fa asked, picking up one of the boxes. "I see. They're awkward to carry, but not especially heavy."

"Um, Ai Fa, I was hoping to have the two of us carry them together. If I tried to carry one on my own, I'd probably drop it along the way."

"Then I'll just make two trips."

"Okay. I guess that's how we'll do it, then."

And so, I exited the pantry empty-handed, feeling a touch pathetic, only for a huge figure to silently step in front of me. Ai Fa was following behind me with one of the boxes, but she was the first to speak. "Hmm? So it's you this time, Jiza Ruu? What are you doing in a place like this?"

"I came here to speak with you, Ai Fa."

Jiza Ruu looked down at us with his usual smile. He was far more difficult to read than Darmu Ruu. His eyes *always* seemed to be smiling, which made it hard to tell what he was really feeling.

"Darmu Ruu challenged me before, but you were in the top eight in the last contest of strength, so you cannot do the same."

"Yes, you are correct. That's why I want to ask you to challenge me. Would you please grant that request?"

Ai Fa silently placed the box down at her feet, staring at Jiza Ruu with a sharper look in her eyes than before.

"Why? I don't see any reason for you to be in such a rush to face me, Jiza Ruu."

"I have several reasons. But to put it simply…I wish to face you while you still have strength to spare." Jiza Ruu's placid demeanor hid a forceful nature that sometimes took my breath

away…but he wasn't giving me that kind of feeling now. No, he remained perfectly calm as he spoke. "You're skilled enough to fight on close to an equal level with Dan Rutim. There's no guarantee that even I could defeat you. That is why I'd like to compare my strength to yours while both of us are still in peak condition."

"So you *only* wish to compare our skills?" Ai Fa asked, causing Jiza Ruu to tilt his head a bit.

"If you want to know whether I'm thinking solely about my own honor, then I would have to say that I am not. I'm thinking about the pride of the Ruu clan too."

"The pride of the Ruu clan?"

"Yes. Depending on how the pairings work out, you could end up making it all the way to the end. For example, if our clan head Donda Ruu clashes with Dan Rutim early on, it could leave both of them seriously exhausted. And if he faced you in that state, even my father might be defeated. That is my concern."

"I see."

"Including a hunter from an unrelated clan goes against the customs of the forest's edge to begin with. If such a person were to win the entire contest… Even if there is supposed to be no shame in losing during a contest of strength, it would be a rather heavy blow to the pride of the Ruu clan. I was planning to leave things to the will of the mother forest, but now I've decided to follow my own will instead."

"Very well. I believe I understand your thinking, Jiza Ruu. If it will put your mind at ease, then I will challenge you," Ai Fa calmly replied.

With the same look on his face as always, Jiza Ruu offered a small nod.

"I'm very grateful to hear that. Of course, holding back in such a competition isn't permitted, so please do not hesitate to use all of your strength."

"Indeed. The outcome will be decided by our mother forest. But could you wait a moment until I finish carrying these boxes?"

"Of course. I only just finished my second match, so there is no need to rush. I'll wait beside the house," Jiza Ruu said. Then he left so silently that I could barely sense him moving.

As Ai Fa picked the box back up, I leaned closer to her and asked, "H-Hey Ai Fa, is this really okay?"

"What do you mean? Jiza Ruu was completely correct in what

he said.”

“Yeah, maybe. But it’s hard to read what he’s really thinking, isn’t it?”

“Surely you aren’t thinking that Jiza Ruu would deliberately try to injure me? If he did that, he would lose. After all, it is a serious taboo to injure your opponent during a contest of strength,” Ai Fa said, shrugging with the box still in her arms. “Besides, Jiza Ruu places great value on the customs of our people. He would never intentionally break them. Doing such a thing would be unthinkable.”

“I know. It’s not like I doubt him.”

I had come to think of Jiza Ruu as an important comrade after all the time we had spent together. However, I still wasn’t confident that he felt the same way about us. The Ruu clan heir was an outstanding person of the forest’s edge, and my perception of him had only improved over time, especially after the peace banquet with the house of Saturas. I really did think that he’d do a wonderful job leading our people as Donda Ruu’s successor. But this was a totally different matter. It was abundantly clear that he absolutely wanted to prevent Ai Fa from coming out on top in this competition, and that was what made me so uneasy.

It’s exactly as Jiza Ruu laid out. Donda Ruu has never objected to Ai Fa participating*, and I don’t think Dan Rutim or anyone else would either. But if she were to win the whole event, it really would damage the honor of the whole Ruu clan, wouldn’t it?*

I must have been looking seriously worried, because after Ai Fa finished carrying out the second box, she gave me a light poke in the ribs with a fierce expression on her face.

“Don’t worry. It all comes down to the will of the forest.”

“Yeah… Give it your all, Ai Fa. And make sure to be careful, okay?”

“Trust in me. And in Jiza Ruu too. Focus on your own work.”

After that, Ai Fa departed once again. I somehow forced down the unease I was feeling and managed to get back to work. A short while later, Bartha stopped by the kitchen, clad in women’s clothing, and informed us of how things were going.

“Donda Ruu and Dan Rutim finally defeated three opponents, and it seems that Gazraan Rutim and Ji Maam will be fighting next.”

“So Ai Fa and Jiza Ruu still haven’t gone yet?”

“No. I saw them toward the back of the line. I have to say, I never expected Ai Fa to challenge Jiza Ruu.”

“Bartha, if you head back out to the plaza, would you mind telling me how their match goes?”

“Yeah, no worries. I mean, it’s not a match I’d want to miss!”

With that, Bartha hurriedly exited the kitchen. She had previously been a hunter in Masara and was used to rough living, so she seemed to be greatly enjoying the contest of strength. *I, on the other hand, am seriously bad at dealing with violence.*

As I moved the ingredients we had prepared onto the plates, Vina Ruu gave me a look of uncertainty. “Hey, what’s the matter? If you’re worried about Ai Fa, you could go check on her,” she said.

“No, we’re a bit behind on work, so I’d better not. It’ll be a real issue if the food isn’t ready on time.”

“Oh? Well, there should be very little chance of either of them getting injured, so I don’t think there’s any need to be so concerned about it.”

And yet, in Ai Fa’s first fight with Darmu Ruu, she had been forced to resort to a pretty outrageous move that could easily have injured him. Hunters were seriously robust, but they didn’t hold back at all when they fought.

On top of that, Jiza Ruu was the winner last time. His skills are probably second only to Donda Ruu’s and Dan Rutim’s. I couldn’t even begin to guess how strong he is compared to Ai Fa.

Looking back, I couldn’t really remember Ai Fa making any clear comments about Jiza Ruu’s strength recently. She had seemed to think she wouldn’t lose to him back when she had concluded that Melfried was roughly his equal, but she hadn’t really said anything since.

If she loses, she loses, and that would take care of this issue without any problems, I guess. Whatever happens, please just don’t get hurt, Ai Fa, I prayed in my head as I worked.

Right when we finished our second round of prep work and were about to head to the next house, though, Bartha returned to the kitchen.

“Oh, Asuta! There’s been a bit of an incident! Jiza Ruu was injured!”

“Huh?! *He* was injured?! Not Ai Fa?!”

“Yeah. He circled around behind Ai Fa and tried to grab her,

but Ai Fa swung her arm back toward him, and her elbow hit him in the head. He looked to be bleeding pretty badly."

I stood there dumbfounded for a moment, before shaking myself out of it and hurrying over to the plaza.

The plaza was in an uproar when I got there, with the whole crowd contributing to the commotion, until Donda Ruu bellowed loudly, "Do not be worried! The eldest son of the main house, Jiza, is not in any danger from his injuries! He cannot continue with the contest of strength, but he should be fine by the time the sun sets!"

Everyone had quieted down by this point, and all were listening closely to the clan head's words as he continued.

"Furthermore, it has been determined that Ai Fa of the Fa clan did not injure Jiza intentionally! Therefore, she has been absolved of any guilt in this manner, though she won't be taking part in the contest of strength any further! She will be resting until the banquet begins!"

A decent chunk of the crowd let out sighs of relief. Naturally, I was one of them. Then, as I headed toward the center of the plaza, Ai Fa appeared from within the crowd.

"Don't let it worry you, Ai Fa."

"This sort of stuff happens every now and then."

"Let's enjoy the rest of the evening together, okay?"

Several people from the Ruu or their related clans called out to Ai Fa as she passed. She nodded back to them, but never stopped walking directly toward me.

"Are you okay, Ai Fa?" I asked, jogging over to her.

With an intense look on her face, Ai Fa nodded and replied, "I'm fine. I never expected things to go that way, though. I'm ashamed of my own carelessness."

My clan head was coated in sweat, and her blonde bangs were clinging to her forehead and cheeks. This had clearly been an unfortunate accident at the end of an intense battle.

"That's just how it goes sometimes, right? You didn't mean for your elbow to hit his head."

"Even so, it doesn't change the fact that I was careless. If I had not been so inexperienced, that never would have happened," Ai Fa said with regret swirling in her eyes.

But then someone approached us: a boy with hair as red as flames, yellow eyes, skin that was lighter than that of the people of the forest's edge, and a small build. It was Jeeda, who was

currently a guest of the Ruu clan.

“That was a close match. I wish I could have seen it settled properly.”

Ai Fa slowly turned toward him. There was a frightening aura about her, as if she were an injured beast. “Oh, it’s you. If you wish to chastise me for being so green, then go right ahead.”

“If you’re green, then I’m nothing but a baby chick. You and Jiza Ruu are some of the strongest not just among the Ruu clan, but the whole of the forest’s edge,” Jeeda remarked while crossing his arms, staring intently up at Ai Fa. “Besides, I don’t see any reason to blame you for what happened. Or, well, I can’t say for certain if there is one or not.”

“What exactly are you trying to say?”

“At the end of the fight, you two were pretty close to where I was standing, and it looked to me like Jiza Ruu failed to avoid that blow on purpose.”

Ai Fa furrowed her brow deeply. “You’re saying Jiza Ruu intentionally let himself be injured in order to make me lose? Such a thing would be completely unacceptable in a contest of strength with our pride on the line.”

“Whether it’s acceptable or not, that’s just how it looked to me. Still, it’s totally possible that I was seeing things wrong.”

“Hold on. I won’t allow you to sully Jiza Ruu’s honor with such an ambiguous statement.”

“Then why not ask him directly? He’s the only one who really knows the truth,” Jeeda replied, already turning away from us, and then he disappeared back into the crowd. Ai Fa’s eyes were positively blazing as she watched him leave.

At any rate, the preliminary round of the contest of strength was still ongoing, so we weren’t going to have an opportunity to speak to Jiza Ruu for quite a while.

4

As the sun sank off to the west and the curtain of darkness descended, bonfires were set alight in various places around the plaza.

The lower sixth hour was approaching, and the banquet would be kicking off before much longer. The unwed women returned to their own homes for a bit, and then reemerged clad in dazzling banquet attire.

The largest bonfire was the ritual flame in front of the stage. Granny Jiba was standing next to that fire, accompanied by Vina and Donda Ruu.

“Head of the Ruu clan and leading clan head Donda Ruu…I grant you this celebratory crown, in honor of your triumph as the greatest warrior in all of the Ruu clans.”

Donda Ruu got down on one knee before the clan elder, deeply bowing his head. Herbs were thrown into the ritual flame and the grass crown was briefly passed through the aromatic smoke before being placed atop Donda Ruu’s head. The way it looked on him reminded me of a lion’s mane. In that instant, wild cheering filled the previously silent plaza.

Ultimately, Donda Ruu had emerged victorious in the contest of strength between the hunters. However, it had been a seriously intense competition.

The final eight ended up being Donda Ruu, Dan Rutim, Gazraan Rutim, Ludo Ruu, Giran Ririn, Rau Lea, Shin Ruu, and Mida. Jeeda ran out of time with two wins and no losses, so he didn’t make it.

In the first match of the tournament part of the competition, Donda Ruu defeated Giran Ririn. Following that, Dan Rutim beat Shin Ruu and Ludo Ruu took down Rau Lea. Finally, Gazraan Rutim beat Mida. All of the matches were close, and it wouldn’t have been surprising if any of them had gone the other way. Well, at least according to what Bartha told me.

In the semifinals, Donda Ruu faced Ludo Ruu and Dan Rutim squared off with Gazraan Rutim. Those matches were apparently even more intense, with each one taking a quarter of an hour, like when Ai Fa and Dan Rutim had fought.

In the end, Donda Ruu and Dan Rutim both defeated their sons. Then, after a break, the finals were held, and apparently Dan Rutim went down in seconds. That was quite a letdown for the crowd, who were excitedly expecting a fierce battle.

“Well, my wound is supposed to be completely healed by now, but my right leg wouldn’t listen to me at all! I guess defeating Gazraan and Shin Ruu pushed me to my limit!” Dan Rutim remarked with a hearty laugh as he lay there on the ground. “But it should be the same for you, shouldn’t it, Donda Ruu? I injured my leg, but you hurt your shoulder! I suppose that made the difference in the end, though!”

Donda Ruu had injured his right shoulder in the battle with

the lord of the forest. As he looked down at Dan Rutim on the ground, the Ruu clan head snorted, “Hmph. It’s true that my right arm wouldn’t move properly. It doesn’t usually get in the way this badly on the hunt, though.”

“Well, that’s no surprise! It’s just proof that hunters of the forest’s edge are tougher than giba, wouldn’t you say?”

At any rate, Donda Ruu was the one who emerged victorious, while Dan Rutim came in second. What would the results have been like if Ai Fa and Jiza Ruu had been in the mix? Well, there wasn’t anything to be gained by thinking too much about that.

“All of the matches were splendid. I’m sure the mother forest has taken notice of the Ruu clan’s strength,” Granny Jiba said in front of the ritual flame. The crowd went silent for a moment before cheering loudly once more.

And after waiting for their shouting to die down, Donda Ruu bellowed, “Today is also the eighty-sixth birthday of our elder Jiba Ruu. Before we begin the banquet, I would like to offer her a blessing.”

With that, Granny Jiba was led back up onto the stage by Vina Ruu. Donda Ruu followed behind them and knelt down on the stage, holding out a large red flower toward her.

“I celebrate the fact that you, my grandmother and elder, have spent this past year in good health, and I pray that the same is true of the next year.”

“Thank you, Donda. I’d like to spend as many days as I can with all of you.”

Granny Jiba hugged the red flower to her chest as she took a seat. Then Donda Ruu sat down cross-legged a short distance away, and that seemed to be a signal for the crowd to approach the base of the stage. All of the Ruu relatives wished to offer Granny Jiba flowers.

“It’s okay if we go last, right, Asuta?” Yumi asked with a smile, standing next to me.

“Yeah,” I replied with a nod. “It’s the custom at the forest’s edge for guests without blood ties to wait for later. Why don’t we line up when the crowd thins out a bit?”

“Okay! I hope she likes it!”

Our group consisted of just me, Ai Fa, and the three guests. Myme, Mikel, Jeeda, and Bartha must have all been waiting for their turn elsewhere.

“This is really amazing. What must it feel like, having over a

hundred relatives?" Telia Mas wondered.

"I'm not sure," Yumi remarked with a tilt of her head. "But at the forest's edge, if even one member gets married, the clans become related, don't they? So it makes sense that she'd end up with such a huge number."

"There aren't many clans with this many relatives even at the forest's edge. And in Jiba Ruu's case, it's likely that most of those relatives are actually related to her by blood," I interjected.

"Really?" Yumi questioned.

"Yeah. The newest generation of the Ruu is Jiza Ruu's son Kota Ruu, and Jiba Ruu is four generations back from that. Also, the Ruu tend to have a lot of kids, so the blood of Jiba Ruu's siblings and children has been passed on to all the subordinate clans too."

"There're five generations here?! I can't even imagine!"

"It's really something, huh? For example, Dan Rutim of the Rutim clan is one of Jiba Ruu's grandchildren. Jiba Ruu's daughter married into the main Rutim house, creating a blood tie between them. And through Dan Rutim, his siblings, and their children forming ties with other clans, Jiba Ruu's blood spread even farther."

"I'm starting to feel dizzy here! That's seriously amazing!" Yumi said, breaking out in a smile. "The fact that she's been blessed to have this many children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren has got to make her so happy."

That was probably a kind of happiness that would be difficult to even imagine for younger folks like us.

Even when it came to the Ririn, Uru Lea Ririn had married into that clan from the Lea, and the Lea had been connected to the Ruu for quite a long time, similarly to the Rutim. As a result, the children born to Uru Lea and Giran Ririn must have inherited either the blood of Granny Jiba Ruu herself or her close relatives.

Since they value blood ties so highly, that could eventually lead to things breaking down, as Gazraan Rutim said. That's precisely why the laws need to be changed, so that they can form new ties while still maintaining the importance of family ties. I firmly believed that, and I got the feeling Donda Ruu felt much the same way, which was why he had accepted Gazraan Rutim's proposal.

While I was thinking about that, the crowd in front of the stage had shrunk a good bit.

"I guess it's about time. Are you ready, Ai Fa?"

“Indeed,” Ai Fa replied, though her expression was tense. She had been making that face ever since she had spoken with Jeeda after her match with Jiza Ruu.

“Ai Fa, I get how you feel, but you’ll worry Granny Jiba if you go up to her looking like that.”

“I know,” my clan head replied, suddenly slapping her cheeks with both palms and massaging her face.

“Feeling a bit less tense now?”

“Yes, more or less.”

Ai Fa would undoubtedly need to speak with Jiza Ruu before she could clear up the emotions swirling about inside her. We hadn’t seen him since he had headed back to his house to have his injury treated.

If Jiza Ruu insists he didn’t intentionally take that attack, I’m sure it’ll help Ai Fa feel at ease, I thought as I climbed the stairs to the stage alongside the others.

The top of the stage was already brimming with flowers, and Granny Jiba’s hair and chest were adorned with a ton of them as well. Vina Ruu had tastefully arranged the ones the elder couldn’t wear by her feet.

“Congratulations on turning eighty-six, elder! I hope you have a long life yet to come!” Yumi said.

“Happy birthday. Please accept this flower,” Telia Mas added.

“Congratulations, Granny Jiba Ruu! I hope you’ll come to my house again sometime!” Tara chirped.

Each of the girls handed over a fresh flower in turn, and Granny Jiba’s wrinkled face broke into a smile.

“Thank you. I never expected the day would come when people from town would celebrate my birthday. I hope your friendship with the people of the forest’s edge will last for a long time, Tara, Yumi, and Telia Mas.”

Fires were burning at the four corners of the stage, which illuminated Granny Jiba’s face as she smiled blissfully at us. I felt all warm inside as I knelt in front of her after our guests from town stepped aside.

“Happy birthday, Jiba Ruu. I’m really glad that I was invited to this celebration.”

“Thank you, Asuta. This is all thanks to you helping me remember the joy of living.” Her eyes, hidden behind half-drooping lids, then turned toward my clan head. “And Ai Fa...you were once so little, but now you’ve grown into such a fine hunter.

Though we are not connected by blood, I'm as happy for you as I would be for my own child."

"You say I was little, but I believe I was taller than you even when we first met," Ai Fa noted with a natural smile. "I'm truly grateful to be here to celebrate your birthday. I pray that you will live for a long time yet and guide not just the Ruu but all people of the forest's edge down the proper path."

"You have been a guide for me as well, you know. It's my greatest joy to be able to continue walking this path alongside my family and all of you."

"Yes, I feel the same way," Ai Fa said, handing Granny Jiba a large red mizora flower.

The older woman accepted it, holding it gently to her chest. "You'll be staying at the Ruu house again tonight, won't you? I'd like to have some time to talk to you later in the evening."

"I'll be looking forward to that as well." Ai Fa moved back and rose to her feet. Tara and the other guests were already heading down the stairs. However, my clan head turned toward Donda Ruu instead. "Donda Ruu, I'd like to say something."

"If it's about Jiza, no need to apologize. When hunters are close in strength, sometimes bloodshed results. Consider the regret you feel punishment enough."

"No, but..."

"There's no point in arguing. Besides, I consider Jiza's inability to dodge to be partly to blame for what happened anyway," Donda Ruu said, leaning forward and then rising to his feet. "You're the last ones to offer flowers, so let's get the banquet started. I've got a hundred starving relatives waiting, so I can't waste any more time prattling on."

Ai Fa just nodded and stepped back.

As we returned to ground level, Donda Ruu called out, "Let this banquet commence! Relatives of the Ruu, give your thanks to the forest and turn this blessing into your own body and strength!"

Sounds of jubilation once again filled the plaza. I, meanwhile, hurriedly rushed to my workstation, since I needed to help set out the food.

There were simple stoves set up all around the plaza again today, surrounded by blankets laid out on the ground. Lately, Ruu clan banquets had always had basic accommodations like these so you could either walk and eat or have a seat and enjoy

your food.

When I got in position, I found that Lala Ruu and a number of women had already gotten to work.

“Oh, Asuta, we’ve already got these two started.”

“Thanks. Take care not to burn yourselves.”

Two of the three types of dishes were already laid out atop the stand constructed from a plank and some wooden boxes. Specifically, those two were stone oven-baked pizza and oven-roasted giba meat.

We had made the pizza dough out of a mix of fuwano, poitan, a little salt, a little reten oil, and gigo. Like with the pasta, it required a blend of both fuwano and poitan to get the right consistency. I had added the gigo because I still hadn’t found an ingredient equivalent to yeast, so the dough didn’t rise enough without it. It had required some trial and error to get the ratio correct, but all that effort had resulted in a texture quite similar to the pizza I remembered.

I had kept the toppings simple, with karon dried milk and ripened tarapa, as well as slices of sausage and finely chopped pula. Basically, I had decided to go for something akin to pizza Margherita.

The karon dried milk was mild and not too quirky, like mozzarella cheese. And I had used fully ripened tarapa from the castle town because ordinary tarapa were too sour. These tarapa originally came from the Daleim lands, and I was able to purchase them from the castle town with Yang’s assistance.

In an ordinary Margherita, meat wasn’t necessary, but the people of the forest’s edge were so extremely fond of giba meat that I had decided to add sausage to it. I had laid out a sizable number of sausage rounds on top, so I was sure it would be plenty substantial. After being thoroughly baked in a stone oven, the sausages had only browned a bit around the edges, and the juices they released gave them an awesome shine.

The bell pepper-like pula was mostly meant to add some color, though actually, I liked pizza with green pepper in general. I hadn’t had much opportunity to bake the real stuff myself, but when I made pizza toast, I would always use a fair amount of them.

“If we only give it this much pula, even you should be able to handle it, right, Lala Ruu?”

“Yeah, I suppose. But I think it’d be just fine without any pula,”

Lala Ruu replied while cutting the pizza into slices. As expected, it seemed she had already given it a taste test. Oh, and she was naturally wearing banquet attire, so she looked even cuter than usual. Not that she didn't look cute all the time, but letting her red hair dangle naturally instead of putting it up in her usual ponytail made her look a lot more girlish. "Either way, this stuff is incredibly delicious. I'd like to have Sati Lea try it as soon as possible."

"Sati Lea Ruu? Oh yeah, she's fond of poitan, isn't she?"

"Yeah. I'm sure she'll enjoy it as much as she enjoys okonomiyaki."

There was already a sizable crowd in front of the stand, so the pizza was being snatched up as fast as Lala Ruu could cut it. Once that initial flurry subsided, Yumi and company approached.

"Whoa, talk about extravagant! You used a ton of dried milk on this! I guess that means it's gotta be delicious!"

"Yeah, it looks really tasty!" When I heard that voice, I looked down and saw that Rimee Ruu was there beside Tara again. Apparently, they had met back up at some point. "Hurry up and give us some, Lala! I'm starving!"

"Quiet, you. This is actually kinda tricky to work with," Lala Ruu replied while using a metal skewer and a cooking knife to make fairly smooth cuts as she sliced the pizza. "If you're that hungry, you can eat the food over there first. All you need to do with that stuff is load it onto a plate."

"Hmm? Is this giba meat?"

"Yeah, but it's super delicious."

That was the oven-roasted giba meat. I had used many different cuts of meat, marinated in a mix of fruit wine, nyatta spirits, tau oil, keru root, myamuu, and chitt seeds, and then slowly roasted. I had thrown some chatchi and nenon in with it as well, and they were being served piping hot on the same big plate as the meat. It had turned out every bit as well as the roast giba I had made in the past, all thanks to the stone oven.

The parts of that particular dish that I would have recommended the most were the chunks of sirloin that had been cut to be as large as possible, and the rib meat that was still on the bone. The ribs had been prepared in a spare rib style, steadily cooked in the stone oven until they were nice and tender all the way to the center. The meat was as soft as if it had been boiled, and was easy to smoothly remove from the bone. The

hunters of the forest's edge tended to prefer tough meat, but I figured they wouldn't complain about this texture.

"Yup, this is great! Now to follow it up with some wine!"

"Y-Yumi, please try not to drink too much, okay?"

"I'll be fine! I've got a real high tolerance for the stuff. I promise not to make a show of myself or anything!"

The group were all excitedly chatting away as they smacked their lips in anticipation. And then, their portions of pizza were finally cut.

"Thanks for waiting. It shouldn't be all that hot anymore, but still, be careful with it."

"Thank you, Lala Ruu! Ooh, it really does look delicious!" Yumi bit down into the pizza. The dried milk must have still been plenty hot, since it stretched into a nice stringy strand as she pulled back. Rimee Ruu and Tara were also stuffing their cheeks with pizza. It didn't take long for everyone to start smiling.

"Yummy! It tastes totally different from normal baked poitan!" Rimee Ruu remarked.

"Yeah, I love this stuff!" Tara chimed in.

The oven-roasted giba meat and pizza with dried milk and ripened tarapa both seemed to have earned rave reviews. After briefly watching the adorable sight of everyone enjoying them so much, I turned around to face Ai Fa, who had been waiting quietly behind me.

"Well then, why don't we bring out the last dish too? Could you lend me a hand, Ai Fa?"

"Of course."

The final dish was being kept warm in a stone oven that had already been extinguished. With Ai Fa's assistance, I carried it out. Rimee Ruu's group was still hanging around, and when they saw it the young girl said, "Wow, what big plates! Did you bring them from the Fa house?"

"Yeah. These are plates that won't break even if you cook them in a stone oven."

They really were quite large, around sixty centimeters in diameter. They were what had been packed inside the wooden boxes. We had six of them in total, and three of them were currently sitting atop the tray we were carrying out.

Atop those plates sat a gratin of sorts, piping hot and giving off steam. The rich aroma of karon milk and dried milk was evoking excited comments from a bunch of different people, not

just Rimee Ruu.

“That’s amazing! You used dried milk in this one too?”

“Yeah, though this is gyama dried milk.”

Gyama dried milk had a taste similar to Camembert cheese. I had melted a load of it mixed with some karon milk, and then added that to a white sauce I had made. Inside it were aria, chatchi, nanaar, giba bacon, and the mushrooms that resembled brown beech and common mushrooms, as well as some specially prepared pasta. Rather than my usual spaghetti style, this time I was using something closer to gnocchi.

They were little flat balls around the size of my thumb, with jagged ridges along the surface. I had added that texture with a fork while smooshing them flat so that they would pick up more of the sauce. Also, unlike my usual pasta, where I added egg to the fuwano and poitan, for the gnocchi I used chatchi instead. The potato-like chatchi gave it that particular springy texture I had been aiming for.

“This stuff is really hot, so please be careful while eating it. If you burn your mouth, you’ll have a hard time fully enjoying the other dishes,” I explained while portioning out the gratin onto small wooden plates. It had come out of the oven thoroughly cooked, with some nice crispy browning on its surface. Meanwhile, a line had started to form in front of me without me even noticing. Naturally, it was the same elsewhere too, but there were around twenty to thirty people gathered around us specifically, making quite a commotion.

“Whoa, this really is hot! But it’s delicious too, Asuta!” Yumi said.

“Thanks. What do you think, Telia Mas?”

“It’s very good! I never knew an oven could let you make something so wonderful!” Telia Mas was more calm and composed compared to Yumi, but she sounded so happy that it brought a blush to my cheeks.

“Whoa, it’s vanishing before my eyes! Leave some for me, okay, Asuta?” Lala Ruu remarked with a bit of a worried look.

“No need to be concerned,” I replied with a smile. “I left the other half of it in the oven for that exact reason. I’ll take the other three plates out in half an hour or so.”

“Got it! Hey, Rimee, you should bring some food to Granny Jiba and Papa Donda instead of only stuffing your own face.”

“Okay! I’m sure even Granny Jiba could eat this gratin and rib

meat!”

Having finished sampling each of the dishes, Rimee Ruu set about securing plates for Granny Jiba and her father. However, just in that short span of time, two whole plates of the gratin had already been wiped clean. No one was familiar with these dishes that relied on the use of stone ovens, but they seemed to be extremely popular.

It was then that I heard Ai Fa call out, “Asuta?”

“Hmm?” I turned, and was surprised when a little torn off bit of pizza was shoved into my mouth.

“I say this every time, but you need to eat properly too.”

Perhaps it wasn’t the best manners, but I chewed on that piece of pizza as I stood there, continuing to serve up food. It had cooled off to around skin temperature, but it was still delicious. The mellow flavor of the karon dried milk and the perfect sourness of the ripened tarapa created a wonderful harmony with the delicious flavor of the sausage and the bitterness of the pula, delighting my tongue. The crispy surface and moist interior of the crust was quite pleasant too.

The members of the Ruu clan were all eating my dish with smiles on their faces. This was the biggest banquet I had attended since our own festival of the hunt, so I was filled with a great sense of satisfaction.

Celebrations like this really are great, I thought to myself as the gratin ran out. There was only a bit of pizza and oven-roasted meat left too.

“Asuta, is there any of these dishes left?”

“Yeah. A lot of folks haven’t been able to try them yet, so I’m going to bring out more later along with the rest of the gratin.”

“Got it! Then once we finish this up, we’ll go enjoy the other food too!”

Just a few minutes later, all of the food was gone. Rimee Ruu and Tara’s group had already vanished on us, probably seeking out other dishes elsewhere in the plaza. At any rate, Ai Fa and I could now do as we wished for the time being.

“Well then, why don’t we go enjoy everyone else’s cooking? Or would you rather go see Granny Jiba again?”

“No, she’s got her family surrounding her at the moment. I’ll be able to speak with her after the banquet, so there’s no need to butt in.”

“I see. In that case…” I started to say, only for Ai Fa to

suddenly turn to the side. Jiza Ruu was approaching us from somewhere in the darkness, gray bandages wrapped around his head.

"Jiza Ruu... You've been cleared to move around?"

"Indeed. The romu leaves put me to sleep, but I've finally awoken." Jiza Ruu eventually stopped about a meter away from us, his narrowed eyes staring calmly at my clan head. "I hear our clan head Donda won the contest of strength. I would have liked to at least have seen the matches between the final eight."

"How are your injuries? I heard they were nothing to worry about."

"Yes, that's correct. Even a slight wound to the head can bleed quite a bit. After taking a bit of a break, I'm essentially back to normal now."

"I see," Ai Fa replied, raising her head. "I am truly grateful to the mother forest. And Jiza Ruu, I must apologize for—"

"No, you have nothing to apologize for. In fact, I am the one who should be apologizing."

When he said that, Ai Fa's shoulders trembled slightly. "What do you mean? I injured you, so I cannot see any reason for you to apologize. Unless..."

"Hmm?"

"Do you mean to say you let yourself get injured so that I would lose?"

Jiza Ruu shook his head, the smile on his face not changing one bit. "It would be unacceptable to commit such a vulgar deed in a contest of strength at the forest's edge. However...the thought *did* enter my mind for a moment. That is proof that I am still not fully mature."

"Not fully mature?"

"Yes. I truly was aiming to defeat you. But then I saw your arm coming at me out of the corner of my eye, and a shameful thought passed through my mind for but a mere moment: that if I didn't dodge, I would surely be injured and you would be unable to continue in the contest of strength."

Ai Fa was totally silent as she listened to him.

"It was a mere moment of hesitation. I had no intention of taking any such action. However, in a match between hunters who are close in strength, a moment of lost focus can prove decisive. By the time I came to my senses, I was already staring up at the sky and bleeding."

And then Jiza Ruu… Jiza Ruu of all people… He bowed toward Ai Fa.

“As a result, I sullied a competition between hunters. On top of that, I caused you to suffer from regret. This was all caused by my immature spirit, and so I feel deeply and truly apologetic.”

“There’s no need for you to bow your head. You were only driven to that point because I thoughtlessly joined your contest of strength,” Ai Fa said, furrowing her brow and looking pained. “Allow me to share my honest feelings. My loss to Dan Rutim in that previous contest of strength frustrated me. And you, Donda Ruu, and Gazraan Rutim are all splendid hunters, so I wanted to see how far my strength would take me against such opponents. However…that was a mistake on my part.”

“But our clan head Donda granted you permission to participate.”

“It was foolish to allow myself to rely on Donda Ruu’s accepting nature like that. Even if he gave his permission, I should have restrained myself.” Ai Fa closed her eyes for a moment, then stared up at Jiza Ruu once more with a look of determination. “We now hold a festival of the hunt with our neighboring clans. If someone from an outside clan were to participate and win in all the events, how would that make me feel? I am certain I would find it very aggravating. It isn’t proper to make others feel that way during a festival of the hunt, an event meant to deepen ties with your comrades. Because of that…I do not intend to take part in any further Ruu festivals of the hunt.”

“Not just the contests of strength, but the festivals as a whole?”

“Indeed. I am a hunter, so it does not make sense for me to participate in one but not the other. A celebration between relatives should not involve outsiders so casually.”

Jiza Ruu had a very calm look on his face as he listened to Ai Fa’s words. “I have felt the same way myself for some time. Our clan head Donda has acknowledged the Fa as friends, but participating in our contest of strength could endanger that bond.”

“And now I can see how true those words are… As I recall, there was a young Rutim hunter who once felt something close to animosity toward me for fighting a nearly even match with Dan Rutim. If I were to win the entire Ruu contest of strength,

there would surely be plenty of hunters who would feel similarly."

"Yes. We people of the forest's edge are all comrades. We should try to deepen our bonds with the members of all clans, rather than hating one another. That is why I believe actions that would hamper that goal should be avoided."

Jiza Ruu's expression remained unchanged. However, I sensed something unexpected as I looked at his huge frame. It was something entirely different from the stifling pressure I had felt from him in the past. Now his aura felt gentle yet firm in a way that was unique to him. Even Gazraan Rutim, who had a presence like a sturdy, reliable tree, didn't give me the same impression I was getting from Jiza Ruu.

"I still do not know if the path you and Asuta tread overlaps with my own. However...I can tell quite clearly that we are in full agreement right now, at this very moment."

"Indeed."

"It makes me quite happy to know that." Jiza Ruu turned so that his side was facing us. He seemed to be smiling faintly. It was probably the first time I had seen him openly express what he was actually feeling.

"Well then, I believe I'll go offer our elder Jiba a celebratory flower. But before that, there's something I would like to say."

"Hmm?"

"I am grateful that you have decided to no longer participate in our contests of strength and festivals of the hunt, and believe you are correct to do so. But I do not feel there is any need for you to distance yourself otherwise. A great many people would like you to participate in our other banquets," Jiza Ruu said as he headed off toward the brightly lit plaza. "Rimee's birthday will be coming up in the yellow month. She'll be expecting you to be there, so please don't disappoint her."

"As long as you and Donda Ruu give your permission, I would certainly not wish to upset her."

"Our clan head Donda would never do anything to make Rimee sad. And I feel much the same."

Jiza Ruu walked off. After watching him leave, Ai Fa glanced over at me.

"My apologies for making a decision about our future activities all on my own, Asuta."

"You're the clan head, so no need to worry about that.

Besides, I don't have any objections on my end," I replied with a smile. "Why don't we go enjoy the food the Ruu clan prepared? I'm sure you must be starving by now."

"Indeed," Ai Fa answered. She'd had an intense look on her face all evening, but for the first time in a while, she was now smiling honestly.

5

"Why, if it isn't Asuta?! Where in the world have you been hiding all this time?" a booming voice called out from beside a stove as we approached the crowd after Jiza Ruu separated from us. The man was laughing heartily, and there was naturally no mistaking his identity. It was the father of the Rutim clan head, Dan Rutim.

"Oh, Dan Rutim. I was serving people my own cooking at that stove over there. Have you already had some of the food we made with the stone ovens?"

"Indeed! A woman from a branch house brought some over! That rib meat was unbelievably delicious! It hasn't already run out, has it?"

"No, it hasn't. I plan to bring out the other half in a little while."

"Ah, I see! That rib meat was so delicious that I'm gonna have to get one of those stone oven things at our house too!" Dan Rutim remarked with a hearty laugh, and I found myself laughing along with him.

"I heard your leg wasn't moving right so I was worried. It's a real relief to see you looking so well, Dan Rutim."

"Hmm? Yeah, my leg's not listening to me! Guess I'll need to use a cane again for the next few days! I'm just glad it's a break period!" Dan Rutim complained, and then he let slip a satisfied sigh. "Gazraan really has gotten strong. I used to be unstoppable, even in the face of giba, but now my leg's a real mess! At the next festival of the hunt, Gazraan may well finally beat me!"

"I wish I could have beaten you *before* your leg was injured, though," Gazraan Rutim said from behind his father.

When I looked over at him, I let out a surprised sound. "Oh! Ama Min Rutim, long time no see! How are you feeling?"

"It really has been a while, Asuta. I'm glad to see you looking

well.” Ama Min Rutim was smiling kindly at us from where she was sitting beside her husband. It definitely had been quite some time since we had last met, and her appearance had changed quite a bit. Her outfit was a full dress, proof that she was wed, and it was really jutting out at the stomach. “Both my child and I are doing quite well. Not long ago, just the smell of meat and fat was unbearable, but that seems to have finally settled down.”



I had learned of her pregnancy back during the violet month last year. It had to have been roughly five whole months since then. I wasn't exactly knowledgeable about such things, but she must have been heading into the stable stage of her pregnancy.

Though her stomach was definitely bigger, Ama Min Rutim didn't look any different otherwise, except that her already kind gaze seemed to be overflowing with more warmth and affection than ever before.

"I had some of your cooking too, Asuta, and it was all delicious. Last month, the smell of dried milk melting would have been too much for me."

"That food will become our child's flesh and blood," Gazraan Rutim calmly remarked, gently placing his hand on his wife's shoulder.

Ama Min Rutim smiled joyfully, but then her eyes opened wide and she said, "Is something the matter, Asuta? Are you feeling unwell?"

"Ah, no. I was just overcome with emotion." I hurriedly wiped the tears from my cheek with the back of my hand.

Ai Fa seriously furrowed her brow and brought her face close to mine. "I'd say that you simply cry too easily. What in the world were you thinking about?"

"Oh, sorry. I got kinda emotional when I saw the two of them looking so happy. Even more so when I remembered how we first became friends back during their wedding banquet."

"You are a truly kind man, Asuta," Ama Min Rutim said with a relaxed smile. "It will still be a few months until our child is born, but I would like to have you hold them when the time comes."

"Sure thing. I'll do my best not to make your baby cry."

With that, Dan Rutim gave another hearty laugh. "If the kid turns out to be a girl, I'd love to have her study cooking under you, Asuta! A kid who's had your cooking since before birth will definitely turn out to be an amazing chef!"

I couldn't help but notice Dan Rutim tearing up just a bit as he laughed. He was a really emotional guy, and he had cried a bit during their wedding too.

Raa Rutim and the second Rutim son were also present. Their clan seemed to stick together quite a bit, even at such large banquets. However, there was one member of the main house that I wasn't able to spot.

"Morun Rutim isn't with you, huh? I saw her a number of

times while I was cooking, though."

"Yes, I believe Morun is helping Reina Ruu's group. I think she prepared that whole-roast giba."

"I see. The folks from the Dom didn't come along, though."

"Yeah! They said regardless of how the clan head meeting goes, it wouldn't do for the Dom to show up at a Ruu banquet! They sure are a stubborn lot!" Dan Rutim said, looking quite amused. "Well, even if the Rutim and Dom do become relatives, the other clans we're related to won't be included in that! But still, I don't see how them showing up at a banquet would cause an issue."

"The northern clans value the customs of the forest's edge more than anyone else. I'm just glad that they allowed Morun to stay there."

It had only been about ten days since the meeting with Gulaf Zaza and the others regarding the matter of Morun Rutim. She had ended up coming back home rather quickly.

"Will Morun Rutim be returning to the northern settlement tomorrow?"

"That she will! If she comes back for festivals of the hunt, wedding banquets, and family members' birthdays, we'll still be able to see her around ten times a year! And if we want to see her more, we can always visit her ourselves!"

It was good to see that the whole thing with Morun Rutim hadn't cast a dark shadow over the Rutim clan. That was unsurprising when it came to Dan and Gazraan Rutim, but everyone else was smiling and chatting away as well.

"I hope your proposal is accepted at the clan head meeting, Gazraan Rutim. At the very least, you have the support of the clans near the Fa."

"Indeed. The next clan head meeting will be quite hectic, considering that we'll be discussing marriage, the hunting dogs, and doing business in the post town," he replied with a relaxed smile.

And then, the second son's wife returned from the stove carrying two plates.

"Ai Fa, Asuta, you must be hungry, right? Please eat this."

"Ah, thank you very much."

It was a dish cooked in tau oil, using giba meat, chatchi, nenon, and onda, and it had a light brown color. It was a rather simple dish for a Ruu clan banquet of late, but it really did look

good. When I took a bite, I found myself a bit surprised. Despite the simple ingredients, there was some serious depth to the flavor. It used not only tau oil, but also sugar, fruit wine, and a pinch of myamuu. On top of that, there seemed to be grated gigo in there too. That gave the dish a bit of a viscous feel.

"This is really good. And, how should I put it...? It seems to use some tricks I haven't seen before."

Reina and Sheera Ruu tended to ask me to give their dishes a taste test when they were trying out something new. However, I couldn't recall ever having anything like this.

"That dish was prepared by the Lea and Rutim women. Oh, and a Ririn woman was there too, directing them."

"A Ririn woman? Was it Uru Lea Ririn, perhaps?"

"Ah, so you knew? That woman seems to be quite skilled when it comes to cooking."

I could see why Vina Ruu would feel jealous of her. After all, Uru Lea Ririn was apparently skilled enough to prepare a dish that could impress *me*.

"I can just stay sitting here and have all sorts of dishes delivered to me! Asuta, Ai Fa, why don't the two of you have a seat as well?" Dan Rutim suggested.

"Ah, no, in half an hour I'll have to get back to work, so for now, we'll be walking around to the various stoves ourselves."

"Well, make sure to come back around before the banquet ends! I haven't had much of a chance to relax and talk with you two lately!"

I felt a great deal of happiness inside as we headed to the next stove. Those simple stoves were spaced out evenly around the plaza, and they were each offering a number of dishes, so it felt like we were going around to a bunch of different stalls.

At the next place, we found the whole-roast giba. However, all of the meat had already been cut off, and the bones had been stored in jars. It would definitely make the hunting dogs happy to be given those as a treat.

Even the stand for roasting the giba had been taken down, and on top of that stove sat a pot of cream stew, boiling away after being freshly brought out. As it happened, the Ruu clan grandmother, Tito Min Ruu, was the one serving the dish to those who came her way.

"Oh my, Asuta and Ai Fa. Are you finally done with your work?"

"Yeah, I'm taking a little break right now. Weren't Reina Ruu

and Morun Rutim supposed to be here?”

“Once work with the whole-roast giba was done, it became my turn. They’re over there, chatting in the dark.”

I hesitated for a bit, but ultimately accepted a half serving of cream stew before heading in the direction Tito Min Ruu had pointed. Morun Rutim would be leaving again early tomorrow, so I wanted to speak with her a bit now while I had the chance.

They were sitting together in front of a house, outside of the main plaza. As it happened, Sheera Ruu was also there with Reina Ruu and Morun Rutim.

“Good work today, everyone. Mind if we join in?”

“Ah, Asuta and Ai Fa. No, that’s no issue,” Reina Ruu said with a smile after turning in our direction. Apparently, it hadn’t been a serious conversation, so I felt relieved. “We haven’t seen Morun Rutim in a while, so we were just chatting a bit. You two can join in if you’d like.”

“Glad to hear it. Still, why are you talking in the dark like this?”

“Well, we noticed that Morun Rutim had a real serious look on her face for some reason,” she explained, turning back toward the girl from the subordinate clan, who smiled in embarrassment.

“Yes, I suppose I did. I wanted to apologize again for suddenly quitting work at the stalls,” Morun Rutim said.

“That’s nothing to worry about. It’s true that you were a fully trained worker and I’ll miss working alongside you. But what you’re trying to do now could be a major turning point in your life,” Reina Ruu replied.

Morun Rutim had moved to the northern settlement half a month ago. Ever since then, we’d had to have Tsuvai’s mother Oura take her place at work. But even so, the other women were so experienced that we weren’t having any issues.

“You’re doing what you have to, so don’t worry about us and just give it your all. Right, Sheera Ruu?”

“Yes, of course. And if you end up getting permission to marry into the Dom, I promise that our relationship won’t change.”

I hadn’t seen Sheera Ruu either since we had parted ways in Shin Ruu’s kitchen. I had been a bit worried about her, but I was glad to see that she was back to showing her usual kind smile.

It went without saying, but as unmarried women, they were all clad in beautiful banquet attire. Reina Ruu was a looker to begin with, so she was absolutely dazzling now, and Sheera Ruu

looked like a lovely spirit from the moon. As for Morun Rutim, she was adorable too. She wore a large number of accessories made from flowers and berries rather than metal, and her dark brown hair was running down her back, done up just at the ends. She was the youngest out of the group, so she had a really innocent appearance.

But even so, she looked a lot more mature than the last time I had seen her. Morun Rutim was a bit plumper than most, with a healthy roundness to her limbs and stomach. Her face was also round like that of an infant, which probably made her look younger than she actually was. And yet, there was a calm composure about her, more so than ever seen from her before.

She had always been as cheerful and bright as the sun, charming in a way that soothed all who saw her, and that remained true. But there was also a clear sense of calm added on top of that now. She reminded me most of all of Mia Lea Ruu, who was in charge of the Ruu women.

“It’s certainly felt lonely since you moved to the northern settlement, Morun Rutim. But I give you my heartfelt blessing to pursue your own happiness,” Sheera Ruu added, causing Morun Rutim to blush.

“But there are over two months left until the clan head meeting, and even if Gazraan’s proposal is accepted, I still don’t know if Deek Dom will want me as his bride.”

“I can’t imagine many men out there would turn you down. You don’t have anything to worry about,” Reina Ruu replied.

“Yeah,” Sheera Ruu agreed. “And I’m really impressed by the bravery you’ve shown. Moving to the northern settlement all on your own is no small thing. It must’ve taken a lot of courage just to open up about having feelings for a man from the north in the first place, I’d say.”

“You’re not wrong. I got a lot of my courage from Sufira Zaza, when I saw what she did because she fell for someone even further out of reach,” Morun Rutim noted with a remarkably mature look in her eyes.

Sheera Ruu gave a little smile that made me think of a moon spirit again. “That makes a lot of sense. You and Sufira Zaza are truly dazzling to me. I’m a real coward compared to the two of you.”

Reina Ruu looked a bit worried about what her cousin had said, but before she could respond, Sheera Ruu continued.

“Well then, I guess we should head back to the plaza. I’m sure everyone else wants to speak with you too, Morun Rutim.”

“Sure.”

With that, we returned to the brilliantly lit plaza, right before Donda Ruu suddenly called out to the crowd once more from atop the stage.

“We’re in the middle of the banquet, but Gazraan Rutim and I have something to tell you all! You can keep eating if you want, but listen to what we have to say!”

Looking in the direction of the stage, I saw that Gazraan Rutim was indeed standing atop it too. As I wondered what was happening, I gestured for Ai Fa to follow me as I headed over there.

“Today is the birthday of our elder! And so, it is also a fitting occasion to discuss this matter! I’d like all of the clan heads under the Ruu to gather here!”

Five men stepped forward: Rau Lea, Giran Ririn, and the heads of the Min, Maam, and Muufa.

“What’s this about? If it’s going to be all stiff and formal, I’d prefer to save it for another day,” Rau Lea said, knowing no fear.

Donda Ruu snorted, “Hmph!” in response. “Unlike you, Gazraan Rutim and I follow basic logic and our customs. Normally, you’d be standing up here with us too, Rau Lea.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. Whatever it is, just hurry up and say it.”

Donda Ruu’s shining blue eyes turned toward Gazraan Rutim. The Rutim clan head nodded, then spoke up in a deep and clear voice. “It has not been long since I became the head of the Rutim, but I have come to a decision. And it is one I would like everyone gathered here to listen to. Tsuvai and Oura, come stand before me.”

As the crowd started murmuring, two slender figures—Tsuvai and Oura—stepped forward, placing themselves in front of the ritual flame.

“What’s this all about? I can’t see what we did for you to shame us in public like this,” Tsuvai said, glaring up at Gazraan Rutim and hugging Oura’s arm tightly. However, Gazraan Rutim smiled gently at her in response.

“Oura, Tsuvai... As your clan head, I, Gazraan Rutim, wish to grant you the Rutim name.”

Oura froze in place, as if she had been struck by lightning.

Tsuvai looked like she was trying to shout something, but her mouth could only flap open and shut as she was left at a loss for words. The murmuring coming from all around us was growing louder now.

Then Donda Ruu shouted out, “Mida of the Ruu clan, step forward beside Oura and Tsuvai!”

A massive figure then approached from somewhere in the crowd. Mida stared up at Donda Ruu, holding two plates of food in his hands.

“As your clan head, I, Donda Ruu, wish to grant you the Ruu name.”

“Huh?” Mida looked around in confusion.



As he glanced over at the three of them, Rau Lea said, “I see. So that’s what it was. Donda Ruu, Gazraan Rutim, you guys really made this into a whole thing, huh?”

“Silence. You’re the one who was thoughtless enough to grant a clan name the very day a new member joined you.”

Naturally, he was referring to Yamiru Lea.

Rau Lea just casually shrugged in response, so Donda Ruu continued.

“Today, Mida succeeded in becoming one of our top eight for the third time! And I am told Tsuvai and Oura have been living proper lives at the Rutim settlement! Roughly three hundred and thirty days have passed since we welcomed them in as members of our clans. Gazraan Rutim and I believe that is enough time to take their measure! And so, we ask all of you in our extended family for your approval as well!”

At that, an even louder cheer erupted than the one at the start of the banquet.

Quite a few people around me and Ai Fa were lifting bottles of fruit wine up into the air. It took me a moment to come back to my senses, but then I started heartily applauding.

“They and Yamiru Lea still seem to show affection for one another as relatives. However, the Ruu, Rutim, and Lea are all related, so they undeniably share blood ties once again! Accept these clan names, as proof that you have finally shed the ill bonds created by the Suun!” Donda Ruu shouted loudly enough to be heard over the cheers from the plaza. “From today on, you are Mida Ruu, Oura Rutim, and Tsuvai Rutim! Step forward onto this stage, and receive your blessing from our elder Jiba!”

The three of them timidly stepped up atop the stage. Gazraan Rutim accepted Mida’s plates, and then they each knelt in front of Granny Jiba in turn. It seemed the Ruu elder was offering them some sort of blessing, but I couldn’t properly make out what she was saying, with everyone around us still cheering loudly.

Amid all that, Ai Fa leaned in close to my ear.

“Asuta, I told you not to shed tears so easily, did I not?”

“Yeah, sorry. But I can’t help it at a time like this.”

“I really don’t understand you.”

After a few moments of hesitation, Ai Fa wiped the tears from one of my cheeks with her finger. I instantly felt bashful, so I wiped my other cheek myself with the back of my hand.

However, my vision remained blurry even so. But with my blurry vision, I saw Mida and the others turning toward us. What were they feeling inside as they looked out at the crowd? I had no way of knowing, but they were undoubtedly even more moved than I was.

6

After a little while longer, we set about serving up more of the cooking from the stone ovens, and unsurprisingly, the food started vanishing at much the same rate as before. It seemed the folks who hadn't gotten to try the dishes before had heard how good they were and now those people were rushing over to give them a shot.

"They're really swarming us. Asuta, will you teach us how to make these dishes sometime too?" Lala Ruu called out.

"Of course," I replied.

After doing another short round of work, we resumed our tour around the various stoves, and somewhere along the way, we ran across a group of people that was in the midst of an argument. "Huh? What in the world's going on here?" I had to ask.

The two arguing women were none other than Vina Ruu and Yumi. Standing between them was Shumiral, who turned my way with a look of relief.

"Asuta, you came at, the perfect time. I am, very troubled."

"Yeah, I can see that. What's this all about, Yumi?"

"Hmm? It's nothing all that serious. Vina Ruu just got all annoyed with me and isn't listening to what I'm trying to say."

"I am NOT annoyed. The person responsible for causing this commotion is you."

The two of them had known each other for some time, and I was pretty sure they had always gotten along well too, so it was a little disquieting to see them fighting like this.

"I was only chatting with Shumiral here. But Vina Ruu seemed to misunderstand, even after I explained to her that she had nothing to worry about."

"As I said, I didn't misunderstand anything, and I'm not worried either. Those are just *assumptions* you made."

"I mean, it wasn't hard to notice the stink eye you were giving me. But I wasn't putting the moves on your guy."

“I’ve already told you, we don’t have that sort of relationship.”

I felt bad for Vina Ruu, who was going red from the neck on up. Now that I more or less understood the situation, I gestured to Yumi to come closer to me.

“Hey Yumi, the way the people of the forest’s edge handle romance is really reserved, so talking about it too directly can upset them sometimes.”

“Really? Nothing I said was all that out there, though.”

“Yeah, but the two of them haven’t agreed to be wed or anything yet, so even just calling him her man is pretty embarrassing for her.”

“What the heck?! It’s not like she’s some naive little girl!” Yumi shouted, earning her a fresh glare from Vina Ruu. Shumiral shot me a pleading look.

“Look, you two should just drop it. What were you even talking to Shumiral about in the first place?”

“I was asking him about his determination, naturally. I mean, he wanted to marry into the forest’s edge badly enough to cast aside his god, so I wanted to talk to him about that. But I suppose I should take your advice, Asuta.” After saying that, Yumi turned to face Vina Ruu and Shumiral. “Sorry for bothering you like that! I really didn’t mean anything by it, so I hope you’ll forgive me! And I think you two really go well together!”

I wasn’t certain if Yumi really understood what I had meant or not, but at any rate, she briskly departed after giving her apology. Poor Vina Ruu was trembling and her face was red, while Shumiral was still staring at me. I didn’t think I should leave the two of them like this.

“Yumi comes from town, you know, so she’s still not all that familiar with the customs of the forest’s edge. Try not to pay too much mind to what she said, Vina Ruu.”

She didn’t say anything in response.

“Are you enjoying the banquet, Shumiral? This is probably the first big one you’ve participated in at the forest’s edge, isn’t it?”

“Yes. I was able, to attend, the wedding banquet, for the Min and Muufa, but this is, my first one, on this scale.”

Soon after the start of the red month, there had been a wedding between the Min and Muufa. It had been celebrated with a banquet at the Min settlement, and each of the clans related to them had been invited to send a few people to join in. The only times a big event in the Ruu plaza was held for that kind

of occasion was when it was for someone with a standing like Gazraan Rutim's.

"Everyone seems, so happy. I am a newcomer, but I am, happy too. I feel blessed, to have become, a member of a clan, under the Ruu."

"Yeah, I'm sure. Festivals of the hunt and weddings are the biggest celebrations we have here. And it's the elder's birthday too, so everyone's extra happy today."

"Yes," Shumiral replied with a nod. He was dressed casually, without his long leather cloak. Unlike the other men, he had a number of accessories dangling around his arms and in front of his chest, but he wasn't wearing a necklace of tusks and horns. Those necklaces were apparently only given to hunters once they had taken down a giba with their own hands. Though Shumiral had greatly contributed to his clan's hunts with his two hunting dogs, he still hadn't killed a giba himself. Apparently, even the giba pelt cloak he wore when hunting was a spare one borrowed from another member of the Ririn. His long silver hair was almost sparkling in the light of the bonfire. Still staring directly at me, he continued, "I am also glad, that the day, has come, when Mida Ruu, Oura Rutim, and Tsuvai Rutim, have been given, their clan names. It makes me wish, to strive even harder, to receive my own."

"I'm sure it won't be long. After all, you've already helped out massively by bringing hunting dogs to the forest's edge."

I felt like I could keep talking with Shumiral forever, but if our chat dragged on too long, I would probably start to annoy Vina Ruu like Yumi had, so I turned to speak to her. "I saw that you were attending to the elder earlier, Vina Ruu. Have you had a chance to eat yet?"

"No. I only just got freed up."

"Well, we've been walking around the plaza to see what's being served at each of the stoves, so why don't you come along with us? We've only gotten to about half of them so far. You can join us too if you'd like, Shumiral."

"Thank you very much. I would, love to."

And so, our group of four started circling around the plaza. As they were an unmarried man and woman, Shumiral and Vina Ruu maintained an appropriate distance from each other, but they were still walking side by side. Since Shumiral had blood from Sym—a land whose people were known for their height—

there was about a twenty centimeter difference between them. Vina Ruu's head, clad in an iridescent veil, only came up to around his shoulders.

Looking at them now, they really do make a great couple, I thought to myself.

Everyone agreed that Vina Ruu was blessed in terms of looks, and I thought that the slender Shumiral was super handsome as well. He had a high-bridged nose, thin lips, and firm cheeks, all of which were attractive traits for a man to have, as I understood it.

On top of that, Shumiral was calm and composed, and had a distinctive bearing that tended to calm the people around him. Perhaps because of his experience with leading a merchant caravan at a young age, he had a strong sense of presence about him. Even surrounded by all these hunters of the forest's edge who were full of so much strength and vitality, there was something about him that made him impossible to overlook.

It took around eleven months for Mida and the others to get clan names. They were criminals, whereas Shumiral was born in a foreign land, so I wonder which one will take longer.

Well, the one to decide that would be the Ririn clan head Giran Ririn. Donda Ruu would also need to give his approval before he could marry Vina Ruu. Only three months and some change had passed since Shumiral had become a person of the forest's edge, so there was no reason to feel impatient about his progress just yet.

"Oh, Asuta! You finally made it!" Myme called out as we approached the nearest stove. Mikel, Bartha, and Jeeda were sitting on a blanket nearby, and there were a whole bunch of other people as well, happily devouring Myme's cooking. "I was able to have some of the food you made in the ovens earlier! It was so delicious that I was at a loss for words!"

"I'm honored to hear you say so, Myme. Which of the three dishes was your favorite?"

"Huh?! Oh, there's no way I could pick just one! But if you forced me to choose, it would have to be that hat bake, I suppose."

"Hat bake? Oh, right, the gratin. I suppose you do have something kinda similar here in Genos."

"Yeah! But dried milk costs a lot, so I've never had it."

I had tried a bit of hat bake before in the castle town,

prepared by the chef Timalo. From what I could remember, Polarth was really fond of it.

“But you didn’t use herbs in your dish. When you make a hat bake in the castle town, you mix karon milk with herbs to give it a strong aroma, then add fuwano dumplings and cap it with a lid of dried milk,” Mikel commented from atop the blanket with a sullen look on his face.

“Yeah, that sounds like the hat bake I was able to try once. But the dish I made today was one from my home country called gratin.”

“Hmph, I figured it was something like that. I’m sure it would be very popular in the castle town.”

If the chance ever came up, I really wanted to have Polarth give it a try. But for now, I was focused on Myme’s dish.

“Myme, could we get some of that?”

“Of course! I’d love to hear your impressions, Asuta!”

Myme portioned out a ladleful of the soup in her pot for each of us. She had been simmering it since the early afternoon. It was a transparent golden color, and there was a thin layer of oil on the surface. It had a very fragrant aroma, calling to mind oxtail soup.

I could see a variety of vegetables below the surface of the soup, along with giba meat. Myme tended to not use expensive ingredients, so they were instead very familiar ones like chatchi, nenon, and pula.

“Delicious,” Shumiral quietly said after taking a sip of the dish.

Vina Ruu picked up a spoonful of the fillings, and after trying them she remarked in admiration, “It really is.”

I took a breath and gave it a try myself, and instantly a full-bodied taste filled my mouth. She must have used karon leg bones to make the stock. The soup had a rich aroma and flavor, and yet it also had a refreshing aftertaste. I thought it was extremely high-quality.

She seemed to have kept the seasonings to a minimum. She might have utilized salt, sugar, and tau oil, but only enough to balance out the taste. I could pick up on the faint aroma of myamuu, though.

The ingredients had been boiled thoroughly and were incredibly tender. I didn’t notice at first, but she had also used yam-like gigo and daikon-like sheema. As I took a hearty sip of the full-bodied soup, I found the sheema in particular to be

incredibly delicious.

As for the meat, she had used giba ribs. Giba meat tended to grow more and more tender over time as you cooked it, so I was able to chew through it just as easily as the vegetables. In fact, the fat had taken on a jiggly texture almost akin to gelatin.

Myme really was exceptionally skilled when it came to bringing out the flavors of her ingredients. The seasonings, the meat, the vegetables, and the karon bone stock all struck an amazing balance, elevating one another to ever greater heights.

“Mmm, this really is good. It has a whole different sort of flavor to it than the giba soups prepared by the people of the forest’s edge.”

“Yeah. I did a lot of trial and error to balance out the flavors of the karon bone stock and giba meat,” Myme replied with a smile, but then she turned and looked over at Jeeda, seeming a little worried for some reason. “Um, what do you think of the taste?”

“It’s good… I’ve had it plenty of times at home already, though.”

“But the boiling time and flavoring has changed a bit since then.”

“I can’t pick up on such small changes. This soup has always been incredibly delicious to me.”

“I see,” Myme said, beaming. When I noticed her cheeks had gone slightly red, I tilted my head a bit.

Now that I think about it, I haven’t really had many chances to see Myme and Jeeda interacting, but they’ve been living in the same house for quite a while now.

Jeeda was fifteen, while Myme was eleven. She definitely wasn’t old enough to get married yet, but this was probably the first time I had seen her acting like that around someone of the opposite sex.

Well, Myme’s really mature mentally. She’s still pretty innocent in some ways, but I feel like she’s actually more grown up than Lala Ruu.

At any rate, if the two young guests of the forest’s edge were getting closer, I was definitely happy about that.

As Jeeda kept silently eating, Bartha was chatting with Mikel with a bright grin, while the man was still wearing his signature sour look. There was definitely a bit of an age gap between them, but they had both lost their spouses.

Bartha was a hunter and a member of a bandit group, while

Mikel was a famed chef in the castle town. Normally, these two would never encounter one another. And yet, chance had led to them being brought together here at the forest's edge. That was definitely a strange twist of fate.

"Ah, Shumiral, so this is where you were. I was looking for you," I heard a cheerful man's voice call out. When I turned to look, I saw the head of the Ririn clan and his wife standing there. "That stuff you're eating sure does look good. Could we have some too?"

"Yes, of course! It's hot, so please take care," Myme said.

Giran Ririn was grinning, and Uru Lea Ririn had a reserved smile on her face next to him. As always, I found her to be a woman with a strange feel about her, like some sort of fairy. She had auburn hair—a rarity at the forest's edge—and was incredibly thin and beautiful. Since she was married, though, her accessories were kept to a minimum.

"We were thinking of taking you around to meet our relatives, Shumiral. There are over a hundred people under the Ruu, so you've got to use opportunities like this to deepen your bonds."

"Very well. Thank you for, the consideration," Shumiral replied, and then he looked at me.

"Oh, don't worry about me. I shouldn't monopolize your time."

"All right. I am sorry, Asuta." Then Shumiral glanced in Vina Ruu's direction. She was hiding the bottom half of her face behind her now empty plate.

"You don't need to worry about me either," she said. "It's more important for you to deepen your bonds with everyone for now."

"My," Uru Lea Ririn chimed in. "Why don't you join us as well, Vina Ruu? You're already here, after all."

"Huh? But Ririn clan matters don't have anything to do with me."

"Your clan has nothing to do with it. I, personally, would love for you to come with us." Uru Lea Ririn moved away from her husband and gently wrapped her arm around Vina Ruu's. A mysterious light was shining in her pale blue eyes as she looked at the younger girl. "You don't mind, do you? I want to deepen my bond with you too, Vina Ruu."

It was possible that she was only acting that way because she didn't want to see Vina Ruu and Shumiral separated; I couldn't tell for certain. But even Vina Ruu wasn't capable of denying her request outright.

“Well then, I suppose I will tour the stoves with you all. Ai Fa and Asuta, I’ll see you later.”

“Okay, see you then.”

And so, we ended up separating from the two of them not long after we had run into them. After returning my now empty dish to the stand, I turned toward Ai Fa.

“Well then, why don’t we keep going?”

“Indeed.”

Everyone seemed to be hurriedly walking back and forth throughout the plaza today. Considering that it was not only the festival of the hunt, but also the elder’s birthday and the day in which new clan names had been granted, though, it made sense for folks to be more fired up than usual.

As we went, I saw Mida...er, Mida Ruu and the others surrounded by a large crowd. Ji Maam and some hunters whose names I didn’t know were holding up bottles of fruit wine, while the women and children were happily chatting and laughing away. I wondered how Tsuvai and Oura Rutim were feeling about their status. I couldn’t tell with all the people around them.

Yamiru Lea was nearby, talking with a young woman some distance away from the crowd. It was rare to see her away from Rau Lea like that. She very rarely ever smiled, but even at this distance, I could tell how truly relaxed she was.

It must have been a huge relief to her for the others to receive their clan names. I hope Diga and Doddo will earn the Dom name soon. It occurred to me then that if they were officially recognized as members of the Dom clan and Gazraan Rutim’s proposal was accepted at the clan head meeting, they would end up becoming relatives with Tsuvai and Oura Rutim again. If things worked out that way, that would be another strange twist of fate.

Not that long ago, it would have been unthinkable for blood ties to be formed between the northern clans and a clan under the Ruu.

After that, we passed by Jiza and Ludo Ruu. Jiza Ruu’s wife Sati Lea Ruu was at his side, while Ludo Ruu was being accompanied by Rimee Ruu and Tara. Sati Lea Ruu and Tara were smiling and chatting away, which was really nice to see.

Shin and Lala Ruu were sitting shoulder to shoulder off in a quiet spot eating some sort of food. I often saw them together like that at banquets. There was still a year and three months left until Lala Ruu would be permitted to marry. The main Ruu house

was known for getting married late, but I was sure that she would defy that trend.

There were over a hundred people around, all looking happy and deepening their bonds with one another. Sometimes I found myself in the middle of their groups, and sometimes I just watched from a distance. I was able to share in their joy either way.

Once the food was mostly gone and I was thinking of finding a place to sit down for a while, a voice called out to me. “Hey!” A figure was waving its hands from a small group of seated people in the dimly lit area near the entrance to the plaza, on the opposite side from the stage. The voice and silhouette told me it was Yumi.

“Hey there. Looks like you picked a pretty quiet spot to sit in, huh?” I called out as Ai Fa and I headed over to the group. However, I got a bit of a shock when we came close enough for me to see everyone sitting there, because the person next to Yumi was Darmu Ruu, not Telia Mas. “D-Darmu Ruu...what are you doing here?”

“You should be asking that girl, not me.”

When I turned my gaze back to Yumi, she raised a bottle of fruit wine that she was holding in her hand. “This guy was on his own looking bored, so I decided to talk to him. I figured I could get him to crack a smile at least once, but it’s turning out to be pretty hard.”

“O-Oh. I see.”

Darmu Ruu looked seriously annoyed as he snorted, “Hmph. I was trying to find a quiet place to rest, and this is what I got. It’s just as noisy here as it is in the center of the plaza.”

“Sorry about that! But, well, it’s a banquet, so you should enjoy yourself!” Yumi said.

I was feeling more than a little concerned, so I had a seat next to her. “Hey Yumi, like I said before...” I started to whisper, but then she shot me a smile and brought her face close to mine.

“I know, I know. Darmu Ruu’s already claimed by somebody, yeah? I’ve got no intention of fighting with any women from the forest’s edge, so nothing to worry about there.”

Having a conversation one-on-one separate from everyone else could definitely lead to some unnecessary misunderstandings, though, so I felt like I couldn’t leave them alone, at least for the moment. Perhaps sensing the situation, Ai

Fa also sat down beside me. Darmu Ruu, Yumi, myself, and Ai Fa were all sitting side by side in that order. Honestly, it wasn't the sort of quartet I ever expected to end up in.

"Are you drinking too, Ai Fa? You want some?"

"No. I do not drink at Ruu clan banquets, to avoid any chance of acting improperly."

"Oh, really? And here I thought all you hunters of the forest's edge drank like fish! Donda Ruu and Dan Rutim were both drinking like crazy!"

Her bringing that up made me glance at Darmu Ruu, and I saw that he didn't have a bottle with him. Of course, he pretty much immediately noticed where I was looking, and glared at me with his wolflike eyes.

"Whether or not I'm drinking has nothing to do with you," he said to me.

"Oh, sorry. I wasn't planning on asking about that or anything."

Perhaps Darmu Ruu was concerned about how he couldn't remember the previous celebratory banquet because of how much he had drunk. I could still vividly recall how annoyed he had been when he had denied his lack of memory back at the Daleim dance party.

That would've been the welcome banquet when Yumi and a bunch of other townsfolk got invited to the forest's edge, I'm pretty sure. Sheera Ruu was with him that time, but I guess not today.

I wondered who Sheera Ruu was talking to, and where. I glanced toward the plaza to see if I could find her, just in time for a grass flute melody to sound out. Then, a bit of percussion joined in alongside it. The people around the ritual flame pulled out wooden sticks and giba bones and started banging them in a rhythmic manner.

Drawn by that music, the women started heading toward the center of the plaza. They were all unwed and clad in dazzling banquet attire. Sure enough, it seemed they would be dancing again tonight.

"Ooh, nice! Is this that thing where women dance and people look for spouses?"

"Yeah. You like to dance too, don't you, Yumi?"

"I guess," Yumi replied, but she didn't move to stand up.

Darmu Ruu shot her a suspicious look. "You're the one called Yumi? Aren't you the woman who wants to marry into the

forest's edge?"

"Yeah, but this is an event for your relatives, isn't it? I feel like trying to butt in too much tonight would be wrong of me," Yumi remarked with a gentle smile as she stared over at the women starting to dance in the center of the plaza. "Even more so because this dance is meant for women of the forest's edge to get men to fall for them."

"You're more reasonable than I thought you'd be."

"Of course. I want to get along with everyone from the forest's edge, so I'm not gonna make a move until the time is right!"

Darmu Ruu gave a small shrug, then turned back toward the plaza.

The ritual flame was crackling away like a campfire, and there were a bunch of women already surrounding it. Accompanied by that nostalgic melody of giba bones knocking together and grass flutes whistling, they slowly danced their hearts out.

Their iridescent veils and metallic accessories reflected the orange light of the fire, creating a truly magical shine. The hunters weren't the only ones who were overflowing with vitality. The blessings of the forest had gifted the women with dazzling strength as well. The tempo of the percussion steadily picked up bit by bit, and the dancing accelerated until it resembled a boisterous raging flame.

There weren't too many faces there that I recognized. Only unwed women who had reached the age of fifteen could participate, and there were plenty who didn't take part even if they met those criteria. As far as I could tell, Reina Ruu and Yamiru Lea weren't dancing, and I didn't see Morun Rutim either. They must have all had their own reasons for not participating.

However, I did see one familiar face dancing: Sheera Ruu. Her movements were smoother than anyone else's, and her arms were drawing larger arcs through the air. She was putting strength into her motions all the way down to the tips of her fingers. Normally, she was like a flower blooming silently in the moonlight, and yet she could also dance like this? I couldn't help but feel seriously moved.

That said, she looked as if she could run out of strength at any moment and collapse. But even so, Sheera Ruu kept on dancing with all her might. It was like she was begging with all her body to be seen, and to be loved.

"Amazing..." Yumi said, spellbound. Was her gaze fixed on

Sheera Ruu too? What about Darmu Ruu and Ai Fa? I was particularly curious about the former, but I just wasn't able to take my eyes off of Sheera Ruu.

Eventually, though, the percussion's tempo slowed, the grass flute melody took on a more sorrowful sound, and the dancing shifted to become more calm and graceful. The last note of the music was a trailing tweet from the grass flutes, and all the women fell to one knee on the ground.

Silence fell over the plaza, but only for a moment before it was shattered by cheering from all around.

The women all stood and gave a bow toward the ritual flame. Then they slowly stepped back, and the giba bones began banging with a more lively rhythm. At that point, young children, older women, and even men both young and old began dancing however they wished.

"Oh, anybody can dance now?"

"Yeah, so it seems. I'm pretty sure it used to be only the unwed women that danced. Maybe they decided to do this because they enjoyed the welcome banquet so much."

"In that case, I'll head over there too! And I'll have to drag Telia Mas along with me!"

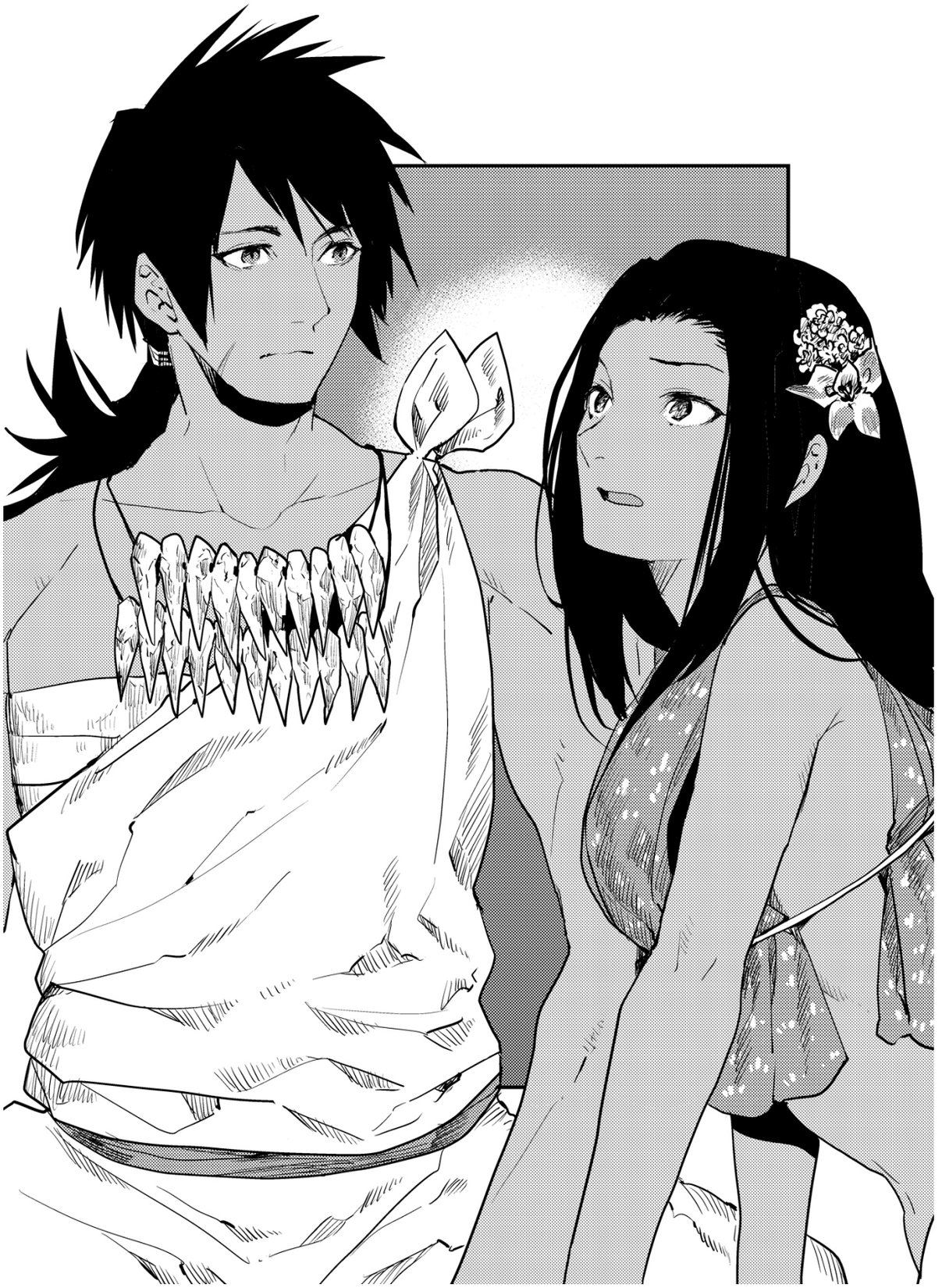
Yumi took off running, and in her place, a slender figure silently approached us. It was, of course, Sheera Ruu. Her small shoulders were heaving up and down as she stood in front of us. Or more specifically, in front of Darmu Ruu.

She had sweat rolling down her face and neck as she held her hands together in front of her chest and knelt down before him. There was an incredibly soft light shining in her eyes as she stared straight at Darmu Ruu, and despite the tender smile on her face, she looked like she was desperately trying to keep herself from crying.

"Darmu Ruu, I..." she started to say in a voice so quiet it was almost a whisper.

Darmu Ruu silently stared back at her.

After closing her eyes for a moment, Sheera Ruu opened them once more, and said just a bit louder, "Darmu Ruu, I was dancing for you and you alone."



Darmu Ruu's shoulders trembled, as if her words had truly caught him off guard. Looking at her with incredible intensity in his eyes, he finally spoke. "Sheera Ruu...you knew the story about our clan head Donda and Mia Lea?"

"Huh?" Sheera Ruu tilted her head, looking rather confused.

Darmu Ruu brought a hand to his brow and tightly pursed his lips.

At some point, the scar on his right cheek had very noticeably turned the color of blood. After a few seconds of silence...Darmu Ruu replied in a slightly shaky voice, "I was only watching you too."

7

"So, do you think Sheera Ruu really didn't know how Donda and Mia Lea Ruu got together?" I asked.

"I suppose not," Ai Fa calmly replied. "Dan Rutim said that he's only ever told the story to Jiza Ruu and his siblings. And even supposing Sheera Ruu managed to overhear the tale, I can't imagine her trying to emulate it."

"Yeah, I suppose not."

We were still sitting in the same place, talking quietly. Sheera and Darmu Ruu had departed, the former having dragged the latter by the arm back over to the plaza.

There were still a lot of people cheerfully dancing around the ritual fire. I could spy Yumi, Telia Mas, Rimee Ruu, Tara, Ludo Ruu, Rau Lea, and even Mida Ruu. They all looked incredibly happy, and the air was full of the joy of being alive.

"It looks like the festival isn't going to be ending anytime soon."

"Indeed."

"On top of being a festival of the hunt, this is also a celebration of Granny Jiba's birthday and Mida Ruu and the others being granted their new clan names. It's hard to imagine a party exciting enough to live up to all that."

"I agree."

There was no reason for us to keep sitting there, but neither of us were getting up. I was fine with taking a bit more of a break, though, since I knew Ai Fa didn't like crowds.

"When Rimee Ruu's birthday arrives, do you think they'll want to keep her party small, like Lala Ruu's was, with just the

members of the main house? And I know you said that we're going to stop coming to Ruu festivals of the hunt after today, but I'd really like to keep attending their other big events, like wedding banquets, if they invite us."

"Mm-hmm."

"Even if we're joining in on festivals of the hunt with the clans in our area now, I really love going to the Ruu clan's banquets too."

"Naturally. We have quite a few very close friends here," Ai Fa replied. Then she started tugging on my sleeve.

I turned my head to look directly at her, and immediately noticed a change in her appearance. "Oh... Ai Fa, where in the world were you hiding that?"

"I wasn't *hiding* it. I've just been keeping it in my hip pocket since it was returned to me along with my blade after the contest of strength." Ai Fa was wearing the hair accessory I had given her as a birthday present by her right temple. It was a translucent, sparkling flower, like a rose in full bloom, made of glass-like stones of seven different colors, and it was shining beautifully in the light from the bonfire. "I can only ever wear it on days like this, after all," Ai Fa said, glaring at me out of the corner of her eye. The corners of her lips were turned downward in an adorable frown, and her cheeks had gone a little red.

"You look beautiful. It really suits you."

"Hmph," Ai Fa snorted, elbowing me in the arm.

"No, I really mean it. I'd love for you to wear it at our festivals of the hunt too."

"A hunter such as myself wearing accessories would just look ridiculous."

"That's not true at all. I mean, you could always change into banquet attire after the contests of strength end."

"But if I were to become the victor of a contest of strength again, I would have to sit in a seat of honor for some time afterward to receive congratulations, in which case, I wouldn't have time to change."

"Then what about at the wedding banquet for the Fou and Sudra? Didn't they mention that they're planning to invite some of their neighbors to attend?"

My clan head blinked in surprise. "But I don't own any banquet attire in the first place," she said.

"You can just buy some in town, can't you? Isn't it customary

to wear it to wedding celebrations at the forest's edge?"

"But I am a hunter," Ai Fa quietly replied.

I felt a wave of emotion that brought a great big smile to my face. "You're a hunter, sure, but you're also a woman, aren't you? An amazing hunter like you should be able to find happiness not only in her job, but as a woman as well."

Ai Fa offered no response.

"And if you happen to get more marriage proposals than usual because you're wearing banquet attire, I'll help you turn them down."

"What?"

"I can't let some other guy marry you, so I'll do my best to try to talk them down too. And then—" I cut myself off before I could finish my thought, as something started tugging at my hair with incredible force. Ai Fa was tussling it roughly, her face now beet red.

"Did you already forget the night when the Fou and Sudra clan heads visited our house?! I never want to feel that way ever again!"

"Y-Yeah, but..."

"If anyone tries to propose to me, *I'll* be the one to refuse them! There's *no* need for you to get involved! Besides, clan heads are the ones who are supposed to sort out marriage requests regardless!"

After one last firm shove to my head, Ai Fa wrapped her arms around her knees. With the contents of my skull still rattling around a little, I shot Ai Fa a smile while doing my best to ride out the dizziness I was feeling.

"Got it. Well, after that whole thing with Jou Ran, I can't imagine anyone from the neighboring clans will be trying that again anytime soon."

"Just how long do you intend to stay on this topic, Asuta?"

"Oh, sorry. I didn't expect it to throw you so out of sorts."

A moment later, I heard a loud cheer arise from the plaza. Apparently, the time for dancing had come to an end, and Donda Ruu was saying something up on the stage. We were sitting about as far away as we could, so I couldn't make out what he was saying. However, Shin Ruu was also there on top of the stage beside him.

Like Ai Fa had said, weddings at the forest's edge required the permission of the heads of both houses, so if Donda and Shin

Ruu were consulting with one another, it must have had something to do with that. In all likelihood, they were giving an announcement about a marriage proposal to all of their relatives gathered here.

I stood up and held out a hand to Ai Fa. “Let’s go. We’ve got to give Sheera and Darmu Ruu our blessings.”

My clan head’s face was still a bit red, but she silently accepted my hand.

Today’s banquet would be over soon, but there was sure to be another before the Ruu clan’s current break period came to an end. I hoped that when the time came, we would be invited. After all, Sheera Ruu was a very important person to me.

At any rate, Ai Fa and I returned to the middle of the plaza, where everyone’s hope and joy were filling the air.

Intermezzo: The Youngest Rutim Daughter’s Determination

Thanks to the efforts of a great many people, Morun Rutim had been given permission to stay at the Dom settlement. That was precisely what she had desired, and it brought her great joy. However, now that her wish had been granted, she found herself feeling anxious and worried for all kinds of reasons.

Gazraan and my father said there was nothing to worry about…but there is*.*

The Rutim clan was trying to majorly alter the customs of the forest’s edge. They were talking about changing the laws regarding blood ties, which their people valued above all else, so of course she couldn’t help but feel apologetic about it all.

And all of this is happening because of something as trivial as my romantic feelings. I wonder how many people are utterly exasperated with me right now?

It had turned into such a big deal that everyone living at the forest’s edge knew about Morun Rutim’s feelings by this point. That alone was enough to make her feel like she might go up in flames from sheer embarrassment.

Morun Rutim had first laid eyes on Deek Dom nine months ago. Since their clans were located so far apart, they hadn’t really had many opportunities to meet, but when the leading clan heads had gone to the castle town to settle things with the wicked noble Cyclaeus, Deek Dom had stopped by the Ruu settlement on his way back home, having attended the meeting as a guard.

At first, she had just been drawn to Deek Dom’s striking physique and the unusual appearance of all the members of the Dom clan. He had been bulky in a way that was rare among the Ruu clans, and he had worn a giba skull atop his head. It hadn’t been enough to frighten her, exactly, but her initial impression of him hadn’t been overly positive either.

But all of that had changed when she had gotten a chance to see him up close while her father Dan Rutim had been chatting with him.

There had been a major confrontation with the nobles in the castle town that day, which had left many of the hunters quite worked up when they had returned to the settlement. Deek Dom alone had been different, standing among them like a massive rock, his black eyes blazing brightly.

Since Morun Rutim was rather small, there was about a head and a half of difference in height between her and the Dom hunter. She had therefore been able to see the ferocity in his gaze quite well, even with it hidden behind that giba skull, since she could look up at him from below.

There was an intensity about him that she only rarely saw among the clans under the Ruu. He was as solemn as if he were made of stone and never allowed his emotions to get the better of him. Despite possessing strength and drive on par with that of the leading clan head Donda Ruu, he hid it all behind self-restraint as firm as steel.

Was that stern nature what had drawn Morun Rutim to him? At first, even she hadn't been able to properly grasp what she was feeling. But she had been unable to forget the fierce look in his eyes and his calm composure, which had caused her heart to beat faster.

With the end of hostilities between their tribe and that wicked noble, peace had returned at last to the forest's edge, but at the same time, Morun Rutim had lost the opportunity to see Deek Dom again. But that only caused her yearning to grow even deeper, until she had eventually come to the realization that she was in love.

I really did impose on Ludo Ruu a lot back then.

At the time, Morun Rutim had only told the youngest Ruu son Ludo Ruu about how she felt. He was the same age as her, and they had gotten along well since they were young. Ludo Ruu wasn't all that large of a guy, but he was an exceptionally skilled hunter, and when he smiled he was as cute as any woman. On top of that, he was incredibly earnest and frank, and valued personal feelings over the customs of the forest's edge. That often led to him getting chewed out by his family, but Morun Rutim really liked Ludo Ruu and trusted him like a member of her own house. That was why she was able to tell him things she couldn't say even to her father or brother.

After he had learned of Morun Rutim's feelings, Ludo Ruu had headed to the Dom settlement the very next day. Apparently, he

had come up with some sort of excuse to justify it, but he had really only wanted to see what sort of guy Deek Dom was. That was just how bold and audacious Ludo Ruu was.

"Well, as far as I can tell, Deek Dom seems like a great guy. He's a bit hardheaded, but nothing outside of the norm for a member of the northern clans. You should figure out the rest yourself."

When she had heard him say that, Morun Rutim had felt cripplingly embarrassed and troubled. But later on, those words had granted her a great deal of courage. And when the talks between the Dom and Rutim about exchanging members had started, she had volunteered without any hesitation.

After staying at the Dom settlement for a month, Morun Rutim had become certain of how she felt. She really had developed feelings for Deek Dom and was no longer able to pretend that she hadn't.

It wasn't solely his sternness that had attracted her to him, though. That was undoubtedly part of his charm, but if that had been all there was to him, Morun Rutim surely never would have fallen for the man. He had become the head of his clan at the young age of seventeen, and he had forced himself to take on the strict demeanor his new role demanded. However, doing so had been a struggle for him.

His passion burned brighter than anyone else's, but rather than showing it openly to others like Morun Rutim's father, he maintained a solemn, stonelike expression. He was every bit as tough as the leading clan head Donda Ruu but had lived only half as long. It seemed like his youth was a source of distress for him.

Even so, he firmly restrained himself in order to carry out his duty as a clan head, which was quite admirable. His determination really spoke to Morun Rutim.

Even more than that, though, Morun Rutim wanted to help comfort him. She wanted him to reveal the feelings he kept hidden inside to her and her alone. She wished to accept everything he felt and share in all of his joy and pain. Those feelings had grown quite strong in her.

But I just can't take that final step…

Morun Rutim had spent the five months after that barely able to control her emotions. Despite how strongly she yearned for Deek Dom, she didn't want to cause trouble for her precious

family.

The Rutim fell under the Ruu, while the Dom were under the Zaza. Their parent clans were both leading clans of the forest's edge, so there was no way the two of them could ever form blood ties. On top of that, her brother Gazraan Rutim had earned a lot of trust from the leading clan heads and would always join them whenever they went to meet with the nobles. She didn't want to unnecessarily endanger the position he had gained.

Because of that, Morun Rutim had spent the last several months constantly suppressing her feelings for Deek Dom. But after she had seen Sufira Zaza's bravery, her attempts to contain her emotions had completely stopped working.

After that, Morun Rutim had opened up to her family, which was what had brought them to the current state of affairs.

◇

After the meeting held at the Zaza house, her brother, father, and Donda Ruu all returned home the following morning.

After seeing them off, Morun Rutim was once again invited into the main Dom house. Gathered there were the clan head Deek Dom, his sister Lem Dom, and the heads of the Dom branch houses.

"Well then, shall we take turns having our guest Morun Rutim sleep at each of our houses?" one of the branch heads asked.

In a weighty tone, Deek Dom replied, "Yes. But the main house no longer has anyone to man the stove, so we have been borrowing the assistance of the branch houses to prepare dinner. Because of this, I would like to ask for our guest's aid on that front."

"So the guest will eat dinner at the main house, then move to our houses after?"

"Essentially. However, I'm concerned about whether that will leave enough time for her to form bonds with the men of the branch houses, so I'm thinking we should have her eat at your houses as well, depending on the day. There's still a couple months left until the clan head meeting, and I would like all of our clan members to have a chance to fully assess Morun Rutim's character before then."

"As you wish. We will abide by your judgment and the

judgment of the leading clan heads," one of the branch heads replied. All of them had serious expressions on their faces, which hadn't changed throughout the entire conversation.

The hunters of the north placed great value on the old customs. Normally, they would have flatly refused any proposal that would change their people's customs when it came to blood ties. However, it was also an important custom at the forest's edge to not oppose the decisions of the leading clan heads or the head of your own clan. No matter how disgruntled they were about the situation, they kept their feelings to themselves.

"You all look so *dour*. This will give the Dom women another chance to hone their cooking skills, so isn't it a good thing?" Lem Dom cheerfully chimed in after remaining silent since the meeting had begun. "Morun Rutim's supposed to be an especially good chef, even among the Ruu. You all saw that when she stayed here before, didn't you? So why not forget about all that troublesome stuff and just be happy about this?"

"This isn't a matter that we can take so lightly. It is imperative that we people of the forest's edge reach a determination about what the proper path forward for us is," another of the branch heads chimed in.

"Hmph," Lem Dom snorted. "You're talking about the whole thing about allowing marriages without involving all your relatives, aren't you? Feel free to worry about all that as much as you please. But that's a whole separate issue from inviting Morun Rutim to stay here as a guest."

"How could we possibly treat that as a separate matter? Do you not get what's going on at all?"

"I mean, whether or not Morun Rutim turns out to be a good bride for Deek, all that tricky stuff about marriage is still going to be discussed at the clan head meeting anyway. That clever Rutim clan head is insisting it's what's best for our people, after all," Lem Dom said, flashing an arrogant grin at the men before continuing. "If she does prove to be a fitting partner for Deek but the new form of marriage isn't accepted, there won't be any wedding, simple as that. So it's nothing to worry so much over. Why not just judge her like you would any other relative? Or are you saying I'm somehow mistaken?"

"No," Deek Dom replied. "It's as Lem says. The matter of Morun Rutim and the new form of marriage should be treated as separate. Confusing them for one another will make it difficult to

judge either issue properly."

"Yes, I suppose you're right," one of the branch heads admitted. Then they all glanced around at one another, looking rather troubled.

Lem Dom, on the other hand, was openly amused by their obvious concern as she rose and said, "Now then, we're done discussing Morun Rutim, aren't we? In that case, why don't I take her to meet the other women?"

"Good idea. We'll be talking for a while longer, discussing the merits of this new form of marriage," Deek Dom replied, and so Lem Dom and Morun Rutim exited the house together.

"Ugh, what a hardheaded lot. They're absolutely terrible at dealing with new ideas."

"Ah, no, I'm truly sorry for causing such a commotion. And I know I'm adding to Deek Dom's burdens by being here, what with how he has to manage all of the branch heads even though they're older than him," Morun Rutim replied, causing Lem Dom to lean in close to her with a grin.

"You really have fallen for Deek *hard*, haven't you? Well, I guess you never would have opened up to your family about how you felt if you hadn't."

Morun Rutim was left at a loss for words as her face went red, causing Lem Dom's grin to widen even further.

"Ever since you revealed how you felt, Deek hasn't locked eyes with you even once. He's seventeen now, but he's seriously still such a child. You're going to have a really hard time winning over an inexperienced guy like that."

"Ah, no... Deek Dom is a truly wonderful person."

"No matter how wonderful he may be, he's still totally green about this stuff. I'm his little sister, so I know that better than anyone," Lem Dom said. But then she suddenly looked around with a piercing gaze. "What do you two want? I'm not going to stand for you acting rudely toward our guest."

"H-Hey, we would never do anything to disrespect a visitor..."

A large and small figure appeared from under the shadow of a tree. They were the former criminals from the Suun clan who had been entrusted to the Dom, none other than Diga and Doddo.

"You two are so persistent. I swear, you keep on asking about your former family day after day," Lem Dom said.

"Th-That's not true. Our blood ties have been cut with

them…so we aren't even allowed to ask about them directly…"

They were talking about Tsuvai and Oura, who had been taken in by the Rutim. Tsuvai was their half sister, while Oura was their stepmother.

"Tsuvai and Oura are doing very well," Morun Rutim stated, causing a childish sparkle to appear in Diga's and Doddo's eyes. "Tsuvai's an essential part of the workforce at the stalls now. And as for Oura, everyone in the Rutim clan thinks she's very kind, and we all adore her."

"I-I see. We've already heard a little about Tsuvai from Toor Deen, but we didn't know how Oura was doing," Diga said.

"Yeah. The Rutim and Deen clans are pretty far away from each other, but not as far as the Dom and Rutim," Doddo added.

"Hmph. If you really have given up your blood ties, you shouldn't be getting so happy about something like that," Lem Dom muttered, causing the pair to shrink back.

Even if the two of them looked like a pair of fine hunters now, they still had some very childish traits. Even so, just like with Tsuvai, Oura, and Yamiru Lea, their past crimes no longer seemed to hang over them. That was the clearest evidence that they had been living proper lives here at the Dom settlement.

Morun Rutim felt glad to see that as she continued, "Still, if I *am* permitted to marry Deek Dom, well…that would restore your blood ties to Tsuvai and Oura. That's quite a strange twist of fate, isn't it?"

"You can say that again! We can hardly contain ourselves just from the thought of it!" Diga said.

"D-Does it seem like you'll really be able to marry Deek Dom?" Doddo asked.

"I can't say. But I want to give my all to make it a reality," Morun Rutim replied while holding back her embarrassment, which made the pair even more excited.

Still staring at the two young men, Lem Dom shrugged. "You two are so childish. But if you're satisfied with what you've heard, then hurry up and get lost. I've got to take Morun Rutim to see the women."

"Huh? You're going already? But we still have more we want to ask."

"Morun Rutim will be staying at the Dom settlement at least until the day of the clan head meeting, so you'll have plenty of chances to talk in the future. And if you don't stop pestering us,

I'll tell the family heads." With that harsh scolding from Lem Dom, Diga and Doddo stepped back dejectedly. And as Lem Dom watched the two crestfallen young men leave, she gave a strained chuckle. "You really are a kind one, showing pity even to guys like them. They did some pretty awful things to your friends Asuta and Ai Fa, you know."

"But their crimes have been forgiven, and they're living new lives under the Dom clan, aren't they? That's why I'm glad to see them doing well, just like Tsuvai and Oura."

"You really are too kind... Anyway, the women are over this way. At this time of day, they should be working over by this kitchen."

As Lem Dom had said, the Dom women were all gathered in front of the kitchen of a branch house. Since the Dom didn't have a ton of members, they all worked together. The sun had only just come out, so they were chopping firewood and drying out pico leaves.

At the Dom settlement, even the women had impressive strength. Lem Dom was one thing, given her desire to become a hunter, but the rest of them were all pretty muscular as well and had the same uncompromising aura that the men did. Morun Rutim couldn't help but stand up straighter when she saw them.

"You've already heard the gist of what was discussed last night from the heads of your houses, right? Morun Rutim will be staying here at least until the clan head meeting, so do your best to look after her, okay?"

"I-I look forward to working with you all," Morun Rutim said with a bow.

In response, an especially burly older woman stepped forward. She was the wife of the head of a branch house and was in charge of managing the Dom women. "We're looking forward to working together too. We heard you'll be teaching us more about how to make delicious food. Is that true?"

"Y-Yes. I'll teach you whatever you wish, as long as I'm capable of doing so."

"I'm really glad to hear that," the woman replied, smiling kindly.

The other women, meanwhile, all kept quietly watching Morun Rutim. The atmosphere actually felt surprisingly relaxed, though, which was a little perplexing to her.

"Well then, all of you, take good care of Morun Rutim, okay?

I’m going to take a bit of a nap before I head out hunting.”

With that, Lem Dom swiftly turned around, only for Morun Rutim to hurry after her in a fluster.

“H-Hold on, Lem Dom! Are you sure everything that was discussed last night was properly explained to the members of the branch houses?”

“Huh? Why are you worried about something like that?”

“W-Well…if all they were told was that a woman from some other clan asked to marry the head of the main house… I mean, a lot of people wouldn’t be too happy to hear that.”

Lem Dom grinned, placing one hand on her own taut waist, then replied, “Ah, I see. You’re saying you can’t understand why the Dom clan is welcoming you with open arms, considering how hardheaded we’re supposed to be, right?”

“N-No, I didn’t mean that at all.”

“There’s no need to be so worried. It’s true that the Dom can be stubborn, but more than that, we like strong people, so they’re sure to treat you well.”

“S-Strong people? But I’m so little, I could never measure up to the members of the Dom clan.”

“It’s true that you’re small, but you’ve still inherited the wild strength of that noisy father of yours. And besides, that’s not what I meant. I was talking about the strength of your spirit. I mean, for most women, staying at the Dom settlement all on their own for three whole months would be unthinkable. That’s why everyone’s so impressed with your courage and indomitable will,” Lem Dom remarked with a wide smile. It was the sort of smile that reminded Morun Rutim of her precious childhood friend.

“I decided to become a hunter despite being a woman, so I think I have a pretty good idea of how much courage it takes to do what you’re doing. And, well…I’m already sure you’ll be a good match for Deek, so I’ll be praying for your wish to come true in order to secure a happy future for my precious big brother.”

And with that, Lem Dom departed.

Morun Rutim turned around and found that the women in front of the kitchen hadn’t moved and were watching her the same way they had been before. She took a big breath, trying to calm her rapidly beating heart, and started walking toward them.

There are three months left until the clan head meeting. I have no clue how it's going to turn out, but I want to give this my all so that I won't have any regrets.

And with that thought in mind, Morun Rutim began her life at the Dom settlement.

Would the proposed new form of marriage be accepted at the clan head meeting held in the blue month? Morun Rutim had no way of knowing, but the hope and joy she felt was more than enough to overcome her anxiety and worries.

Afterword

Thank you so much for picking up this book, the twenty-seventh volume of *Cooking with Wild Game*. It took a bit longer to get this one I'm out, but I'm very happy it made it to print without any issues, and I certainly hope you'll all enjoy it.

The theme of this volume was romance, so I asked to have a group of women drawn on the cover. Part of the reason for that was how much I loved the title from the online version, *The Red Month Is the Season of Love*.

Incidentally, the interlude titled "Reminiscence of a Banquet" was actually written some time ago, but I hadn't had a chance to publish it yet, so I hastily inserted it here. It could have appeared as far back as the eighth volume instead, but the readers probably would have more or less forgotten it after so much time, so I'd say everything worked out just fine in the end.

Finally, I want to thank everyone involved in the production of this book, and of course, all of you who purchased it.

See you again in the next volume!

April 2022,
EDA

Bonus Short Story

A Joyous Night

"The second son of the Ruu main house Darmu Ruu and the eldest daughter of a Ruu branch house, Sheera Ruu, have vowed to be wed! The wedding shall be held in the coming days, and I hope that you will join us again on that occasion to give them your blessing!"

After Donda Ruu made that declaration, roaring cheers erupted throughout the plaza.

Today was not only the Ruu clan's festival of the hunt but also the birthday of the elder Jiba Ruu. On top of that, three former members of the Suun had been granted clan names, which had elevated everyone's spirits to even greater heights.

As he stood there atop the stage next to Donda Ruu, Shin Ruu was in extremely high spirits himself. His older sister Sheera Ruu was finally getting married. And he was even happier about the fact that it was to an exceptionally skilled hunter like Darmu Ruu.

I've been nothing but a burden on Sheera.

There were six members of Shin Ruu's house: him and Sheera Ruu, their father Ryada Ruu, their mother Tari Ruu, and their two younger brothers. Since there were only two women in their family, handling all of the housework that needed to be done was difficult for them, and Sheera Ruu was the first child, so she had always had to look after her three younger brothers. As the next oldest, Shin Ruu had been able to see up close and personal just how hard she worked to support their household.

On top of that, Ryada Ruu had been seriously injured last year and was no longer able to work as a hunter, so Shin Ruu had become the head of the house despite his young age. Amid all that, Sheera Ruu had been tasked with managing the stalls in the post town, so that made for a lot more of a burden than what other houses faced.

But working at the stalls has unmistakably made her stronger.

Sheera Ruu had always been a reserved girl. Her body had been rather weak from a young age, which had given her a sense of inferiority. Growing up in the Ruu clan with so many

incredibly strong people constantly surrounding her had made her into a modest young woman, a woman who reminded Shin Ruu of a small flower.

But last year, she had started helping Asuta with his business and had begun changing bit by bit. The fact that Asuta acknowledged her cooking skills had undoubtedly given her confidence a tremendous boost. She had become a remarkably stronger person since then, to the point that when the Ruu had been forced to start running the stalls independently, she and Reina Ruu had taken charge together.

Even now, though, Sheera Ruu was still physically weaker than other women. Illness no longer kept her confined to bed, but she wasn't good at carrying anything heavy or chopping wood. But on the other hand, she was a truly exceptional cook. According to Asuta, she and Reina Ruu stood far above all other women at the forest's edge in that regard. Apparently, Rimee Ruu and Toor Deen were the best at making sweets, but when it came to cooking in general, they couldn't measure up to the older girls.

Up until Asuta appeared, though, nobody ever paid any attention to whether a woman's cooking skills were good or not.

Before Asuta, none of the people of the forest's edge had cared about how food tasted. Either they would boil giba meat in a pot along with vegetables, or they would heat it over a flame. No special skills were needed for that.

That had been enough to satisfy their people. As long as they hadn't been starving, they'd been happy enough. On top of that, the Ruu hunted more giba than most, so they had been able to buy all sorts of vegetables to give their bodies more strength.

However, they had only been able to feel happy with that because they hadn't known the joy of delicious food. No matter what ingredients they had bought, giba meat had such a strong flavor that it overpowered everything else, making it impossible to perceive any other tastes.

Asuta had insisted that the reason the meat had been so unpalatable was that they hadn't been bloodletting the giba they'd hunted, leaving it with a powerful stench. Once they had learned how to bleed the beasts, as well as how to properly butcher them, though, the taste of the meat had changed dramatically.

On top of that, Asuta had come up with all sorts of delicious

ways to prepare giba meat. But using his methods required skill as a chef…which was what had led to Sheera Ruu discovering her own strength.

And so, I'm certain that if Sheera hadn't met Asuta, she never would have been able to properly convey how she felt, Shin Ruu thought to himself as he looked over at his sister, who was standing on the stage along with him.

Sheera Ruu's smile was full of joy. Though her eyes were teary, she didn't look timid or embarrassed in the least, letting her happiness show openly with a hundred of her relatives arrayed before her. She wouldn't have had the fortitude to do that in the past. She had grown strong. That was undoubtedly how she had gotten the attention of Darmu Ruu, who had previously been so fixated on Ai Fa. Shin Ruu was certain of it.

"Sheera…I know it may be too soon to congratulate you, but I'm truly happy to see your feelings bear fruit," Shin Ruu said.

"Thank you," his sister replied, her unrestrained smile unwavering.

Meanwhile, Darmu Ruu was staring down at his relatives with an almost angry glare. Despite being such an exceptional hunter, he looked a whole lot more tense than Sheera Ruu. But as he looked at the man, Shin Ruu couldn't help but feel an even greater warmth well up inside.

"This is seriously getting out of hand. You two go do something about it," Donda Ruu grumbled, prompting Sheera and Darmu Ruu to step down from the stage.

Instantly, a huge number of their relatives surrounded them. The wedding banquet was still some time away, but it was clear that everyone was absolutely thrilled with this development. Shin Ruu was extremely pleased to see people responding so enthusiastically. It felt like proof of how much their relatives loved Sheera Ruu.

All thanks to the skill she's gained as a chef.

In the past, nobody had paid any attention to Sheera Ruu at all. But at this point, she had given cooking lessons to women from every clan under the Ruu, and there was no one among their relatives who didn't know her name.

Sheera and Darmu Ruu walked to the center of the plaza, and the crowd followed them. Shin Ruu watched them for a while longer, but then he spied Lala Ruu off in a corner by herself.

Why isn't Lala Ruu congratulating them?

Darmu Ruu was her big brother, and she got along with Sheera Ruu quite well. He would've expected her to have been the first one to run over to them at a time like this. And yet, Lala Ruu was standing all alone in the dim light. After a moment of hesitation, Shin Ruu stepped down from the stage and walked over to her.

"What's the matter, Lala Ruu?" he called out, only to find the girl weeping like a child.

Dressed in her banquet attire and with her long hair down, she looked far more mature and beautiful than usual. The sight of her crying like that threw Shin Ruu terribly out of sorts.

"Wh-Why are you crying? Do you...not want Sheera and Darmu Ruu to get married?"

"Of course I do!" Lala Ruu tearfully replied. "I'm not upset... I'm happy. Sheera Ruu's hopes are finally going to be fulfilled," she said, her face all scrunched up.

It was like she was a little kid again. Seeing Lala Ruu's tears of joy made Shin Ruu feel even happier.

"Thanks for thinking about Sheera so much. But this is a happy occasion, so please stop crying," Shin Ruu said, causing Lala Ruu to smile, though her tears did not stop.

"It's been a while since I've heard you say 'thanks,' Shin Ruu... You've been much more formal lately."

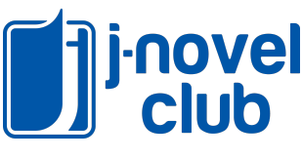
"Yeah. But the way you were crying made you look so much like a child that maybe I couldn't help but feel a little childlike myself."

Still smiling tearfully, Lala Ruu gave Shin Ruu's chest a shove and said, "Jeez!" And then, she grabbed on to his clothing.

Even if they were related, men and women who didn't belong to the same house weren't supposed to touch one another unnecessarily. That was their people's custom, so Shin Ruu begged for the mother forest's forgiveness as he gently gripped Lala Ruu's hand. The girl let go of his clothing so that she could hold his hand as well.

The pair stood together, hand in hand, watching their precious family celebrate in the light of the bonfires.





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by EDA

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