COOKING WITH WILD GAME

Author: EDA
Illust: Kochimo

VOLUME 28



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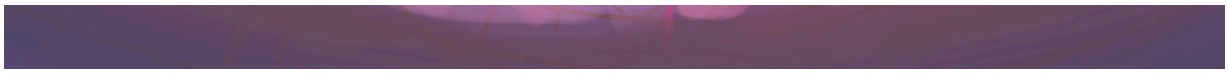


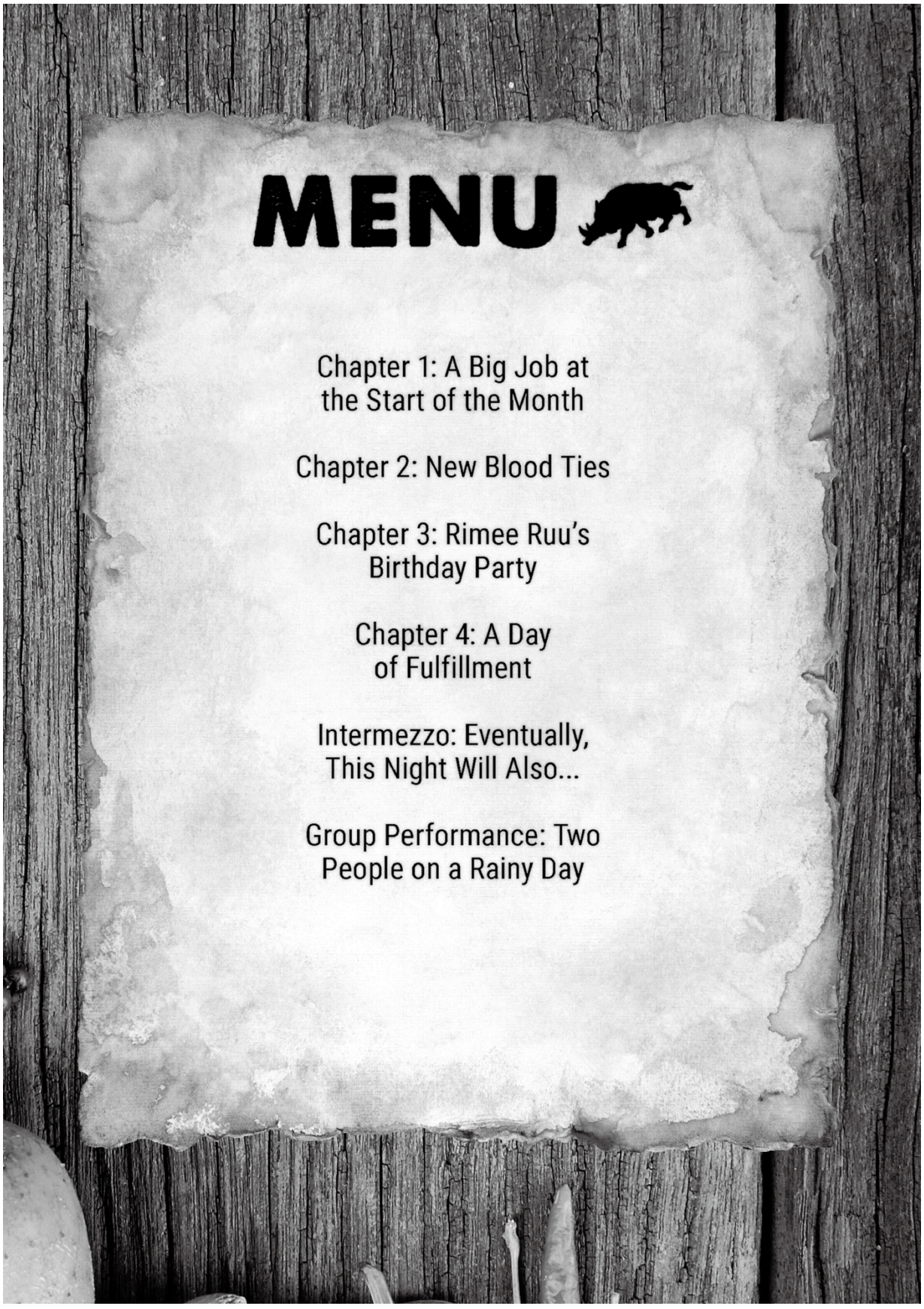

After thinking for a moment, Ludo Ruu grabbed his little sister and placed her up on his shoulders, making her excitedly exclaim, “Yay!”
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"Tonight, the second son of the main Ruu house, Darmu Ruu, and the eldest daughter of Shin Ruu's house, Sheera Ruu, shall be wed. May they show one another affection and bring new strength to both the Ruu clan and the forest's edge until the day their souls return to the forest."


"You were crying like a baby. You're the only one who got so out of sorts, Asuta."
"That's not true," I replied, my voice going all nasally. And yet, the hand towel was so drenched that it seemed like it would need to be wrung out.




MENU
Chapter 1: A Big Job at the Start of the Month
Chapter 2: New Blood Ties
Chapter 3: Rimee Ruu's Birthday Party
Chapter 4: A Day of Fulfillment
Intermezzo: Eventually, This Night Will Also...
Group Performance: Two People on a Rainy Day



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 was engaged to Darmu Ruu at the festival of the hunt.



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 is staying at the northern settlement after asking to marry Deek Dom.



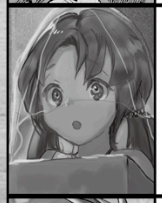
Geol Zaza

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.



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 Rutim

The youngest daughter of the former main Suun house. Currently a member of the main Rutim house. 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 Ruu

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

Giran Ririn

The head of the Ririn clan, which is subordinate to the Ruu clan. He has a cheerful personality and is unusually curious about the townsfolk and their way of life.

Saris Ran Fou

A member of the Fou clan who live near the Fa house. She is Ai Fa's childhood friend and the mother of a single child.

Raielfam Sudra

The Sudra clan head. He has a wrinkly face and is both incredibly intellectual and loyal. He approved of the Fa clan's actions from early on.

Cheem Sudra

A member of the Sudra clan. A skillful young man with a small build. He is deepening his bond with Asuta by working as a bodyguard.

~ Townsfolk ~



Yumi

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

Milano Mas

The owner of an inn called the Kimyuus's Tail. A stubborn man with a strong sense of duty. Though he has had issues with the people of the forest's edge, those issues have been cleared up over time, and he has become a strong supporter of Asuta's.

Telia Mas

Milano Mas's daughter. She's shy by nature but has been opening up to the people of the forest's edge by interacting with them. She's also getting closer to Yumi as daughters of parents who own inns.



Tara

Dora's nine-year-old daughter. She is becoming close with Rimee Ruu, who is also around her age.

Nail

The innkeeper of the Sledgehammer. He strongly admires the culture of Sym and always remains expressionless. He has many strong connections with his eastern customers.

Naudis

The innkeeper of the Great Southern Tree. An excellent businessman who has a cheerful personality. He has many strong connections with his southern customers.

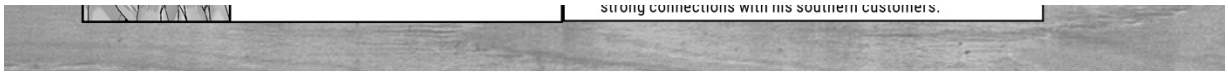

strong connections with his southern customers.

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Chapter 1: A Big Job at the Start of the Month

1

The yellow month had finally arrived.

This was a big deal because the previous yellow month was when I had appeared at the forest's edge and first met Ai Fa. In other words, nearly a year had passed since my arrival, and what a chaotic year it had been!

I had been sent to this world at the end of the yellow month, where I had met Ai Fa out in the forest and she had taken me into the Fa clan. I had met Rimee Ruu a few days after that, which had led to me making hamburger steak for Granny Jiba.

In the green month, I had prepared food for Gazraan and Ama Min Rutim's wedding, and after that, I had opened my first stall and started doing business in the post town.

The clan head meeting had been held during the blue month, which had been followed by that whole incident with Tei and Zattsu Suun, and then I had said farewell to Shumiral and Balan. That was also around when we had welcomed the totos Gilulu into our clan.

The white month was when we had settled matters with Cyclaeus and put an end to his villainous actions against the people of the forest's edge.

In the gray month, Ai Fa and I had enjoyed our first break period together. We had also started building new bridges with the nobles of Genos, and our lives became peaceful, with business in the post town really taking off.

During the black month, I had met Myme, Varkas, and Arishuna. We had then invited Myme to the forest's edge, along with Mikel, and they had shown off their skills for us and taught us about

smoking techniques, so their visit had been good for both building our friendship and boosting our productivity.

In the indigo month, we had taken our trip to the neighboring town of Daleim, opened the outdoor restaurant, helped the Sauti clan bring down the lord of the forest, and spent a lot of time getting ready for what would be happening next.

After all, the violet month was when the sun god's revival festival was held. That had been another really hectic period for us, and we had met lots of interesting people, like the members of the Gamley Troupe.

Then, the new year had rolled around with the silver month. That was when Dora and his family had been invited to the Ruu settlement for a friendship banquet. We had also gone to another banquet so we could make peace with the house of Saturas.

In the golden month, we had held a combined festival of the hunt with the clans that lived around us, and during the break period that followed, we had forged ties with a few clans that we hadn't interacted with before.

The rainy season had then arrived with the brown month. Not long after, I had been infected by the illness called Amusehorn's Breath, which very nearly killed me.

The rains had continued through the red month, which had also featured Ai Fa's birthday. Also, down in the south, work on the path through the forest's edge had been completed.

Finally, in the vermilion month, Sufira Zaza and Morun Rutim's problematic romantic feelings had been revealed. Granny Jiba's birthday party had been at the end of the month, during which Darmu and Sheera Ruu had decided to get married. That brought us all the way to the present month, the yellow one. The last year had been incredibly busy, filled with major changes for us and the town outside of the forest.

Of course, since this was a year with an extra month, which occurred every three years, I had already been in this world for more than twelve months, amounting to around 370 days in total. But I personally felt that I couldn't say I had been here for a full year until I reached the anniversary of my arrival at the forest's edge

—the twenty-fourth of the yellow month.

Naturally, since we were still only at the beginning of the yellow month, it was a little early to be getting so emotional about it. However, there was a lot for us to look forward to in the next month. Just off the top of my head, there was Rimee Ruu's birthday, the innkeeper meeting I was supposed to participate in, and two marriages, one between the Fou and the Sudra, and the other between Darmu and Sheera Ruu, both of which I would be attending. Every single one of those events was going to take place before the twenty-fourth of the yellow month, so I had a lot of things I needed to pour my energy into first.

◇

First on the docket was the inn meeting. It occurred on the first day of the yellow month, two days after the Ruu festival of the hunt where Granny Jiba's birthday had also been celebrated.

We headed over to The Great Southern Tree, where the event was being held after finishing up work with the stalls. The meeting was scheduled to begin in the evening, and was going to last for a couple hours.

In this country, there were organizations called firms that businesses of the same type were members of. They held meetings regularly in order to maintain their connections, discuss any edicts the nobles might have handed down, and look into any problems that had arisen.

This time around, we had been permitted to participate as concerned parties related to The Kimyuus's Tail. Most snack stalls were associated with one inn or another, so it had been agreed that we had reason to join them for this meeting.

To be honest, I had probably put this off longer than I should have. This firm had done a lot of the work when it came to distributing the new ingredients that had become available around the post town—the ones that Cyclaeus had been hoarding until we had stopped him. Now these precious foodstuffs were readily available even to the common folk of the post town. The firm had

also been involved in spreading information about how poitan could be used in place of fuwano. Those were two huge changes that they had been involved in all the way back in the white and gray months, which was over nine months ago at this point.

Of course, I had been heavily involved in both of those changes as well. After all, I *was* the person who had invented the new technique for cooking poitan. Of course, Polarth and a few of his people were the ones who had come up with the plan to apply economic pressure to the house of Turan by spreading my method, so it had officially been an initiative directed by a noble. The fact that I had been the original source had been kept quiet, so that the people of the forest's edge wouldn't face blowback for the disruption it had caused. The firm's network of contacts had been instrumental in circulating the information, and it had all started at a meeting like the one I was about to attend. Groundwork for the sale of karon milk and torso meat from the castle town had been handled in a similar manner.

Even when it came to spreading knowledge on how to effectively use the new ingredients that were becoming available, the nobles had asked me to be discreet in how I went about it. Apparently, Yang had been dispatched to inn meetings in the past to explain such methods to them personally. All I had done was keep on quietly doing business like I always had in order to show people what the ingredients could be used for in the most direct way possible.

As things stood, we people of the forest's edge who did business in the post town were still outsiders in a lot of ways. When we had a complicated business issue to deal with, rather than going to the firm, we went directly to the nobles instead. Up until now, even though we had a big presence in town, our dealings with inns were limited to just selling giba meat to a small handful of them.

Of course, it wasn't as if that was some sort of issue for us. Even if we didn't belong to the firm, we still followed their established way of doing things. Our management system differed, but we *were* subject to the same rules, so that much was only natural. The merchants who visited from Sym, Jagar, and other towns in Selva all practiced business in more or less the same manner as well.

Still, I felt it was high time for me to take this step. The settlement at the forest's edge was officially considered Genos territory, so it seemed sensible for us to operate similarly to the locals, and in order to continue building a healthy relationship with the people of the post town, it was a necessary step to take. Besides, I wanted to have a good rapport with the other inn owners too, just like we had with Milano Mas, Naudis, Nail, and Sams. And if it meant we'd be selling more giba meat, that was yet another reason to be looking forward to it.

At this point, many of the people of the forest's edge were financially better off than they had ever been before. At the very least, the clans selling fresh meat to the post town through the Fa and the Ruu were undoubtedly earning far more money than they had in the past.

However, we were still far from satisfied with what we had accomplished. At present, fewer than half of the clans of the forest's edge were getting any of that new wealth. And what was more, we had recently learned how incredibly helpful it was to have hunting dogs, but unfortunately, the Fa and Ruu were the only clans currently capable of purchasing dogs on their own. We were going to need more money if we wanted to buy enough dogs for all the clans to have as many as they needed. In order to reach that goal, we would have to work together with the clans who currently didn't approve of the Fa's actions, and expand our business even further.

By forging proper bonds with others, both in the post town and at the forest's edge, we would be able to give everyone a chance to lead a fulfilling life. That was the ideal that Ai Fa and I had been pursuing right from the start. And so, in order to see our objective realized, we had to keep finding ways to push things forward.

That was certainly a long introduction, but now, the inn meeting was almost here.

After wrapping up business at the stalls, we headed over to The Great Southern Tree.

I was going as the representative for the Fa, while Reina Ruu would be representing her clan. The Great Southern Tree's owner, Naudis, had arranged things so that we would be preparing dinner

for the gathered crowd as well, so Rimee Ruu and Tsuvai Rutim were also accompanying us. Normally, I'd have wanted to have Toor Deen and Yun Sudra helping out too, but we needed them to head back to the forest's edge to handle the prep work for tomorrow.

"Jeez, why do I have to help out with a hassle like this?!" Tsuvai Rutim grumbled on our way to The Great Southern Tree.

Reina Ruu turned to look at the younger girl with a soothing smile. "Sorry to burden you with this, Tsuvai Rutim, but as the one who understands matters of business the best out of anyone under the Ruu clan, we really wanted you to be there with us."

"Hmph! If you're calculating coins, Asuta of the Fa clan should have no trouble handling that on his own!"

"We can't always leave everything to Asuta. After all, we're now doing business in the post town separately from the Fa clan."

Tsuvai Rutim frowned, not looking very satisfied with that answer, but she refrained from complaining any further. That was just the sort of girl she was, though. I was certain she wasn't too annoyed, and she would never skip out on work. Otherwise, Gazraan Rutim never would have granted her the clan name that now belonged to her.

Two days ago, Tsuvai Rutim, her mother Oura Rutim, and Mida Ruu had all finally been given clan names. When she had gotten the news, the young girl had clung to her mother's arm, looking like she had been about to break down crying, or like she might burst from sheer emotion. She almost never let her feelings show like that in her day-to-day life. Honestly, it was reassuring to see the young girl —who was short even for her age—striding down the street so resolutely.

"Even after getting a clan name, you're still as noisy as ever. But I guess it'd be pretty creepy if you suddenly started being quiet all the time," a voice called out from Reina Ruu's other side. It was Ludo Ruu, who was accompanying us as a guard. Since we would be getting back late, both Ai Fa and Donda Ruu had insisted that we needed an escort.

Shin Ruu was part of our group as well, serving as our second guard. Those two were always the ones we brought with us when

we were trying to forge new bonds with townsfolk, due to their benign appearances. Though, it had actually been quite a while since I had last seen the two of them on guard duty together.

"It sure is fortunate that the Ruu clans are in a break period. Otherwise, you would've had to choose Ryada Ruu and Bartha again," Ludo Ruu added as we walked, surrounded by heavy foot traffic. He seemed to be in a good mood as he strolled along, holding hands with his precious little sister, Rimee Ruu. He had always enjoyed being in the post town more than most of our people. "It's been a while since you've been to the post town too, right, Shin Ruu?" Ludo Ruu asked.

Shin Ruu calmly nodded and answered, "Indeed. Lately, it feels like I've been visiting the castle town more often than the post town. But it's been a couple months since I've gone to either."

"I'm just glad that Darmu and Sheera Ruu shifted their wedding date. If the pre-celebration had already started, neither of us would be able to be out here as late into the night as we're gonna be."

When members of the Ruu clans got married, they held a pre-celebration for seven days beforehand. Each night, the pair to be wed would visit the house of a clan head under the Ruu to present themselves. The first encounter I'd had with members of the Rutim clan had been during such an event, and as the head of his household, Shin Ruu would be accompanying his older sister as she went around to the various houses. Thinking about it warmed my heart.

"Darmu sure did take his sweet time, though, didn't he? Because of that whole mess with Ai Fa, for a while there it seemed like he had absolutely no interest in any other woman."

"Yes, but Sheera has had feelings for Darmu Ruu for a long time, so as the head of her house, I couldn't be happier with how things worked out."

"And before long, you and Lala will be next! It's definitely rare to have two marriages between members of the same two houses!"

"It's way too early to be talking about that. Lala Ruu's still only thirteen," Shin Ruu replied, his face red as he glared at Ludo Ruu.



The other Ruu hunter just snickered at him with a big grin on his face.

"Darmu and Sheera Ruu's wedding banquet will be on the fourteenth of the yellow month, right? I'm really looking forward to it, Shin Ruu," I interjected.

Rimee Ruu smiled up at me and said, "I'm so happy that you and Ai Fa got invited to the banquet! But don't forget that my birthday comes before that, okay?"

"Yup, on the sixth of the yellow month. You're very important to me, so of course I remember your birthday," I responded, causing the smile on the young girl's face to grow even brighter.

Ai Fa and I had actually been invited to the Fou and Sudra wedding being held the day before as well. Talks of Yun Sudra and Jou Ran being wed had fortunately been nixed, but there hadn't been any problems with the other pairing, so their marriage was still on. We really had a lot of celebrations to look forward to in the first half of the yellow month.

As we were chatting, The Great Southern Tree came into view. I had to place Gilulu and his wagon into their care before anything else, so Shin Ruu and I peeked inside the inn first.

Naudis was at the reception desk, and he smiled and greeted us. "Welcome, Asuta. You need me to take charge of your totos and wagon, correct? Hold on for just a moment. Hey! Come handle the front desk!"

"Coming!" a voice called out, and then Naudis's wife came down from the second floor. The inn owner himself had mixed blood from Jagar and Sym, but his wife was a pure-blooded westerner, though her short figure made her look kind of similar to Naudis in some ways.

After the married couple swapped places at the desk, Naudis stepped outside with us. We quickly moved the ingredients we had brought with us into the building, and then followed him to the back of the building, where there was a rather sturdy-looking storehouse. Just like at The Kimyuus's Tail, there was a hefty lock attached to the door. Naudis unlocked it, then opened the heavy door and gestured at us to come inside.

"I'm not worried about bandits or the like breaking in here, but you should probably take your money along with you. And as for your totos, please lead it inside this fence. Hmm... This totos doesn't seem to have been branded."

"That's right. We've given him a necklace of tusks and horns to identify him. Will that be okay?"

"Yes, of course. We don't have any other unbranded totos, so there's no danger that we might get them mixed up."

The totos and wagons of the guests staying at The Great Southern Tree were all being held there. Taking a quick glance around, I spied five or six wagons and nearly twice that many totos. The wagons merchants used were usually quite large and made to be drawn by two of the massive birds. But despite how many wagons and totos were within, there was still a fair bit of room left to spare in the storehouse.

"This is really impressive. Is this storehouse actually bigger than the main structure?"

"Indeed it is. No matter how fine an inn may be, if it doesn't have enough room to store people's wagons and totos, you can't accommodate a large number of guests."

It was true that not many people traveled on foot, so that certainly made sense, but I still thought it was pretty remarkable as we exited the massive storehouse.

"Now then, let's head on back. I must say, I've really been looking forward to this day. It's been quite a while since I've been able to invite you all into my inn's kitchen."

In the past, we had prepared food in the kitchens of each of the inns we interacted with several times, but fairly early on, we had switched to selling completed dishes only, so it had probably been several months now since we had used his kitchen.

"Is it really all right for us to only prepare food with giba meat in it, by the way? I have to assume there's gonna be at least a couple people in the group who won't want to try it."

"Anyone who doesn't can simply have the karon and kimyuus dinners we prepare for our customers, but I doubt you'll have much in the way of leftovers at the end of the night. The other inn owners

all seemed quite interested in your cooking."

Somehow, Naudis seemed to be grinning even wider than usual, and the smile didn't leave his face for a moment as we returned to the inn and entered the kitchen.

"Well then, feel free to use whatever you please. We'll move our own cooking off to the side so it doesn't get in your way."

"Thank you so much for everything. All right, let's hurry up and get started." With that, we four chefs cleaned our hands and got to work. Ludo Ruu took up a position next to the window, while Shin Ruu stood by the entrance. "The other inn owners should be arriving around the lower fifth hour, right?" I asked Naudis.

"Yes. We'll talk for around an hour after that, and then it will be time for dinner. We deal with the most important topics first, then discuss the rest as we eat."

"I feel kind of nervous, to be honest. I mean, it's not like everyone there is going to have a good opinion of us."

"Maybe, but the number of people who hate the people of the forest's edge has gone down a lot over the last year. There might be one or two who still dislike you, but it won't be anything to worry about."

It was true that I couldn't recall any townsfolk reacting to us with animosity lately. However, that was no surprise when most of the people we interacted with were our customers. Today we were attending a gathering of people who could reasonably see us as business rivals. We were earning a lot more profit than the other stalls were, so I had to wonder how these folks who were in the same industry saw us. Pretty soon, we were finally going to learn the answer to that question.

The chefs from the castle town have generally been pretty professional with us, but we were never directly competing with them as businesspeople. Well, whatever ends up happening, we have to make this work for the sake of Naudis, Milano Mas, and everyone else who's been treating us so well, I thought to myself as I tackled my first big job of the yellow month.

2

Time passed by in a flash after that, until the lower fifth hour rolled around. Having finished with our cooking, we went ahead and moved to the dining hall where the meeting was going to be held.

There was still an hour left until sunset, so there weren't any customers around, but I quickly spotted a big cluster of inn owners already sitting in the back. The dining hall looked like it was probably able to fit seventy to eighty people if they were really packed in, but currently there were only around thirty people present.

We headed over to them with Naudis at the front of our group, and the chatter suddenly stopped.

A figure seated in the corner raised a hand and called out, "Hey." It was Milano Mas of The Kimyuus's Tail, sitting alone at a table for six. "You sure are late. Did you finish with the cooking?"

"Yes, it's done," I said "Thank you so much for inviting us to today's meeting."

"There's no need for you to keep bowing to me over and over like that. We've been waiting for you lot, so hurry up and take your seats."

Apparently, we were the last ones to arrive. After grabbing some chairs from an empty table, we all sat around the same table as Milano Mas.

Naudis bowed with a smile before walking over to the back wall. He sat down in an empty chair, and the person seated next to him stood up in turn.

"This is everyone, isn't it? It looks like we're right on time."

He was a broad-shouldered man who looked to be in his mid-forties. His hair and eyes were dark brown, while his skin was pale. He had a friendly, cheerful expression on his face that made me think he probably specialized in customer service.

I vaguely remembered the man. He was the owner of Tanto's Blessing where Yang helped out, and his name was Tapas. From what I had heard, he was in charge of running these meetings. Or in other words, he was the head of the firm.

"Thank you for coming today in spite of your busy schedules. We

shall now begin our regular meeting for the yellow month. But before that, I would like to introduce the individuals who are participating in this meeting for the first time."

Milano Mas nodded and stood up. "I'm sure you've already heard about this, but the people of the forest's edge I lend stalls to will be participating today. Some among their tribe have committed crimes in town, but those responsible have already been punished, so I hope you'll treat them as fellow citizens of Genos rather than prejudging them."

He glanced at us, and we also stood up.

"My name is Asuta of the Fa clan, and I run snack stalls. It's a pleasure to meet you all."

"I'm Reina Ruu of the Ruu clan. This is my younger sister Rimee Ruu and a member of one of our subordinate clans, Tsuvai Rutim. And our attendants here are Ludo and Shin Ruu," Reina Ruu quietly added, and Rimee Ruu bowed her head.

The crowd silently looked us over. They had supposedly been informed in advance, so none of them should have been surprised to see us. And yet, most of them wore expressions full of misgivings.

There was one girl seated some distance away from our table who waved her hand at us, though. It was Yumi of The Westerly Wind, and next to her sat her father Sams—the owner of the inn—who had a stern look on his face. When she'd heard we would be participating in this meeting, Yumi had asked her dad to let her come along.

In the distance, I also spied Nail from The Sledgehammer. His face was the last one in the crowd that was familiar to us. Feeling more than a little nervous, we sat back down, as did Milano Mas.

"All of you are well aware by now that their stalls have been doing incredibly well," Tapas said before taking a seat as well. "And like me, they have been tasked by the noble houses of Saturas and Daleim to find ways to make use of all the new ingredients we now have. I'm sure most of the people here have visited their stalls at least once in order to see for yourselves what their cooking tastes like. It goes without saying that they've been putting in a tremendous amount of effort to help our post town thrive. Though

we are competitors looking to steal customers from one another, we are also all engaged in the same business in the same town, so I am asking you to be open to working with our colleagues from the forest's edge."

That introduction brought the meeting to a slow and quiet start.

First up came a report about some information the nobles had provided, but there was nothing particularly noteworthy in its contents. It was mostly just an update about all the different foodstuffs that would be coming in from Sym, Jagar, the western capital of Algrad, and various other towns in Selva in the near future, which the nobles wanted everyone here to try to put to good use.

There had also been a gang of bandits captured near Genos, a case where some travelers got into a fight at an inn and there had been injuries, a criminal who had been whipped for trying to steal totos... Honestly, it was a whole bunch of violent stuff, but then Tapas said something that really caught my attention.

"In the upcoming green month, a construction group from Jagar will once again be visiting to conduct building repairs. Please determine exactly what repairs your inns are in need of by the end of this month."

I was pretty excited to hear that, even if nobody else was. The construction group from Jagar he was referring to was Pops Balan's group. But Reina Ruu barely knew them, since she had only started working at the stalls around the end of the blue month, and Rimee Ruu and Tsuvai Rutim had never met them at all.

So Pops and his crew are finally returning to Genos. I'll have to steel myself, or else I'll probably end up crying again.

And there was one more matter of interest: The new path carved through the settlement at the forest's edge was going to become usable soon. That had to mean that the merchant group that had been assigned to assess the route—the Black Flight Feathers from Sym—would be returning to Genos before too much longer.

Thinking back, when they had left Genos in the silver month, I had been told that they would be back three months later at the earliest, and four months or so had passed since then. Some sort of message about their return must have arrived in Genos recently.

"When the Black Flight Feathers return from Sym using the new path, that will prove its safety, and Genos will undoubtedly find itself hosting more easterners than ever before."

"That's certainly good to hear. I'll be praying to the western god for everything to go smoothly for them," a calm voice chimed in from the table beside us. It had come from an older woman with dark skin whose unique appearance had immediately caught my eye. There weren't many women here to begin with, and her skin marked her as likely being of mixed blood from Sym and Selva. She had gray hair, brown eyes, and a general appearance that made her look like a kind person.

It was a little hard to judge her height because she was sitting, but she looked quite thin. She was wearing a long, flowing robe and lots of accessories, in a style I had very much come to associate with Sym.

"Yes, your inn, The Ramuria Coil, is the first one that comes to mind for most easterners. Did the members of the Black Flight Feathers stay at your place last time, Jizeh?" Tapas asked.

The older woman, Jizeh, gave a gentle smile and replied, "No, they always stay in the castle town from what I've heard. They're all fine people, of such good character that even the nobles of Genos think well of them."

"I see. But your inn serves Sym cuisine good enough to measure up to anything in the castle town, doesn't it?"

"Oh, certainly not. A lot of our customers leave to go elsewhere when dinnertime rolls around lately. They must be coming here to The Great Southern Tree, or perhaps to The Kimyuu's Tail, looking for giba meat," Jizeh replied, her smile turning toward us. "Which is why I'd like to ask...if our friends from the forest's edge would be willing to sell giba meat to my inn as well?"

"Ah. Let's put those discussions off until later. There's one more thing I'd like to bring up first," Tapas interjected, retaining his perfectly calm demeanor. "This is about the proposal the owner of The Kimyuus's Tail recently made. Apparently, he has been continuing to order onda from a vegetable seller in the Daleim lands even now that the rainy season has ended. And so, you wished to

ask if any of the other inns would like to keep serving onda as well, correct?"

"Yeah. At present, there are four inns buying onda. That's enough for them to agree to continue selling us the stuff, but I'm sure they'd be happy to have more business," Milano Mas stated, making the other inn owners start murmuring among themselves. He glanced around the room at each of them, and then snorted, "Hmph. As you've probably figured out, the four inns I'm talking about are the ones that are already buying giba meat, and this idea to keep using onda was raised by the people of the forest's edge. But regardless of whether any of you lot decide to get in on this, they won't be getting any profit from it. The only thing you need to think about is whether your inn's cooking would benefit from having onda."

That caused even more murmuring.

As the one in charge, Tapas lightly cleared his throat and said, "Well then, this seems like the right time to move on to the topic of giba meat. Like with the onda, I believe The Kimyuus's Tail has a proposal on that front."

"Yes, we do. Though I'll be having these guys explain it themselves."

With that prompt from Milano Mas, I nodded and said, "Sure. I definitely appreciate the offer we just got from the lady at the table next to us, but we actually wanted to ask everyone if you would like to start ordering giba meat. It's a bit on the expensive side, but I've heard that more inns and stalls are starting to use pricey karon torso meat, so I would appreciate it if you would give it some thought."

The murmuring in the room was growing quite a bit louder now.

One of the voices speaking up belonged to the owner of The Ramuria Coil, Jizeh. "If you're willing to sell giba meat, I'm glad to hear it. How much does it cost, exactly?"

"Well, like with karon, the price varies based on the cut. The cheapest cut is leg meat, which will cost five and a half red coins for enough to serve four people. The most expensive is chest meat, which costs ten red coins for the same amount."

"I see. That means it's two to three times as expensive as kimyuus meat, yes? It certainly isn't cheap... However, it sounds like

it's still cheaper than karon torso."

"Yeah, it is. The castle town said that we should set our prices at a level similar to that of karon meat, so that's the price range we're allowed to sell giba at."

Then another voice called out, "I wanted to ask...you're talking about selling giba meat, not your cooking, right?"

"That's correct. We're currently selling giba cooking to three inns, but we believe that taking on any more jobs like that would be too much of a workload for us."

"Three of them? Don't you sell giba cooking to four inns?"

"We sell cooking to The Kimyuus's Tail, The Great Southern Tree, and The Sledgehammer, but we only sell raw meat to The Westerly Wind."

"That's right," Yumi chimed in. "We pride ourselves on our cheap prices, so if we did buy cooking from them, we probably wouldn't be able to get it to sell. That's why we only buy giba meat and do the cooking ourselves."

"Hey, if you can't keep quiet, I'm gonna send you home," Sams said with a glare, but Yumi simply shrugged, looking totally unconcerned.

"What's the problem? I only spoke the truth, didn't I? We only get broke outlaws and eccentric easterners at our place, so even if we were to serve their giba cooking like the other inns do, it wouldn't bring us many more customers."

The other attendees started huddling together in groups to discuss the matter. It appeared that most of the inns had only sent one person, unlike The Westerly Wind, but when it came to making a decision as big as this one, they all felt the need to talk it over with someone first.

I noticed Jizeh smiling again, looking like she was about to say something, but before she could, someone called out from a different direction, "I see. I was wondering why you'd invite people of the forest's edge to this meeting. So *this* is what you were aiming for, eh?" It had come from another woman, a middle-aged one with a raspy voice. "You already earn a fortune every day selling your giba cooking at your stalls and to inns, but it's still not enough?

What a greedy bunch."

When I looked over at her, I found that she was a large woman who was sitting haughtily in her chair. She looked like she probably weighed at least one and a half times as much as Jizeh. She had curly dark-brown hair that came down to her shoulders, and her brown eyes were full of hostility. Her skin was a tanned color, and her upper arms looked thicker than mine.

"Hey, why're you calling people greedy just because they brought up a business offer? Stop nitpicking already," Milano Mas harshly chimed in.

"Hmph," the woman snorted. "You despised the people of the forest's edge not that long ago, but now you've fallen low enough to become their underling. And to think, I used to feel bad for you."

"Getting sympathy from *you* is more annoying than comforting. If your unreasonable mudslinging is the only thing you have to add to the conversation, maybe you should keep your mouth shut."

"Oh? I wonder, which one of us is really being unreasonable here? I'd appreciate it if you'd stop trying to use our meetings as a tool to push your own business interests."

At that point, even Tapas seemed fed up with the woman, and he turned to look directly at her. "You are being pointlessly disruptive with your comments, Lema Geit. If you have an issue with procuring giba meat from the people of the forest's edge, all you need to do is not buy any yourself."

"I'd never buy that garbage even if you begged me to. Why should I have to help the people of the forest's edge make a profit?" the woman said, utterly undaunted.

Milano Mas clicked his tongue, looking annoyed. "Hey, you don't have to pay any attention to her," he told me. "She's just had a grudge against the people of the forest's edge since forever ago."

"I see. Is she an inn owner as well?"

"Yeah. She runs The Arow Bud, the second-largest inn in the post town after Tanto's Blessing. The Geits are all ridiculously stubborn."

Thinking back, this was only the third time I had encountered a westerner with a true last name, after Milano Mas's family and Shilly Rou. That meant she must have been a descendant of the

independent settlers who had been here before the house of Genos had been sent to this region.

"I'm sure after this, you're planning on bringing out some of that giba cooking we've all heard so much about, aren't you? How predictable. I'm amazed you can do something that shameless," Lema Geit continued, causing Naudis to stand up with an uncharacteristically angry look on his face.

"Lema Geit, I'm the one who suggested serving a meal with giba meat tonight. I'd like you to stop slandering the people of the forest's edge by calling them greedy, shameless, or anything else like that."

"Hmph. Are you also one of their underlings? The people of the forest's edge are nothing but a group of outlaws, and anyone who supports them may as well be one too."

"Give it a break already. The criminals who broke our laws have all been judged. Only stubborn folks like you are still complaining about it at this point," Milano Mas retorted, his tone growing harsher.

However, Lema Geit still didn't back down. "All the criminals have been judged, you say? I can't help but find that odd. From what I've heard, the former leading clan head alone ended up having to take the blame for all of their crimes, while the rest of the criminals got acquitted."

"Two of the criminals were executed as well, and they were the only ones who had harmed anybody."

"What nonsense. You're talking about some old geezers who were going to kick the bucket any day. But what about those young ruffians who were always running wild in town? They were set free without being punished at all, weren't they?"

Milano Mas raised a suspicious eyebrow as Lema Geit's thick lips twisted upward into a hateful grin.

"I've had an expensive stall smashed by those ruffians, you know. And that monstrously huge fellow is still living it up at the forest's edge even now, isn't he? To have caused so much damage and receive no punishment for it is utterly ridiculous."

I gulped and looked over at Tsuvai Rutim, who was seated beside me. Her big eyes were blazing with animosity as she glared at Lema

Geit.

"Didn't you settle the matter in return for the money you needed to buy a new stall, though?" Milano Mas asked a fair bit less forcefully than the last time he'd spoken.

"Hmph," Lema Geit snorted. "When folks from the castle town order you to drop something, you don't get to keep complaining after that. Your wife's brother was killed, and you were forced to suffer in silence with no ability to object to how things were handled, were you not?"

"Are you saying that the value of a stall is equal to the value of a life?"

"Well, the guy who was using that stall almost died too. That monster of a man smashed his stall right in front of him, and he got so scared he wet himself. If things had gone a little differently, he could've been crushed along with the stall."

The people around us shared concerned looks with one another. Even Milano Mas held his tongue with a deep frown on his face.

"In the end, the people of the forest's edge have been living it up however they please because the nobles have taken a liking to them. They've simply taken a step up from brownnosing the house of Turan to brownnosing the house of Genos. How could you ever trust a group of people who act like that? I'd sully my soul if I ate giba meat."

"Hey!" Tsuvai Rutim shrilly called out as she rose to her feet in a fury. "I tried being patient, but you just won't stop running your mouth! Do you have any idea what you're talking about when you say we're living it up with no punishment?! Huh?!"

"Tsuvai Rutim, stop," Reina Ruu chided, but Tsuvai Rutim ignored her and kept on wailing.

"That 'monster of a man' you're complaining about had his ties to his family severed and had to be taken in by another clan! Why don't you try using your shabby excuse for a brain to consider how harsh of a punishment that really is?!"

"What was that? You're a noisy brat, aren't you? What's all this about family ties?"

"I'm telling you that all of the members of the main Suun house

who committed those crimes *were* properly punished! Even you folks in the post town should know that!"

That certainly was true. But it was possible that folks outside of the people of the forest's edge wouldn't understand how serious their punishment had really been. And sure enough, Lema Geit just kept on jeering at Tsuvai Rutim, seemingly not listening to her argument at all.

"Those criminals weren't whipped or driven out of Genos, and are living carefree lives now, aren't they? How is that a punishment? I don't recall so much as a single one of them bowing down and apologizing to me."

"You think that being whipped is more painful than having your ties with your family severed?!"

"I've got no clue. It's not like I did anything to earn such a punishment in the first place, after all," Lema Geit replied, lifting up one eyebrow with a sneer.

Tsuvai Rutim, meanwhile, looked furious, with her slender shoulders trembling violently.

"That's enough, Lema Geit. What do you hope to accomplish by bringing this up again?" Tapas asked, fed up. "No matter what objections you might have had, you accepted the payment offered to you as compensation. If you truly weren't satisfied, you should have sent it back. It goes against the laws of Genos to keep publicly complaining like this after you've accepted an offer of reconciliation, even if you believe it was insincere."

"Hmph. I guess I can see how you'd think that way, considering how fond you are of having the nobles' attention, Tapas."

"Duke Marstein Genos officially proclaimed that all of the criminals from the house of Turan and the forest's edge had been judged. Do you truly think it's appropriate to make claims to the contrary?"

Lema Geit turned away, her large body swaying a bit. Tapas gave a single sigh before turning toward Tsuvai Rutim.

"Please return to your seat as well, Tsuvai...Rutim, was it? Your anger may be just, but there's no point in arguing about this here."

Tsuvai Rutim continued to glare at Lema Geit, ignoring his

request.

Ludo Ruu had watched that whole exchange in silence, but now he called out, "Hey, sit down already. If you're not okay with this, then we can talk about it later."

"Shut up!" Tsuvai Rutim shouted before turning around and running off. As she did, Shin Ruu swiftly stood up and followed after her. The two of them disappeared from the dining hall in a matter of moments, leaving Ludo Ruu to bring his hands together behind his head and say, "Ugh, sorry for all the commotion. Tsuvai Rutim falls under the Ruu clan, so as a member of her parent clan, allow me to apologize for her rudeness."

"O-Oh, of course... Well then, may we continue the meeting?"

"Of course. You can just forget about those two for now," Ludo Ruu replied, and then he looked over at us. "Hey, don't go running around on your own, okay? There's only one me here, after all."

"Yeah, I know," I replied. However, I couldn't help but be worried about Tsuvai Rutim. Reina and Rimee Ruu were also staring sadly at the dining hall's exit.

Needless to say, the "mountain of a man" Lema Geit had referred to was Mida Ruu. Quite some time back, there had been talk around the forest's edge of him occasionally throwing fits and smashing stalls in the post town.

Back then, Mida Ruu was only interested in delicious food and didn't think about the trouble he caused other people at all. His family even had to chain him up so he wouldn't head into town on his own. It's hard to even imagine that at this point.

Just two days ago, Mida Ruu had finally been acknowledged as having a proper spirit and had been given his clan name. Hearing Lema Geit disparaging him at a time like this must've been too much for Tsuvai Rutim to let slide.

She knows all too well how painful the punishment of having your family ties severed truly is.

As the meeting resumed, I found my thoughts returning to Tsuvai Rutim constantly, a bittersweet feeling filling my heart.

A long time passed, but the young girl did not return to the dining hall.

3

The discussions continued for a while after that, until eventually the sun set outside.

The candlesticks around the dining hall were lit, and customers started pouring in, at which point the inn owners all bunched up as tightly as they could manage so as not to get in the way.

Apparently, a notification had been put out in advance that thirty of the seats in the dining hall were reserved, but things still felt rather cramped. Naudis's wife and son were hurriedly running about waiting tables alongside the men and women they employed. I knew that thanks to the giba meat they served in their meals, The Great Southern Tree had been thriving, but this was the first time I was actually seeing it with my own two eyes.

A majority of the customers were southerners. However, there were also a lot of westerners and even some easterners in the mix too. The south and the east were enemy nations, but because so few dining halls offered giba meat, people were willing to go wherever they had to in order to get it.

"Look there, the folks at that table are guests at my inn. They usually prefer to keep their distance from southerners, but they wanted to have giba for dinner so badly that they decided to come here anyway," Jizeh of The Ramuria Coil said with an amused smile.

We chefs from the forest's edge were also moving back and forth through the hall. After all, it was time for us to have dinner too. I moved swiftly to carry out all the food alongside Reina and Rimee Ruu, with Naudis also lending us a hand. And the more food we brought out, the louder the inn owners' chattering about it got.

"This is everything. Thank you for waiting, everyone," I said.

"Hmm. So this is giba cooking? It all looks truly delicious," Tapas remarked with his voice full of anticipation.

"Oh? Have you not ever tried giba cooking, Tapas?" Naudis asked as he returned to his seat.

"I haven't. I invited the head chef of the house of Daleim to come work at my inn, so I haven't felt much need to get food anywhere else," Tapas replied, glancing around the dining hall. "Well then, shall

we dig in? Thank you for granting us this gift, dear people of the forest's edge."

The members of our group all carried out their premeal traditions, and naturally, we people of the forest's edge took the longest to finish ours. As soon as he finished whispering out his chant, though, Ludo Ruu excitedly grabbed a plate and exclaimed, "All right! Oh, this food all looks a lot more ordinary than I expected. Still seems like it'll be pretty tasty, though!"

"Yeah. I figured we shouldn't be too showy tonight."

However, this *was* a presentation of sorts, with the hope of getting more inns to purchase giba meat from us. As such, we had put a lot of careful consideration into deciding what we would make tonight.

We were offering two main dishes: a simple meat and vegetable sauté, and meatballs with sauce. For soup dishes, we had made cream stew and giba soup with tau oil, and as a side, we had baked poitan that we had done a little something extra to. We had also prepared dessert, but that would be left until after the main course.

"Oh, it seems like you only used salt and pico leaves on this. Well, I think it looks delicious even so," I heard Jizeh say from the neighboring table. She was holding up the meat and vegetable sauté. We had used rib meat in it, and the vegetables were aria, tino, nenon, and onda. And as she pointed out, we hadn't used any seasonings aside from salt and pico leaves.

"For this one, we decided to use chest meat with plenty of fat so that the vegetables wouldn't burn. We made sure to include a dish like this in our meal tonight to show that even just grilling giba meat is enough to make it taste incredibly good."

"I see... But you used pico leaves, didn't you?"

It seemed I needed to provide a little more of an explanation.

"At the forest's edge, we can gather as many pico leaves as we please, so we use them instead of salt in order to preserve meat. For this dish, the only pico leaves that we used were the ones that were already sticking to the meat."

"I'm jealous. It's not as if they're especially expensive, but you can't get pico leaves here in town without paying for them."

“Yeah. Pico leaves can do a lot to bring out the taste of a dish, so we tend to use them in most of our recipes.”

As she nodded in response, Jizeh picked up another plate, this one carrying meatballs covered in sauce. She took a bite of one, and her eyes opened wide in astonishment. “My... This dish seems quite elaborate in comparison. Does this sourness come from mamaria vinegar?”

“Yep, it does, but we used a lot of sugar in order to make it sweet. And the gooeyness comes from chatchi starch.”

“Chatchi starch? Ah, this meat is quite unusual too. It’s shockingly soft.”

“That’s because we chopped it up finely and then formed it into balls before we cooked it. The Kimyuus’s Tail actually offers a similar dish using kimyuus meat.”

With the meatballs, we had also used pula and chamcham in addition to the four types of vegetables in the sauté. Pula was akin to green pepper, while chamcham was like bamboo shoots, so we used the latter vegetable in a lot of our Chinese- and Japanese-style dishes.

Reina Ruu had taken the lead on the giba soup and cream stew, which had been prepared using the same recipes we used when making food for the inns and stalls. Though the giba soup was flavored with tau oil, she hadn’t done anything special with it otherwise. The foundation of the dish was ultimately the exquisite stock she had made using the giba meat and vegetables.

Basically, our theme for this meal was to show off a few simple dishes, presented alongside similar ones that took a bit more effort. Giba meat could taste delicious even in very basic dishes, and it could also have a strong impact on much more complex ones. Those were the two things we wanted to show everyone with this meal.

From the other tables, I could hear the inn owners moaning and voicing their pleasure. I didn’t know how many of them were trying giba cooking for the first time, but we seemed to have succeeded at impressing and surprising them.

“The poitan seem to have a variety of flavors. These ones have a different color too,” someone I didn’t recognize called out from

another table.

"That's right," I said. "For the poitan, we have three varieties. One we made with milk fat and karon milk, the second with kimyuus eggs, and the last one with gigo. The yellowish pieces are the ones with egg in them."

"Hmm. The flavor changes this much just from adding eggs?"

"It does. From what I hear, eggs don't see much use in the post town, but you can use them in all kinds of different ways, and they're not all that expensive."

With so many new ingredients popping up lately and competing for attention, kimyuus eggs seemed to have remained a low-profile foodstuff. Most people seemed to be of the opinion that eggs were something that poor families ate instead of meat, so unfortunately, they tended to be avoided in the service industry.

"These dishes are all truly delicious. I think I'm even more eager to start purchasing giba meat now than I was before," Jizeh remarked.

But then, a haughty woman's voice chimed in. "As I thought, you prepared quite a spread of giba cooking, didn't you?! What a flagrant ploy!" Unsurprisingly, that had come from Lema Geit of The Arow Bud.

Naudis had been slurping on cream stew with a smile, but when he heard that, he looked over at her with an uncharacteristically sullen expression. "Lema Geit, you don't seem to have had so much as a single bite. Shall we bring you some karon or kimyuus dishes?"

"No, thank you. I think I might lose it if I were to accidentally eat a bit of giba."

Milano Mas shot her an annoyed look. "Y'know, I'm getting real sick of your obstinacy. It's not as if you lost family like I did, so what reason could you possibly have for hating the people of the forest's edge so much?"

"Hmph! I just can't stand people who don't go about things properly. They caused so many problems here in town and have never so much as bowed their heads to us in apology, so I want nothing to do with either those barbarians from the forest's edge or the nobles from the castle town."

"What, you're whining about that again? We already told you that all the criminals were punished. Most people have realized by now that even nobles are capable of passing fair and proper judgment every once in a while."

"It's not as if I saw that 'judgment' you keep talking about with my own two eyes. Ten years ago, the Red Beards were framed and beheaded in order to protect those criminals from the forest's edge, but the nobles and the barbarians still get to live their nice, cushy lives. What part of that sounds fair?"

"You're bringing up even more old stories now. Haven't you heard that the remnants of the Red Beards forgave the people of the forest's edge and the nobles?"

"That's just more of the nobles covering things up. I wouldn't be surprised if those remnants had all been executed in secret by now!"

Milano Mas turned to look at us with a sour expression. Jeeda and Bartha had been keeping their identities secret around town in order to prevent any incidents from happening. Only those who were very close to our people like Milano Mas had any idea that they were Goram Redbeard's wife and child.

"May I say something?" Reina Ruu interjected, causing Lema Geit to glare at her in annoyance.

"What do you want, pretty little girl from the forest's edge? Despite appearances, I *am* a woman, so you won't be winning me over with sex appeal."

"Among our people, the former leading clan head Zuuro Suun was the man most responsible for committing those crimes, and he has been sentenced to hard labor, which I'm told is a fate worse than death. The two noble criminals who were involved have been given similarly heavy punishments. One received the same sentence as Zuuro Suun, and the other has been imprisoned for life. Are you saying those punishments weren't fair and just?"

"The folks in the castle town *claim* that's what happened, but nobody can prove that those punishments are actually being carried out. Those nobles could be living free behind those stone walls right now, enjoying all the delicious food they want."

"You really have that much doubt in your heart?" Reina Ruu

asked, biting her lip in frustration.

I had been keeping quiet, not wanting to stand out too much, but at that point, I worked up the resolve to speak up. “Lema Geit, let me say something too. The criminals from the house of Turan, Cyclaeus and Ciluel, ordered their men to aim their bows at Melfried, the son of Duke Marstein Genos himself. Cyclaeus was just a count. The house of Genos’s noble rank is way higher than theirs, so do you really think their crimes would have been brushed under the rug after they tried something like that?”

“What do you mean, they had their men draw bows on the duke’s son? That’s news to me.”

“That part doesn’t get mentioned much because everything else they did was so much worse. See, their crimes from years ago got exposed during a meeting with the leading clan heads of the forest’s edge, so they completely flew off the handle and tried to kill everyone there—including Melfried, who was present as an observer. I can’t imagine Duke Marstein Genos ever forgiving them for doing something so outrageous.”

“Hmph. You speak like you saw all that yourself.”

“I did, because I was there too. I was summoned to that meeting because part of the agenda was to discuss how a foreigner came to be living at the forest’s edge.”

Lema Geit suspiciously narrowed her eyes as she looked me over. “I see... You’ve been summoned to the castle town pretty frequently, haven’t you? You’re best buddies with the nobles, aren’t you?”

“You’re saying you can’t trust someone like me? I suppose that’s understandable, since this is the first time we’ve met,” I replied with as much sincerity as I could manage. “As you can clearly see, I wasn’t born at the forest’s edge. But I’ve lived there for nearly a year now, and over time, I’ve come to see just how earnest the people who make it their home really are. And I’ve been able to gain a similar amount of trust and friendship with numerous folks from the post town and castle town as well. That’s why I’m trying my hardest to strengthen the bonds between all three of those groups.”

“That’s certainly a grandiose statement. But, well, it’s your life, so go ahead and live it however you please,” Lema Geit replied with a

shrug of her thick shoulders, not sounding moved in the least. However, I couldn't help but smile as I kept watching her.

"I certainly will. And right now, I'd like to put in the effort to try to form a friendlier bond with you too."

"Eh? Just leave me be. You've got plenty of other folks here obediently wagging their tails and begging for giba meat."

"Maybe, but I can't simply ignore you. If you're going to insist on hating us, then you should at least get to know the people of the forest's edge properly first. If we manage to get that far and you still can't stand us, then at that point I'll have to admit that there's nothing I can do about it."

But then, right after I finished talking, I heard someone shout "Gyah!" from near the entrance.

I turned to look in that direction, and what I saw there caused me to drop my spoon. And I was one of the *least* surprised people in the room.

"Sorry for interrupting your dinner. This is where the inn owner meeting is being held, correct?" said a deep, rumbling voice that carried across the entire dining hall with ease. No one could have predicted this turn of events. After all, the speaker was none other than Donda Ruu, leading clan head of the forest's edge.

What was more, there was someone with an even bigger figure standing behind him, making a few people shriek in various places throughout the dining hall. Mida Ruu had come along as well. The young hunter, whose body was about three times as massive as the average person's, casually stepped into the room. Under the dim light of the candles, the presence his enormous form was giving off was incredibly attention-grabbing.

"Wh-What in the world is this all about?! I didn't hear anything about more people of the forest's edge attending this meeting," Tapas called out, his voice trembling.

Donda Ruu walked over to us, stopping when he was close to our table, with a bright gleam in his glaring blue eyes.

"I apologize for interrupting your meeting. However, we have an important reason for coming here."

With that, two more people stepped out from behind Mida Ruu:

Shin Ruu and Tsuvai Rutim.

Ludo Ruu had been biting into some poitan, but when he saw them, his eyes opened wide. “What are you lot up to?”

“Tsuvai Rutim was insistent that we had to bring Mida Ruu here. I couldn’t think of any other way to calm her down, so I retrieved the wagon from behind the inn and quickly returned to the Ruu settlement,” Shin Ruu explained.

“Hmph. So why’d you come along, old man?”

“As a leading clan head, when I heard what was being discussed here, I decided I couldn’t simply ignore it. And besides, Mida Ruu and Tsuvai Rutim both fall under the Ruu clan,” Donda Ruu said, looking around the room, his eyes shining like those of a wild beast. “I’m one of the three leading clan heads of the forest’s edge, Donda Ruu of the Ruu clan. I heard that somebody who is participating in this meeting holds a great deal of anger about Mida Ruu’s past actions, and that is what has brought us here tonight.”

“What’s this all about...? Are you going to strangle me to death in full view of this giant crowd of people?” Lema Geit asked, her voice cracking. Despite how pale her face had gone, her expression was full of something akin to fury. It looked to me like she was suppressing her fear of Donda and Mida Ruu with everything she had.

Slowly, steadily, Donda Ruu turned toward her.

“You’re the one whose stall Mida Ruu destroyed some time ago?”

“Yeah! What of it?!”

Donda Ruu stepped back until he was right next to the wall, giving Mida Ruu enough room to kneel in. When the young hunter did so, though, it was enough to make the floor beneath us shake a bit, eliciting a few more screams from the crowd.

“I’m sorry... Back then, I was a really bad person...” Mida Ruu said, his little piglet eyes fixated on Lema Geit.

The inn owner frowned deeply as she glared back at the massive hunter.

“I didn’t know the difference between good and bad... I just wanted to eat tasty food... When I did, that was the only time I didn’t feel sad... So when I bought something that was supposed to

be tasty but it wasn't, that made me really, really sad... And so, I wanted to break everything..."

"I don't get what you're saying at all. Are you trying to tell me that it's normal to destroy a stall that serves bad food?" Lema Geit managed to force out. Honestly, it must have taken some serious guts for the woman to still act so brave under the circumstances. However, Mida's cheeks trembled sadly in response.

"No, I was the one who was bad... I was really sad that I didn't get along with everyone in the Suun clan, and I didn't know what to do about feeling so bad... So, um... Mia Lea Ruu said maybe I took that pain out on the people around me."

"Like I said, I've got no clue what you're going on about!" Lema Geit shouted out, only for Donda Ruu to chime in, looking like he felt he had no other choice.

"Mida Ruu wasn't ever taught the laws of either the forest's edge or Genos, and was raised in a way that kept him from being able to tell good from evil. Because of that, he committed wrongful deeds in town on many occasions. But now, he understands how serious those crimes truly were."

"Yeah... I won't do anything bad again, no matter what," Mida Ruu added, big tears now flowing from his tiny eyes. "I was given the Ruu name, so I'm Mida Ruu now... So I won't do anything bad anymore... But if you can't forgive me, you can hit me as much as you want... So will you let me keep living as a person of the forest's edge?"



“Hey, Mida Ruu! I’m begging you, don’t start crying in a place like this, okay?” Ludo Ruu said, covering his ears and leaning back in his chair. I remembered all too well how Mida Ruu was capable of crying so loudly it felt like it could burst your eardrums.

As he sniffled and sobbed, Mida Ruu weakly replied, “Okay...”

“Mida Ruu has learned the difference between right and wrong, which is why I accepted him as one of our clan and granted him the Ruu name. For 330 days, I lived alongside him and hunted giba with him before coming to that conclusion. And as the Ruu clan head, I’m prepared to be punished alongside him if he commits any crimes from here on out,” Donda Ruu stated in a heavy voice. “However, from what I’m told, the nobles unjustly dismissed or covered up many of the past crimes of the Suun clan. If you say your grudge from back then still remains, I will listen to your story as the leader of all the clans under me.”

“U-Uh, no, there’s no need to dredge up such old matters now,” Tapas interjected, his voice trembling. Meanwhile, Lema Geit continued to stare at Mida and Donda Ruu, her lips remaining pursed.

“In that case, could I chime in as well?” a voice called out from a different direction. It was none other than Sams, the owner of The Westerly Wind. “Putting aside that huge incident the people of the forest’s edge caused ten years ago, some of your people have been making trouble in the last few years as well. I’ve heard rumors about that big guy there, as well as a few other young ruffians.”

Donda Ruu turned toward Sams and nodded. “Yes, you are correct. There’s one more among our people who used to cause trouble around town. He was Mida Ruu’s former older brother, a man by the name of Doddo. He’s about as tall as Shin Ruu there, but with a bit more muscle, and almost always carried fruit wine around with him.”

“Those two were the only ones who were causing trouble?”

“Yeah. There might have been others, but those villains have all died off in the past ten years. If you’re talking about crimes committed in town, the only culprits were Mida Ruu and Doddo.”

As Sams rubbed the scar on his neck, he snorted, “Hmph. By the

way, was this Doddo fellow punished similarly?”

“Of course. Doddo also had his blood ties with the Suun clan severed and was taken in by the Dom.”

“So if he still doesn’t have a clan name, does that mean he hasn’t shown that he has the proper spirit for that yet?” Jizeh interjected. She looked calm and didn’t seem scared of Donda or Mida Ruu in the least.

The leading clan head shot her a questioning look. “From what I’m told, what Doddo lacks isn’t a proper spirit, it’s strength. He doesn’t have the will to get up to any wrongdoing without drinking, but his weakness in body and spirit is unbefitting of our people, so he still hasn’t been granted a clan name.”

“I see... I thought that hunters of the forest’s edge were all tough-looking men like you.”

“The Suun clan’s hunters weren’t carrying out their work, so they never developed the strength they should have. While hunting alongside the Dom, Doddo’s leg was stabbed by a giba’s task, and his soul nearly returned to the forest.”

“My, how unfortunate... So, what is he doing now?”

“What do you mean?”

“Is that Doddo man hunting again after suffering an injury that almost cost him his life?”

Donda Ruu furrowed his brow, looking even more confused. “There’s no other path forward for us. If he’s not strong enough and his soul returns to where it came from, then that is simply the judgment of the forest.”

“Ah... To me, that sounds like a punishment more terrifying than death. To be thrown out into the forest where giba are lurking despite not having the strength to be a hunter... Just thinking about it sends a chill down my spine,” Jizeh said, and then she directed a smile at Mida Ruu, who was still kneeling. “So then, your leader recognized you as a fellow clan member because you have both a just spirit and sufficient strength, Mida Ruu?”

“Yeah... I’ve got to live properly as a member of the Ruu...” Mida Ruu replied, his teary eyes now staring blankly at Jizeh.

Looking satisfied with that response, Jizeh then turned toward

Lema Geit.

"What do you say, Lema Geit? You were angry about having your stall smashed without so much as an apology, right? This boy is bowing his head to you now, so don't you think it's time to let bygones be bygones?"

Lema Geit offered no response.

"You're part of an old bloodline, so you should understand the importance of something like a clan name better than anyone. Try to imagine having the Geit name stripped from you and being forced to live with another house, and you should be able to understand how heavy of a punishment that really is."

"Hmph! You sure are talking big for someone who doesn't have anything to do with this! Honestly, I can't even tell if I'm being apologized to or intimidated here!"

Donda Ruu stroked the coarse beard on his chin.

"We weren't trying to intimidate you. But if the sight of me and Mida Ruu made you feel that way, then allow me to apologize for that too."

"That's because you two are especially huge, even for people of the forest's edge. To folks from town, seeing you probably feels like being face-to-face with a giba," Ludo Ruu remarked in a discordantly cheerful manner. He was the only person in the room who had gone back to eating since Donda Ruu's arrival.

"Quiet, you," Donda Ruu grumbled.

Jizeh smiled happily once more. "My mother was from Sym, and I get a lot of easterners at my inn, so I have some confidence in my ability to judge what people are feeling, and it's painfully clear to me how sincere you're being in your attempts to apologize to Lema Geit."

"Yeah! Papa Donda and Mida Ruu are really nice, so there's no need to be scared of them!" Rimee Ruu energetically added.

Jizeh's gentle gaze then turned her way. "I noticed that you had the same clan name. Is this man your father, Rimee Ruu?"

"Yeah! Me, Reina, and Ludo are all Papa Donda's kids! Shin Ruu is the head of a branch house, and Mida Ruu will be joining them soon!"

I could sense the tension in the air gradually fading away. Now that it had been made clear to everyone that Donda and Mida Ruu didn't mean any harm, and Rimee and Ludo Ruu had energetically chimed in to support them, things seemed to finally be moving in the right direction.

"So, what does Mida Ruu need to do to earn your forgiveness?" Donda Ruu asked again.

"All right already!" Lema Geit cried out. "For now, we'll consider the matter of my smashed stall settled! I still don't want to have anything to do with you, though!"

Then, a middle-aged guy seated some distance away timidly chimed in, "A-Actually, he destroyed one of my stalls too...but the folks from the castle paid me plenty of money to settle the matter, so it's no real issue."

"M-Me too!" another voice added, causing Donda Ruu to glare at Mida Ruu with a furrowed brow.

"Just how many stalls did you break? No wonder people have been holding grudges against you."

"Sorry..."

"You're not going to get anywhere apologizing to me. But this is a good opportunity, so go say sorry to all these folks you troubled."

"Okay," Mida Ruu replied with a nod, slowly rising to his feet and then heading around to the various tables where the inn owners were seated. Since most folks who ran stalls were connected to inns, this was basically a big gathering of the people he needed to apologize to. It was a pretty unexpected set of circumstances that had brought us here, but this felt like an important opportunity for him.

Tsuvai Rutim had remained silent this whole time, simply staring at Mida Ruu's massive form. She was frowning, but I had no doubt that this was precisely the result she had been aiming for. She must have thought that the only way to satisfy Lema Geit was to have her speak with Mida Ruu directly.

"No matter how much of a fuss Tsuvai Rutim was making, you still could've put your foot down and said no, Shin Ruu," Ludo Ruu whispered to the other hunter. "Did you go along with her because

you wanted to bring Mida Ruu here too?”

“Yeah. Mida Ruu is an important relative to me as well, so I couldn’t simply let things stand as they were,” Shin Ruu replied with a composed expression.

Mida Ruu’s house was located right next to Shin Ruu’s, and recently, they had been having dinner together most nights. On top of that, it had been decided that Sheera and Darmu Ruu were going to live together in a new house, while Mida Ruu would be joining Shin Ruu’s household when Sheera Ruu moved out.

At any rate, maybe now Mida Ruu would be able to visit the post town freely without having to worry about people holding grudges against him.

Personally, I couldn’t help but feel incredibly glad that a little more of the bad blood between us and the townsfolk that the Suun clan had caused had now been put to rest.

4

“Ugh, it was starting to feel like the meeting was going to be the least troublesome part of the evening,” Milano Mas muttered at our table after Donda and Mida Ruu eventually left the dining hall.

“Sorry about that. But I’m glad that everything worked out.”

“Well, I guess commotions like that are necessary sometimes to help the people of the forest’s edge and the townsfolk to get along.”

At the other tables around us, the various inn owners seemed to have rebounded and started eating again.

Lema Geit had thrown herself back in her chair with a sour expression. Even after she had settled things with Mida Ruu, she still seemed to have no interest in trying giba meat.

“Now then, our fine friends from the forest’s edge...can you give us an outline of your plans for selling giba meat?” the head of the firm, Tapas, asked after regaining his composure.

“An outline?”

“Yes. The quantities you want to deal in and where you intend to sell it are the questions that immediately come to mind. I’ve heard

that you currently make deliveries in person to each of the inns you're contracted with, but if you end up with ten or twenty inns buying from you, it will be very difficult for you to continue doing that."

"Ah. Yes, that's true."

"And as for the question of quantities, the cost of karon or kimyuus will vary wildly depending on whether you're buying in bulk or only a small amount, and I believe you should follow that practice with giba meat as well."

Indeed, buying kimyuus or karon meat in small quantities could mean paying double the price for it. Inns needed to prepare dozens or even hundreds of meals each day and would buy enough for several days at once, which had led to the development of the concept of wholesale pricing.

If we were to sell giba meat on the open market but were the only ones not to price it that way, then it would be what all the individual consumers who could only purchase a little meat at a time would want. Besides, the nobles in the castle town had mandated the use of wholesale pricing schemes, and disregarding their policies wasn't an option for us.

"I'd like to go with the same prices as kimyuus and karon. Also, we currently deliver enough meat for three days at a time to the inns we have deals with, and that's what I'd like to keep doing."

"Well then, that leaves where you'll be selling. Kimyuus and karon meat is generally sold at the morning market, with buyers heading there to make their purchases."

"Hmm. Then should we do the same?"

"Well, if you do, you won't need to establish a contract with each individual inn, so it should require less effort for everyone involved."

That would probably be a little tricky for us. The Fa and Ruu clans were always busy in the morning preparing food, and anyone who wasn't already involved in that was needed to take care of other chores, so it would be difficult to pull more people away.

"Do any clans under the Ruu have people to spare?" I whispered to Reina Ruu.

"I'm not sure," she replied, tilting her head a bit. "The Ruu are

already getting assistance from our subordinate clans to gather pico leaves and firewood. We need a lot more of both than we used to in order to keep on doing business in the post town."

"Yeah, that's no surprise. In that case, we might have no choice but to ask for help from the clans that aren't connected to either of ours. Um... When does the morning market begin and end each day?"

"It generally starts at the upper fourth hour and wraps up less than an hour later. Every few days, karon sellers from Dabagg visit, but they generally spend the night in the castle town before getting set up for the market in the post town the next morning. And the kimyuus sellers from the Daleim lands aim for that time frame as well."

In that case, participating in the market would probably only take us about two hours in total, once travel time was factored in. If we asked the Fou, Gaaz, and Ratsu, they would probably be able to lend us a couple people for that long. We had also recently gotten friendlier with the Dai, who lived pretty far away from us, so they weren't able to help out with prep work. But that meant it was likely that they would have some women they could spare for this.

"We'd like to return to the forest's edge to discuss this matter with the leading clan heads and the other clans first," I said. "But we do intend to abide by the way you do things here in the post town as much as possible."

"I believe that would be for the best, yes. My own inn has been tasked with helping to spread the use of karon torso meat, so unfortunately I will not be able to use giba meat myself," Tapas noted with a smile. I felt it was a bit of a shame that Yang wouldn't get a chance to use giba meat. "Well then, that should settle matters regarding giba meat for now. I'm certain that after tonight's dinner there will be quite a few more innkeepers who will want to work with it."

"Quite so. I definitely want to buy some for my inn. After all, a lot of my customers from the east are fond of giba meat," Jizeh remarked with a smile. A lot of easterners seemed to have a positive view of the people of the forest's edge, and that was certainly true

of this older woman who had a parent from the east.

"By the way, there shouldn't be any problem with handling onda orders the same way we would any other vegetable, correct?" Tapas asked.

"Not at all," I replied. "Apparently, as long as they're informed of how much will be needed once every few days, the farmers should be able to provide whatever you need. Presently, only a man named Dora has agreed to keep selling onda, but if his farm can't handle all of the demand, he's willing to reach out to other vegetable sellers in order to increase the supply."

Apparently, Tara would be the one in charge of going around and taking orders. Dora ran a pretty big farm in the Daleim lands, so I was sure a fair number of the innkeepers present had previously ordered vegetables from him.

"Well then, are we about done here? If so, I'm going to take my leave," Lema Geit remarked in an annoyed tone, and Tapas turned toward her with a disappointed look.

"The discussions are largely finished and the food is almost all gone. But are you really not going to stay for drinks and friendly conversation?"

"Tonight, I'd just be in the way. Besides, if I drink on an empty stomach, I probably won't be able to stand afterward."

Rimee Ruu suddenly called out, "Ah! Um, we still have dessert left! Even if you don't want to eat giba meat, you should still be able to eat dessert, right?!"

"What's this now? The meal is over, isn't it?"

"Dessert is supposed to be eaten after the meal! So we were waiting for everyone to finish!"

Even Lema Geit ended up holding her tongue when faced with Rimee Ruu's perfectly earnest smiling face. Figuring this would be good timing, I decided to chime in too.

"I'd actually like everybody's opinion on one additional matter. Would you mind sharing your viewpoint too, Lema Geit?"

"Eh? I told you the whole smashed stall thing is settled, sure, but that doesn't mean I feel like helping you lot with a moneymaking scheme!"

"We aren't the only ones who stand to profit. But for now, we'll just serve the dessert Rimee Ruu mentioned."

With that, we cleared away the empty plates before carrying out the after-dinner desserts.

When Lema Geit saw the fresh plate placed on the table before her, her eyes opened wide and she asked, "What the world is this?"

"That's called chatchi mochi. Next to it is a dish made using poitan, sugar, eggs, and milk fat."

The pancake-style baked poitan were one thing, but what really surprised everyone was the chatchi mochi. It was translucent and jiggly and didn't really resemble any commonly known dish found in Genos, so it made a really strong impression.

"Oh wow, sweets too?! That's a happy surprise!" Yumi said excitedly from her spot a short distance away from us. In all likelihood, she was the only person here who was familiar with our desserts.

"Asuta, what do you mean by sweets?" Tapas asked.

"Well, as the name implies, sweets are sweeter than ordinary cooking, and they bring a different kind of pleasure to eating. In the castle town, they're eaten as a midday snack and after dinner."

"Hmm. Then it's like chewing on a sweet ramam when you're feeling a little hungry?"

"Yes, that's exactly right. The post town hasn't had access to any sweet fruits aside from ramam up until recently, so nobody here seems to have had much inspiration to make this kind of thing before."

In terms of fruit, the post town also had arow and sheel, but since both of them were more on the sour side, they were only used to add flavor to dishes and fruit wine. Sugar from Jagar wasn't commonly used in the post town either, so perhaps it was only natural that they wouldn't put much thought into making confections.

"I'd like to hear everyone's opinions on whether people in the post town might like to buy this kind of food. They're fairly popular in the settlement at the forest's edge, but what do you think?"

Like with the earlier parts of the meal, we had a simple dish

alongside a more elaborate one. The pancakes were covered in a sort of dark-brown caramel made by boiling down sugar. The chatchi mochi had karon milk in them, and we had drizzled substitute chocolate sauce made from gigi leaves over them.

The innkeepers slowly reached out toward one of the plates. Unsurprisingly, they all seemed to be starting with the pancakes, which didn't have such an unusual appearance.

"Mm-hmm, pretty tasty!" Yumi said right away.



Sams, who was still seated next to her, looked shocked. "What is this stuff? It's ridiculously sweet."

"But it *is* good, isn't it? I can't get enough of that milk fat flavor!"

I was hearing quite a few sounds of surprise coming from our little crowd. However, I noticed that Lema Geit was silently glaring at the plate in front of her.

"Aren't you gonna try some? They don't have giba meat in them, you know," Rimee Ruu called out with a smile as she stuffed her cheeks with dessert.

"Hmph!" Lema Geit snorted. "How many times do I have to tell you before you get it? I've got no intention of making friends with you people of the forest's edge!"

"Huh? But *I* wanna be friends with *you*," Rimee Ruu replied, her shoulders slumping.

The look on Lema Geit's face grew even more sullen in response, so I decided to chime in again, figuring I needed to offer some support.

"Lema Geit, we're people working in the same industry, and also business rivals. It's one thing if you feel animosity toward us people of the forest's edge, but is it really necessary to take it so far that you end up losing profit?"

"Losing profit? Why would *I* lose profit?!"

"If sweets turn out to be a hit in the post town, everyone will start putting out their own, right? If you deliberately refrain from competing, it's inevitable that you're going to lose business, don't you think?"

The innkeeper had no response to that.

"And your losses could end up turning into profits for us people of the forest's edge."

"Hey! I can't tell if you're trying to draw me in or pick a fight with me!"

"Both and neither, I'd say. Like Tapas said at the start, I'd like to work together with everyone, but I also want to compete with you all in the same field."

Lema Geit's thick fingers scratched roughly at her head, until she finally made up her mind to pick up a spoon. It seemed she was

going for the chatchi mochi.

"What the heck is this stuff?! It's all flabby, and it looks like it has to be hard to eat!"

"Be careful not to spill any of the chocolate sauce! It makes the mochi really yummy!" Rimee Ruu said, smiling once again.

After shooting her a glare, Lema Geit finally went ahead and tossed the chatchi mochi into her mouth.

"Well? It's tasty, isn't it?" Rimee Ruu asked, her eyes sparkling with anticipation.

However, Lema Geit was still wearing that same sour look on her face. "What a disgusting texture... It's hard to imagine this is food."

"Yeah, Papa Donda and Darmu said the same thing at first! But now, they eat even more than I do!"

Rather than replying to that statement, Lema Geit simply kept chewing in silence.

In the meantime, Jizeh spoke up, saying to us, "This certainly is an unusual flavor. You call it chatchi mochi, but how exactly did you use chatchi in this dish?"

"Well, what we did was extract something from chatchi that makes it a little sticky and use it to make these mochi. The process involves finely chopping up the chatchi and squeezing them in water to make something called starch come out. Once it dries out, you end up with something similar to poitan flour, which you mix with water again and boil. Then when it cools off, it comes out like this."

"I see... So it's the same chatchi starch stuff you mentioned when you were talking about the meatball sauce?" Jizeh took another bite of chatchi mochi. "It may look strange, but it's quite tasty as well... And this sauce you added on top, it seems to have been made from gigi leaves."

"That's right. You're familiar with them?"

"Yes. I buy them for the inn from a guest that I'm close to."

Gigi leaves were used in Sym to make tea. They had previously been one of the ingredients Cyclaeus had monopolized in Genos, but Jizeh had apparently been making deals to get her hands on them in secret. Nail and Naudis had been doing something similar with dried milk and tau oil.

“Hmm, but if these require a lot of sugar and milk fat, they must be quite expensive to make, correct? People visiting the post town are becoming less and less reluctant to part with their coins for food, but don’t you think it would be difficult to find enough people willing to pay for these sweets in addition to their regular meals?” Tapas questioned.

I answered with a reply I had prepared in advance. “If I were to try to sell sweets, I would probably offer small portions in order to keep costs down. For example, with these sweet baked poitan, which I call pancakes, I’d sell a whole one for a single red coin and half of one for a half coin. It would be reasonable for curious customers to try them at that price, wouldn’t you say?”

“You’d offer something of this size for one red coin? And you could still turn a profit like that?”

“Yes. At that rate, the profit margin on pancakes will be about the same as our other dishes. We prepared them at this size tonight to demonstrate what they would look like at the price we’re aiming for.”

They were twelve to thirteen centimeters in diameter, and about one centimeter thick. Even if sugar and milk fat were expensive, poitan and eggs were cheap, so the ingredient costs didn’t actually amount to all that much.

At the other tables, folks were starting to huddle up again to discuss the dish.

Jizeh smiled gently at us. “Asuta, why are you doing so much to teach us about these dishes? If the people of the forest’s edge were to sell them first, that would earn you a great deal of attention, wouldn’t it?”

“That’s true, but I figure that if lots of inns and stalls start offering them at the same time, the new dishes will make a much bigger splash. Besides, our true focus is on spreading awareness of how delicious giba meat is; desserts aren’t really part of that.”

“But earning all that money for yourselves would benefit you greatly, wouldn’t it?”

“My only goal when it comes to sweets is to show people new ways to use ingredients. And I thought it best to unveil them in advance like this. Yang—who’s assisting Tanto’s Blessing as a chef—

has made a point of doing the same thing in the past."

Besides, what Polarth had told me quite some time ago had left a really strong impression on me. He had once asserted that Genos was well positioned to become a town where you could find cuisine originating from most of the continent, as a place that had trade connections with both Sym and Jagar.

For better or worse, the foundations for that had already been established in the castle town. Cyclaeus had been so obsessed with gourmet food that it had been downright unhealthy, but because of that, he had secured countless deals for importing all kinds of different ingredients. And Polarth had come up with a truly grand plan to see that possibility realized in the post town as well.

If ordinary travelers without passes started coming to Genos in search of delicious food, it would make the town even more prosperous than it already was. That was the ultimate goal Polarth was aiming to accomplish.

Honestly, his vision was so grandiose that it was a little hard for me to wrap my head around the full scope of it, but the basic idea of improving the range of ingredients available to everyone in order to help develop the town was something I could definitely appreciate.

"Yang is, frankly, more knowledgeable about making sweets than I am. However, he's quite a busy man, so I decided that I should bring them up myself. But I hope that you'll give it some thought."

"Hmm. Then I'll have to consult with him as well, because these sweets were incredibly delicious. As long as I can make their prices work out, I'm certain my customers would appreciate them," Tapas said, and then he looked out over the crowd. "Now then, why don't we all take some time to consider what to do with these sweets on our own? If no one has any further topics to discuss, I'd like to bring today's meeting to an end and move on to the drinking party." There weren't any objections, so Tapas gave a satisfied nod. "Okay, that brings today's regular meeting to a close. Any further orders are to be paid for individually."

Instantly, voices called out for wine from all around. Naudis rose with a smile and said, "Yes, yes. I'll treat you all to the first round of drinks. I'll take food orders as well, so please hold on for a moment."

“Naudis, can we order one of your giba dishes?” someone called out from one of the tables.

“Of course,” Naudis replied, his eyes narrowing happily. “Today we have cubed giba meat stew, which we only serve once every six days. There may only be a little bit left, though.”

That dish took a fair bit of effort to make, so we had decided to only sell it to him after a day off from business, hence why he couldn’t offer it more often than that. At any rate, the innkeepers fought to order the cubed giba meat stew as quickly as possible after hearing Naudis say that.

“Now then, what do you all intend on doing?” Milano Mas asked us while watching the commotion out of the corner of his eye.

“Well, none of us drink, but we were planning to stay for a while in order to get to know people better.”

“I see. In that case, I’ll introduce you to—” he started to say, but before he could finish, Yumi weaved her way over to us between the tables.

“You all aren’t leaving yet, are you? If you’d like, I can introduce you to some of the other innkeepers!”

“Thanks, Yumi. But we’re here as associates of The Kimyuus’s Tail, so...” I said, trailing off.

“Don’t worry about me. That girl’s sure to be more useful than I am anyway,” Milano Mas chimed in.

However, Reina Ruu leaned forward and said, “In that case, why don’t we split into two groups so both of you can help us?”

“You want to split our group in half when there are only four of us?” I asked. “Well, I guess six when you include Ludo and Shin Ruu.”

“Yes,” Reina Ruu replied with a nod. “That way, we’ll be able to get to know more people, right? Time is limited, so we should try to use it efficiently. What do you think?”

“Well, if that’s your opinion, then I’ve got no objections.”

And so, Reina Ruu went off with Tsuvai Rutim and Shin Ruu, following Milano Mas to go meet people at one of the other tables.

“Reina Ruu sure has her act together, doesn’t she? Even if she doesn’t look it, I suppose she *is* older than me, huh?” Yumi said.

"Yeah. She just turned eighteen."

It was remarkable how much Reina Ruu had matured after taking charge of the Ruu clan's stalls. And since around the time when we had set up our outdoor restaurant space, I had really noticed her taking an interest in becoming friendlier with the townsfolk.

"Well then, why don't we get moving too? We'll make sure everyone here wants to buy giba meat!" Yumi declared.

"Yeah, thanks."

And so, I left my seat along with Rimee and Ludo Ruu.

Since we had known that I was definitely going to get back late, Ai Fa was currently visiting the Fou house. She was probably having a nice time with Saris Ran Fou and her son Aimu Fou.

However, I still had a bit more work to take care of today. I approached the first inn owner Yumi wanted me to meet, and got started.

Chapter 2: New Blood Ties

1

It was now the fifth day of the yellow month, the day of the Fou and Sudra wedding.

The groom was Cheem Sudra, and the bride was Ia Fou, a young woman I wasn't very well acquainted with. This was the first marriage to result from the Fou's and the Sudra's efforts to form blood ties. Apparently, there would also be someone from the Ran marrying into the Sudra, and someone from the Sudra marrying into the Fou, but those were going to have to wait until the next break period.

At any rate, after this wedding, the Fou and Sudra would finally be united by blood. The Fou would become the parent clan, and the Sudra the subordinate. Even after consolidating all of their branches and relatives, the Sudra had only had nine members left before this. But now, they would no longer be in danger of losing their clan name, and would gain more relatives in the process. An event like this was an even more sacred and joyous occasion than an ordinary wedding.

"I'm super grateful that they invited me to such a happy event. I'm really looking forward to it," I said while working at our stalls.

From the neighboring stall selling giba curry, Toor Deen smiled and replied, "Yeah." The Fa and Deen had both been invited as guests, since we were close neighbors with them. The food for today's banquet would be prepared by the Fou, Sudra, and Ran women alone, so the only one who had taken the day off from our work in town was Yun Sudra.

"The Fou and Ran women have all improved their cooking skills a lot. And Yun Sudra has too, obviously. I'm really looking forward to seeing what they're making for the banquet."

"Me too! The other members of the Deen clan have been looking forward to it as well."

"By the way, who all will be there from the Deen clan?"

"The head of the main house, me, and the oldest son of the branch house's head. Normally, if this was a celebration held by a clan we were related to, we'd send all of our unmarried men and women too, but tonight we're only bringing a few people."

The eleven-year-old Toor Deen was most likely being included because she was closest with the Sudra and Fou women. She looked seriously happy to be going.

The Fa, on the other hand, only had two members to begin with, so we didn't have to worry about who to bring. Ai Fa was planning to finish up work early so that we could head to the Fou settlement together.

Of course, the Liddo had been invited too, and there were even going to be a few members of the Zaza coming, according to what I had been told. Though the Zaza lived a good distance away, their subordinates—the Deen and Liddo—were being invited, so they had asked to be able to send a few people to observe.

"I've participated in all sorts of celebratory banquets, but I've only ever been to one wedding banquet before," I noted.

"Oh, really? Since I became part of the Deen clan, I've been to three weddings in the north. All of them were as a chef, though."

"Yeah, it was the same for me. That was the first time I had ever had to prepare food for a hundred people, so I couldn't really enjoy the event. The range of ingredients that were available to me back then was pretty limited, and we were still using suurub leaves in place of wooden plates at the time."

It had been almost a year now since Gazraan and Ama Min Rutim's wedding. I felt really emotional when I thought about that.

"My, what a splendid aroma," a new customer remarked while approaching us.

When my eyes found the figure standing in front of the giba curry stall, I said, "Huh? Sorry to ask, but are you Jizeh?"

"Oh my, you remember me?" Jizeh asked, pulling back the hood that had been hiding her face. She was wearing the sort of hooded

cloak that travelers from Sym often used.

"Toor Deen, this is Jizeh, the owner of an inn called The Ramuria Coil. She helped us out a lot at the recent meeting."

"Oh, I didn't do much. I simply said whatever I felt like saying." The older woman with gray hair, brown eyes, and moderately dark skin that told of her Sym heritage gave us a gentle smile. Despite her apparent age, she was about as tall as I was, slender, and seemed to be in good shape, so she still looked fairly young in some ways. "That certainly is a wonderful scent. Is this that giba curry dish I've heard so much about?"

Even though it had to be unfamiliar to her, she had managed to pronounce the word "curry" perfectly. It had been easy for Shumiral too, so perhaps people with eastern blood were skilled when it came to pronouncing foreign words.

"Would you like to sample some? This dish is extremely popular with our eastern customers," I asked.

"Yes, I've heard. An innkeeper I'm friends with has spoken to me rather passionately about both giba meat and giba curry on several occasions."

"Ah, another inn owner said that?"

"Yes. A man by the name of Nail, who you've been selling giba meat and meals to."

That was exactly the response I had expected. "Oh, so you and Nail are acquaintances? Do you know each other because you both serve a lot of customers from the east?"

"Yes, indeed. That man is a pure-blooded westerner, but he's quite taken with Sym, so we naturally ended up forming a bond."

Nail also had an extremely sincere and calm personality, so it made sense to me that he and Jizeh would get along well. I mentally noted that even though Jizeh had Sym blood, she didn't conceal her feelings at all. Sanjura had a background that was similar to hers, and he had also chosen to follow western traditions.

"He's been asking me if I'm ever going to start purchasing giba meat for some time now, but I can be rather stubborn, so I've been putting a lot of thought into dishes I could make using kimyuus and karon that would be able to compete with giba. After all, herbs from

Sym have been much easier to come across lately."

"I see. I'm a little surprised to hear you say that you consider yourself a stubborn person."

"Oh, I definitely am, but I've rethought my position since then. I decided that making my customers happy is what's most important, so I ultimately gave in." With that, Jizeh pulled out a small bag stuffed with coins. "Well then, let me purchase some of that famed giba curry of yours. How much does it cost?"

"Ah, well, one ladleful costs one and a half red coins, but we do get some customers who purchase two scoops."

"I'll buy one scoop, then. I'm not that much of an eater now that I've gotten older."

The Dagora woman who was assisting Toor Deen accepted her coins, and the young chef served up one scoop of giba curry.

"It really does smell amazing," Jizeh remarked, her eyes narrowing. "I can feel the excitement racing across my tongue before I've even tried it. By the way, what did you eventually decide to do about selling giba meat?"

"For now, we're planning to take a look at the meat market first, and once we've done that, I imagine we'll probably start selling there fairly soon. We'll also need to run this by the folks in the castle town too, though, so it may take a few days."

"I see. Well then, I'll be eagerly awaiting the day when I'll finally be able to purchase giba meat." Jizeh then carefully carried her plate of curry with a side of baked poitan over to the outdoor restaurant space.

As she watched the older woman go, Toor Deen whispered, "She seems really nice."

"Yeah. She was the first one to express an interest in doing business with us people of the forest's edge at the meeting, which I really appreciated."

Since we had stayed for the drinking party, though, I'd had a chance to get to know quite a few other people too. As far as I had been able to tell, nobody else hated our people as much as Lema Geit of The Arow Bud did. In fact, there had even been people who apologized, saying stuff like, "I'm sorry for how I acted back then."

When I had asked what they were apologizing for, they had informed me that they had disparaged the people of the forest's edge back when Zattsu and Tei Suun had been causing trouble in the post town. Ever since we had started coming to town, things had apparently been quite tense, with people split into two factions: one side supporting the people of the forest's edge, and the other side speaking ill of us. Apparently, several people had even visited Milano Mas to tell him directly to stop lending us stalls, and some of them had been innkeepers.

But now, even those people had let go of their animosity toward us. In addition to apologizing, some of them had expressed interest in buying giba meat and asked to hear more about confections. I couldn't help but think that we really should have started participating in those inn meetings sooner.

"Oh, Jizeh, what did you think of the taste?" I asked when I saw the innkeeper return from the outdoor restaurant space. Her hood was back up, but I was able to see the satisfied smile on her face.

"It was delicious. You used so many herbs, and yet it all came together into a single flavor. You truly are incredibly skilled, Asuta."

"Ah, no, I couldn't have done it without all the help I had from everyone at the forest's edge."

"I feel as if my eyes have been opened to a whole new way of using herbs. I want to hurry back to my inn to start experimenting with them myself," Jizeh said before departing.

I once again turned toward Toor Deen and said, "Jizeh's inn apparently serves Sym-style food that's as good as what you can get in the castle town. I'd love for us to stop by sometime if we get the chance."

"Sounds good to me," Toor Deen replied, her eyes sparkling. Reina Ruu was undoubtedly curious about Jizeh's abilities as well, and it would be even more interesting to try her cooking once she started working with giba meat.

Time kept on passing by after that, and eventually we wrapped up work for the day. We had upped the number of meals we prepared each day back to eight hundred with the arrival of the yellow month, and we had managed to sell all of them. A month had

passed since the end of the rainy season, and the post town now seemed to be as lively as it had ever been.

After cleaning everything up like always, we returned the stalls and then headed back to the settlement at the forest's edge.

Once we arrived, there was prep work we had to handle. However, tomorrow was a day off, so all we needed to do was prepare curry base and dried pasta. We couldn't leave that task up to the Fou and Sudra today, though, so instead we took care of it with the women who had been working the stalls with us.

We wrapped all that up around halfway through the lower fourth hour, and were getting ready to go our separate ways, when Ai Fa returned carrying a giba, alongside our hunting dog Brave.

"Welcome back, Ai Fa. Looks like you got another big giba today, huh?"

"Indeed. And you seem to be finished with your work as well."

"Yeah. Everyone was just about to leave," I replied.

But then the Matua girl—the second youngest of our workers after Toor Deen, at just thirteen—stepped forward and said, "Um... You bought banquet attire in town, didn't you, Ai Fa? Would you like help changing?"

"I don't believe I need anyone to help me," Ai Fa said with a frown, staring back at the young girl. I had convinced my clan head to buy some banquet clothes, but she still strongly disliked dressing up.

"But you have such long hair. That by itself will take you a good amount of time to get ready, won't it?"

"I plan to simply wear it down."

"You can't! It would be rude to the Fou and Sudra not to look your best for the banquet!"

Ai Fa sighed heavily, still carrying the massive giba she had brought back. "It doesn't really matter, I suppose, but why are your eyes sparkling like that?"

"Huh? Well, I was hoping to see you in your banquet attire before I left, since I won't be able to when you're at the banquet," the Matua girl replied with an earnest smile.

However, Ai Fa responded to her with a frown. "Before I get

dressed, I need to take care of this giba first. And you must have work waiting for you back home, correct?”

“I normally stick around to learn from Asuta as he makes dinner before heading home, so I have time to spare today. I can wait until you’re finished with the giba.”

“But...”

“Oh, but is that all right with the rest of you?” the girl asked the other women who were with us. “I don’t want to delay all of you from getting home solely for my sake.”

Because Yun Sudra was absent today, we had four women from among those who rotated in and out day by day, coming from the Matua, the Gaaz, the Dagora, and the Ratsu. In all four cases, walking home would take a substantial amount of time for them, so they always used Fafa’s wagon instead. That was why the Matua girl had needed to ask them if they were okay with staying. And as it turned out, nobody objected to her suggestion. In fact, their eyes seemed to be sparkling as much as hers were.

“I want to see Ai Fa’s banquet attire too! I’m sure she’s going to look absolutely stunning!”

“There was a bit of a mess with the Ratsu and the Gaaz both asking her to marry into their clans, wasn’t there? Now that I’ve been to the Fa house as many times as I have, I can finally understand what had the men so worked up.”

“We’d love to help you out too, Ai Fa!”

Ai Fa seemed to have lost the will to resist, so she dejectedly headed off toward the carving room.

Though I felt a bit bad for her, I was glad that Ai Fa had someone to help her get changed. It would be a big issue if she came across as rude because she looked a bit unkempt. And besides, if she was going to get all done up in her new banquet attire, I wanted her charms to shine through to their fullest.

“I have to go get ready too, so I’ll be leaving now,” Toor Deen said, turning to head home.

However, I called out, “Hold on a moment. I’ll take you home with Gilulu. I’ve got nothing else to do until Ai Fa is ready, after all.”

“Uh, but the Deen house isn’t far enough away for walking to be

an issue."

"You don't have to decline to be polite. In fact, I'd appreciate having something to do to stave off boredom for a while."

And so, I gave Ai Fa a brief heads-up before once more getting into the driver's seat of Gilulu's wagon and taking up his reins. The Deen clan was located close enough that it would only take a few minutes for me to go there and then return.

"The women from the other clans all seemed really worked up. Think it's contagious?" I asked.

"It may well be. The Gaaz, Ratsu, and Matua women all think it's really unfortunate that the Fa house is located so far away from them. I'm sure they'd like to be able to take part in both festivals of the hunt and wedding banquets together with you and the others."

The Gaaz were only related to the Matua clan, while the Ratsu only had the Auro and Meem. Their banquets had to be pretty modest affairs, given their small numbers. Aside from the leading clans, though, it was quite rare for any clan to have more than two subordinates.

"In that case, the Gaaz and Ratsu should hold festivals of the hunt together as a single group of five clans. And if they include the Beim and Dagora as well, their banquets would probably be as big as the Ruu's."

"That's true. But they may not be close enough to each other to all have break periods at the same time. And besides, the clans around here only got so close because of the Fa."

"Oh yeah? I feel like at this point we aren't really that necessary for that kind of thing to happen anymore."

"No, you are. For sure, the clans under the Zaza like the Deen and Liddo were only able to build such strong bonds with the Fou and Sudra thanks to the Fa clan," Toor Deen calmly stated from within the wagon. "I'm so proud and happy to be invited whenever a wedding is held in the northern settlement. But a banquet together with the clans that live around us is even more wonderful, I think."

"I agree. But I suppose it all comes down to the mother forest's guidance."

"Yeah," Toor Deen replied, and then she sniffled ever so slightly.

She was a very emotional person, so she was probably crying again.

Not long after that, we arrived at the Deen settlement and I said farewell to Toor Deen. I had suggested that we could stop by the Fou settlement along the way, but she had declined since she didn't know when the men would return.

After that, I headed back to the Fa house all on my own. The sun hadn't quite set yet, but the sky was starting to get a bit darker, and there was a pleasant wind blowing on my face. The weather was perfect for a wedding.

When I arrived back at the Fa house, I found Brave sleeping in front of the entrance. After I got down from the wagon and knocked on the door, I heard the Matua girl call back, "Is that you, Asuta? You'll have to wait for a bit. We're just getting started."

"Okay. There's still plenty of time, so no rush."

I sat down beside Brave and let my mind wander idly. It was a rather wasteful use of time that I would normally never indulge in. My musing was interrupted less than fifteen minutes later, though.

"Thanks for waiting. You can come in now," the Matua girl said, and I heard the bolt being removed. The door swung open right as I rose to my feet, and the young girl's face peeked out from inside.

"Ai Fa's banquet clothes are so lovely! And they suit her really well!"

"Yeah. Ai Fa and I don't know how to pick good clothes or accessories, so we had the folks from the Ruu clan choose for us."

As we were speaking, the other women appeared from inside the house, with Ai Fa coming out last.

Her blonde hair was hanging down, and she was wearing banquet attire for the first time since the Rutim wedding. Back then, her outfit had been one that Granny Jiba had loaned her. The outfit she had on now wasn't all that different. The chest wrap and skirt were more colorful than usual, and she had accessories in her hair, around her neck, and on her arms and legs, as well as a translucent and flowing veil and shawl. Naturally, the blue stone pendant she always wore was around her neck, and the rainbow-colored flower-shaped hair accessory was in her hair. They were both presents that I had picked out for her.

“Well? It looks good on her, right?” the Matua girl asked with a smile.

I was so enthralled by the sight of her that it took me a moment to force out a hurried nod and a response of, “Yeah... It’s been a while, so I was a little taken off guard. People of the forest’s edge never look better than when you’re all dressed up for banquets. Right, Ai Fa?”



"Well, it certainly isn't as uncomfortable as the banquet attire from the castle town, but it's still difficult to move around in," she said, sounding like the same Ai Fa as always when she spoke up. Her sword was also hanging from her hip as usual, despite how it clashed with the rest of her outfit. "If we're attacked by giba or mundt on the way there or back, it could be rather difficult to deal with them unarmed."

"But as long as you bring a torch with you, there shouldn't be any danger. And you'll be traveling by wagon, won't you?" the Matua girl chimed in with a laugh. "Anyway, we're satisfied now, so we'll be heading back to our homes. Asuta, Ai Fa, please enjoy the banquet."

"Yeah, thanks. And we appreciate all the help!"

After saying farewell, the women departed in Fafa's wagon. Now that it was just me and Ai Fa again, I smiled at her and said, "It really does look good on you. I'm sure everyone waiting at the Fou settlement will be surprised to see you."

"I don't see any need to be surprising to people, though," Ai Fa replied, turning away in a huff before glaring at me out of the corner of her eye. "It really doesn't look ridiculous?"

"What, you're still worried about that? Lying is a crime here at the forest's edge. I absolutely do think it looks good on you, and so does everyone else."

Ai Fa raised her hand as if to scratch her head, but she wasn't able to do so because her sparkling veil got in the way.

"And the hair accessory suits you too. It looks even better with your hair down."

"Enough already. Stop grinning so brazenly and prattling on and on like that."

"But in the Fa clan our custom is to never hide how we feel, isn't it?"

I braced myself for a kick in the leg.

But today, she flicked my nose instead.

"That's enough. Let's be off already. I feel like this outfit's going to get all tangled up on me, so you take the reins."

"Got it, clan head."

Ai Fa whistled at Brave, prompting him to rise to his feet, and

then she signaled for him to get into the wagon. And as I watched her from the side, I couldn't help but notice that there was just a hint of a blush on her cheeks.

2

When we arrived at the Fou settlement, we found that the women were still working hard. There was a little over an hour left until sunset, when the banquet would begin, so they were in the midst of the last push to get ready.

Their plaza was definitely smaller than the one at the Ruu settlement, but it was still a really nice space for gatherings. And just like during a festival of the hunt, it was filled with excitement.

Firewood was piled up in the center of the plaza for a ritual flame, and there were simple stoves constructed all around it. There was even a whole-roast giba cooking on top of one of them.

They must've been working on the other dishes in the kitchens of the various houses. I could see women hurriedly running between the houses holding ingredients and pots and the like. It felt like it had been quite a while since I'd been able to watch other chefs hustling around like that as a bystander.

There were also a few children setting up bonfires around the perimeter of the plaza. They were the boys and girls too young to work as either hunters or chefs. The Fou and Ran didn't allow children under the age of ten to handle fire or blades.

"Let's go say hello at the main house," I suggested.

After stopping the wagon at the entrance to the plaza, I stepped down alongside Ai Fa and Brave. Then we cut across the plaza, pulling the wagon behind us, smiling and saying hello to the people we passed along the way. Today, the Fou, Ran, and Sudra woman were all hands on deck to man the stoves.

"Excuse us. Is anyone home?" I called out while knocking on the main Fou house's door. However, there wasn't any answer. It seemed that there wasn't anyone in the main part of the house at the moment.

We circled around to the back where the kitchen was located. The place was like a battlefield. It was the biggest kitchen in the settlement, so there were an especially large number of people gathered there.

"Asuta, Ai Fa. Hey there. Welcome to the Fou house. You're rather early, aren't you?" a middle-aged woman who looked like she was in charge said with a smile. She was the wife of the Fou clan head, Baadu Fou.

"Looks like you're working hard here. We brought our wooden plates as promised. What do you want us to do with them?"

"Ah, I really appreciate it. We'll distribute them ourselves, so could you just leave them by the entrance?"

"Got it."

None of the other clans owned as many plates as the Ruu and Fa. We had several boxes full of them in the wagon, but as we were unloading them, a woman approached us, her eyes opening wide as she said, "Oh my. I almost didn't recognize you in those gorgeous banquet clothes, Ai Fa."

"I may be a hunter, but I am still an unmarried woman, so my noisy clan member talked me into dressing up for tonight."

"It looks really good on you. Even more so because it's rare to see a woman as beautiful as you."

Ai Fa fell silent and looked like she was on the verge of pouting. The forest's edge had no rule against frivolously praising the appearance of others when both were of the same sex, so she couldn't even really complain about it.

"We still have plenty of work left to handle, unfortunately. If you'd like, you can rest up at the branch house to the east."

"The one to the east?"

"Yes, the one next to this house. The young children are gathered there, and I believe Saris Ran is there now."

It was common knowledge among the Fou and Ran that Ai Fa and Saris Ran Fou were childhood friends. My clan head looked to be in a slightly better mood now as she nodded in response.

We headed over that way and knocked, and this time we got a response of "Yes?"

"Excuse us. I am Ai Fa, head of the Fa clan, and I have my clan member Asuta with me."

"Oh, Ai Fa and Asuta. Please, come inside."

Having gotten permission, I went ahead and opened the door. When I did, though, I found myself letting out a "Whoa!" before I could stop myself, because inside the house there was an entire crowd of kids between the ages of one and four. They must have been all the young children from both the Fou and the Ran.

One of them noticed Brave and delightedly called out, "A hunting dog!" Most of the other kids soon started getting excited as well. Only those who were around a year old didn't. Of course, Brave himself remained perfectly calm.

"Welcome to the Fou house. I'm glad to see you again, Ai Fa," Saris Ran Fou said while approaching us from the middle of the crowd of children.

"So am I," my clan head replied with a gentle smile.

"My, what lovely clothes you're wearing. I've really been looking forward to seeing you all dressed up."

"I wasn't looking forward to it at all, myself. I'd prefer not to spend too much time talking about fashion, if you don't mind."

"My..." Saris Ran Fou said once again with a giggle. "Ah, and welcome to you as well, Asuta. You can bring your hunting dog and totos inside as well if you'd like."

"Thank you."

I released Gilulu from the wagon, and then we all stepped inside.

The little kids surrounded Brave in no time flat. The Fou clan already had a hunting dog of their own, so none of them seemed to be wary of him.

"Sorry for the commotion. Please, come inside, you two."

"It's no big deal..." I started to say, but then I gulped. I had spotted someone in the room whom I hadn't seen in quite some time. "Li Sudra! I didn't know you were in here!"

"Yes, I wasn't feeling the best, so I've been resting."

Li Sudra was the wife of the Sudra clan head, Raielfam Sudra. I hadn't seen her since the combined festival of the hunt that we'd held back in the gold month. However, she looked very different now

compared to back then. Her belly had gotten a whole lot larger, even more than Ama Min Rutim's. Li Sudra had also been pretty slender before, but now her neck and limbs seemed to have plumped up. She had gotten pregnant a little more than two months before Ama Min Rutim, so over seven months had passed since she had noticed her pregnancy.

"Asuta. Ai Fa. It's been some time, hasn't it? The festival of the hunt was at the start of the gold month, so it must have been around four months now, right?"

"Sorry about that. I've stopped by your place plenty of times when dropping off Yun Sudra, but I figured it was best not to disturb you during such an important time."

"Yes, Yun mentioned that to me. You were simply concerned about my health, so you have nothing to apologize for."

Li Sudra was a gentle and polite woman, but she also had a very strong will. That part of her was still readily apparent, but her gentle side seemed to have grown even stronger.

"I'm just glad to see you looking so healthy. And your child seems to be doing well too."

"Yes. They should be born around halfway through next month, at the earliest."

I had received news of her pregnancy seven months ago, but calculating backward from there, that would probably make sense.

"I've lost young children twice now...so I would very much like to raise this child properly."

"I'm sure everything will be fine. There's no more need to worry about starvation, after all," I said.

But then, I felt Ai Fa poke me in the arm for some reason. "Hey, the Sudra wedding shouldn't be affecting you this much, should it, Asuta??"

"Huh? What are you saying that for?"

"I'm asking why you're crying."

I wiped my eyes in a fluster. "I'm about as close to Li and Raielfam Sudra as I am to Ama Min and Gazraan Rutim, so you can forgive me for getting a little emotional, can't you?"

"It's not a question of forgiveness," Ai Fa said, frowning and

shooting me a glare.

Honestly, I didn't think I was *that* much of a crier. Still, I'd lost my mom at a young age, so maybe that made this kind of thing hit me harder than it would other people.

"It's thanks to you that the Sudra no longer need to starve. This is the first time my belly has ever grown this large... Now I can eat as much delicious food as I like, and that's helped the child inside me to grow," Li Sudra said while rubbing her large stomach.

Saris Ran Fou—who had stepped to the side while we had been talking—then smiled at me and Ai Fa. "Please, feel free to rest a bit here. The men should be back from the forest soon."

We ended up sitting directly in front of Li Sudra, as well as another woman sitting next to her. Yes, there was one other woman in the house aside from Saris Ran Fou and Li Sudra.

"Thanks for welcoming us in, um..."

"Asuta, this is Ia Fou," Saris Ran Fou interjected from where she was sitting beside Ai Fa.

"A-Ah, so you're Ia Fou? This...isn't our first time meeting, is it?"

"That's correct. I've visited the Fa house quite a few times to take cooking lessons," Ia Fou replied with a smile. It felt to me like there were a lot more charming and gentle women than energetic ones among the smaller clans. Ia Fou belonged to the former category. Her long brown hair hung over her right shoulder in a braid. She looked fairly tall, but she was slender and seemed like a modest person.

"We can't have the bride prepare the banquet food, so Ia Fou is here to help look after the children," Saris Ran Fou explained, as one of the little kids toddled over—none other than her own child, Aimu Fou.

"Hey there, Aimu Fou. It's been a while since I've seen you too," I said.

Saris Ran Fou occasionally brought him along to the Fa house, but I hadn't seen the kid for around half a month. But apparently, that was plenty of time for him to have grown noticeably bigger. Aimu Fou had turned two years old sometime in the last few months.

Now that he was two, he was able to walk properly, and his face looked a lot less babyish than when I had first laid eyes on him. But even so, with his big puppy dog eyes, he was still absolutely adorable.

"Aimu avoided starvation thanks to the Fa clan as well. If you hadn't delivered those giba pelts, Ai Fa, I don't know what would have become of him."

"No, like I told you—"

"Yes, yes. I'd feel bad about making you keep committing the crime of lying, so I'll stop talking about it now."

Having been cut off by Saris Ran Fou, my clan head held her tongue with a sulky look.

When Aimu Fou—who had been staring at Ai Fa for a while—saw that expression on her face, he awkwardly said, "Pretty."

"Hee hee, even little Aimu can tell how beautiful you are, Ai Fa."

"Aimu Fou was surely just praising my accessories," Ai Fa said with a small shrug, but then Aimu Fou reached out his tiny hand and stroked Ai Fa's golden hair that was hanging down in front of her chest.

"Hair, pretty..."

"Yes, Ai Fa's hair is every bit as shiny as any accessory, isn't it?"

Ai Fa stared down at Aimu Fou with a very complicated expression on her face.

"I can't help but be reminded of when I first met Rimee Ruu. As I recall, back then she was around the same age that Aimu Fou is now."

"My, you made friends with such a young child, Ai Fa?"

"Indeed. She had Granny Jiba with her, after all. However, I believe it took around a year before I could have a proper conversation with Rimee Ruu," Ai Fa explained while giving Aimu Fou's plump upper arm a light poke. Saris Ran Fou, Li Sudra, and Ia Fou all narrowed their eyes happily as they watched over the pair.

Despite the young children energetically chattering away behind us, our time together felt surprisingly calm and quiet. There was just such a relaxed feeling in the air that it was hard to think about the excitement of the banquet yet to come.

"By the way, is Cheem Sudra taking a break in another house?" I asked.

"No," Li Sudra replied with a shake of her head. "Cheem is out in the forest. If he had stayed home, he wouldn't have had anything to do."

"Huh? He's out hunting even on the day of his wedding? With the Ruu clan, they take the day off so they can go visit all of their subordinate clans."

"Between the Fou and Sudra, there wouldn't be many houses to visit. And besides, the women and children have all come to the Fou settlement already, so the Sudra and Ran houses are empty."

Then Saris Ran Fou chimed in, "That's right. And a man of Cheem Sudra's ability won't have any trouble making it home safely, I'm sure. It's a great honor to have a woman of our clan marry such a fine hunter. I haven't interacted with him much yet, but he has been your friend for some time now, hasn't he?"

"Well, I only actually learned his name fairly recently, but yeah, I've known him for quite some time. The Sudra men guarded us in the post town for a while."

That was back when we had needed extra protection because of Tei and Zattsu Suun. Four hunters from the Sudra had joined us as guards for several days, alongside a few members of the Ruu.

"Ia hasn't been to the Fa house that often either. She hadn't even spoken to Ai Fa until recently," Saris Ran Fou casually remarked.

With a soft expression on her face, Ia Fa nodded and said, "That's true. My last visit to the Fa house was back when the townsfolk were holding their revival festival. But of course, there were quite a few women helping out during that period."

I could only recall meeting Ia Fou a few times, but the night when I had attended the inn meeting a few days ago, Ai Fa had visited the Fou house, which must have been when they had first spoken.

"A lot of women from the Fou visit the Fa house fairly often, but you haven't gone there much, have you, Ia? You're so reserved," Saris Ran Fou commented, causing Ia Fou's cheeks to go red with embarrassment. "Still, you're also rather skilled as a chef. I'm sure

you won't disappoint Cheem Sudra on that front."

"Is that so? I'd love to have you help out again sometime if you'd like," I said, and then I decided to bring up the question that had been lingering in my mind for a bit. "By the way, you two seem rather close. Since you're referring to each other without clan names, do you live in the same house?"

"Yes, Ia is my husband's younger sister."

In other words, Saris Ran Fou's sister-in-law was marrying Cheem Sudra. It felt like sort of a strange twist of fate.

"So if Cheem Sudra and Ia Fou have a child, they'll be Aimu Fou's cousin? Y'know, thinking about this stuff makes me feel kinda emotional."

"Yes, that's how blood ties go."

If the discussions about the other two marriages bore fruit, the Fou, Ran, and Sudra would come to share deep bonds, and their bloodlines would endure for many years to come.

"Speaking of which, Li Sudra, what's the relationship between you and Cheem Sudra?"

"Cheem and I came from different branch houses originally. I believe our grandmothers were sisters, but I don't know too much about all that... In all likelihood, our grandmothers both married into the Sudra, which would have been their parent clan at the time." Despite her personality, Li Sudra had to be around twenty-three or twenty-four. Meanwhile, Cheem Sudra was around sixteen or seventeen, and apparently they were second cousins. "As you already know, the Sudra branch houses and subordinate clans were all consolidated together until only a single house of nine remained, so even though we all lived together, we aren't really very closely related by blood. There's only one other married pair in the Sudra aside from us, and they only have a single child."

"I see. Once he's married, will Cheem Sudra be moving out?"

"Yes. Cheem and Ia Fou are going to have their own house where they'll have plenty of space to raise their children. Fortunately, we have a number of empty houses to spare. Of course, we'll still do our housework together and will all have dinner in the main house as a clan."

In that case, their circumstances were similar to Darmu and Sheera Ruu's. After those two got married, they were going to live together in a new house, but would eat dinner at Shin Ruu's house.

"In other words, Cheem will become the new head of the branch house he was born into. A year ago, it seemed like the Sudra were fated to dwindle away to nothing, so this is a big step forward."

"Yeah, and if things go well, you'll be bringing in a woman from the Ran too, won't you? Then you'll be able to start another branch house."

"Yes. And when that happens, the older married couple will move out as well. The man expected to marry the Ran woman is their son, you see."

"Oh, so they're related? I didn't know that."

There were only four men in the Sudra clan, so since Raielfam and Cheem Sudra were already spoken for, there were only two others she could be referring to. I hadn't known that those two were related, but the Sudra men all had a similar feel about them, so it wasn't exactly a shock.

"And then when one of our women marries into the Fou, there will only be four members left in the main house. Thinking about that makes me feel a bit lonesome, but this child will help counter that."

Four members left in the main house, huh? They would have to be the clan head and his wife, Yun Sudra, and the one older woman who had lost both her children and her husband. That certainly could seem lonesome compared to the numbers they'd had up until this point, but when Li Sudra's child was born it would undoubtedly fill their lives with hope and joy.

"It will also be a great blessing to the Fou clan to receive nine new members. And considering that in the future we'll be inheriting the blood of the Sudra's hunters, all of whom are incredibly impressive, it's hard to imagine a happier occasion than this," Saris Ran Fou said, stroking Aimu Fou's head. "I'm sure Aimu Fou and Li Sudra's child will someday walk hand in hand, carrying the fate of our clans on their shoulders. And that thought fills my heart with joy."

“Yes, it really does,” Li Sudra agreed, and the two women shared a smile with each other.

During all the banquets their clans had been holding lately to get to know one another better, the two of them must have gotten very close. It really moved me to see Ai Fa’s childhood friend Saris Ran Fou getting along so well with Li Sudra, who had been one of the first women to work at my stalls.

Ai Fa was watching the two of them as well, but then she suddenly glanced up, like a wildcat that had detected a concerning smell.

A second later, Saris Ran Fou said, “Looks like the men are back. They went into the forest with the Sudra today, so I’m sure they caught even more giba than usual.”

At that point, I noticed that the sunlight streaming through the window had taken on the colors of sunset. The banquet that would unify the Fou and the Sudra was finally about to begin.

3

It was currently twilight, just before the sun set, and the Fou and Sudra wedding was kicking off at last under a violet sky.

There was a large crowd of people in the plaza. Between the Fou, the Sudra, the Ran, and the guests invited from the other clans, there were around fifty participants altogether. Compared to the joint festival of the hunt that we had held between six clans, it was a more modest crowd, but it still felt every bit as lively.

Everyone was crowded around the ritual flame in the center. Baadu Fou and Raielfam Sudra were standing over toward the western edge of the plaza, where there were places to sit set up for the happy couple.

“Well then, let us begin this wedding between the Fou and Sudra clans! Let the two who are about to be wed step forward!” the tall and lean Baadu Fou loudly declared, and with that, the woman waiting in front of the main house opened the door.

Two figures stepped out from inside and were met with cheers:

Cheem Sudra and Ia Fou.

Cheem Sudra was wearing a massive giba cloak that seemed to reach all the way down to his ankles, with the giba's face hanging down in front of his chest. Gazraan Rutim had worn a similar cloak at his wedding, so apparently the custom was to wear hunting cloaks with the heads still attached during weddings. The blade at his waist was also sheathed in a more decorative scabbard than his usual one.

As for Ia Fou, the outfit she had on was similar to the one Ama Min Rutim had once worn. Her entire body was clad in a transparent veil, and she seemed to be wearing a number of accessories underneath it as well, but the shimmering fabric was playing the biggest role in making her look absolutely gorgeous.

On top of that, the two of them had crowns of woven greenery sitting on top of their heads, and they were accompanied on either side by a pair of young children, both looking to be around the age of ten. The boy was wearing a hunter's cloak and had what looked like an ornamental dagger by his hip, while the girl had banquet attire on that was no less dazzling than that worn by any of the women around her.

Compared to the accessories that members of the Ruu clan had, those worn by people from smaller clans were simpler in their construction. Rather than using precious metals, many of them were made from flowers or berries. Even after they had gained so much more wealth than they'd had in the past, they obviously didn't want to spend their hard-earned money on that sort of thing just yet.

Even so, the groom didn't look any less gallant, nor the bride any less beautiful as a result. And the joy and happiness everyone felt was the same as well.

The four figures steadily approached the ritual flame, surrounded by passionate cheering every step of the way.

Part of the crowd moved aside in order to make a space where the four could line up in front of the clan heads. The children held out the woven baskets they were carrying, and the two clan heads each tossed a giba horn and tusk into them.

The bride and groom bowed their heads and then started walking

to their right. They steadily passed in front of each member of the crowd, all of whom gave the couple their blessings along with one giba tusk or horn after another.

Just like with the Ruu clan, it was the Fou's custom for every member of their clans to gift the new couple a horn or tusk. The women and young children who weren't hunters handed over one of the three hanging around their necks instead. The next morning, they would receive a replacement from the men.

I had received a tusk from Ai Fa in advance for this. The ones hanging around my neck were my greatest treasures—gifts the members of the main Ruu house had given to me. I couldn't give those away, so we had made sure to solve that problem in advance.

We patiently waited for the couple to reach us, which didn't take long. Cheem Sudra was so nervous that he almost looked angry, while Ia Fou was smiling gently behind her transparent veil.

Cheem Sudra was a pretty small guy, short enough that Ia Fou might have actually been taller than him. But even so, the hunter looked quite manly, and clearly possessed the will to protect his wife for as long as he lived.

I offered the tusk as my blessing to the two of them, and at the same time, Ai Fa tossed a fine-looking horn into one of the baskets.

Ia Fou locked eyes with me, but Cheem Sudra was so worked up that he didn't seem to even notice who we were. The Sudra hunter was normally quite calm and composed, but it was no surprise that he'd have trouble maintaining his composure during an event like this. Personally, I found it quite charming.

After completing a trip around the plaza, the pair returned to the clan heads.

Baadu Fou and Raielfam Sudra stepped off to the side, giving everyone a clear view of the place prepared for the stars of the night. It was the same stage where the victors of the contests of strength had sat during the combined festival of the hunt. Though, rather than being a proper stage like the one the Ruu had, it was more like a wide pedestal about a meter tall made of planks and logs, with pelts spread out over it, and decorated with berries and flowers here and there. The pair took their seats on top of it, with

the baskets full of gifted horns and tusks next to them.

"Tonight, Cheem Sudra and Ia Fou shall be joined together as husband and wife. As the Fou clan head, allow me to offer you my most sincere blessing," Baadu Fou said, and the crowd instantly went silent. "This ceremony will also bring the Fou a new subordinate clan—the Sudra. Ever since the festival of the hunt we held in the gold month, we have worked to strengthen the ties between our clans, so there's no point in prattling on about this now. But for the Fou clan—we who have lost all of our subordinates other than the Ran and who didn't seem to have a future ahead of us—there is truly no occasion that deserves to be celebrated more than this one." With that, his gaze turned toward his fellow clan head. "The Sudra clan head Raielfam Sudra would also like to offer a few words."

"I don't really know what to say at a time like this, but as the Sudra clan head, I'm very proud to be forming blood ties with the Fou and Ran. I look forward to walking the same path together in the future as relatives," Raielfam Sudra said in the same blunt tone he usually used.

Baadu Fou gave a single nod before turning back toward the crowd. "Every single member of the Fou, Sudra, and Ran have gathered here in this place. If anyone has any objections to Cheem Sudra and Ia Fou being married, or to the Fou and Sudra being bound together, speak them now."

The plaza remained completely silent.

After waiting about five seconds, Baadu Fou gave a hearty nod. "Well then, we shall move on to the wedding vows. Cheem Sudra and Ia Fou, step in front of the ritual flame."

The pair stood up on top of the pedestal. This time, Cheem Sudra awkwardly reached out a hand to help Ia Fou down.

Now on the ground once more, the two of them knelt. Then Baadu Fou's wife threw herbs into the blazing ritual flame, and a strange smell—kind of sweet and kind of sour—drifted through the air. Next, the older woman politely removed the couple's grass crowns and briefly passed them through the smoke from the herbs, before placing Cheem Sudra's crown atop Ia Fou's head and vice versa.

The pair rose and turned their backs to the ritual flame as Baadu Fou stepped in front of them.

"As of tonight, Ia Fou of the Fou clan has become Cheem Sudra's wife and has been granted the name Ia Fou Sudra. May the bonds between the Sudra and Fou deepen, bringing strength and prosperity to the forest's edge."

"I, Cheem Sudra, accept Ia Fou Sudra from the forest."

"I, Ia Fou Sudra, accept Cheem Sudra from the forest."

And with that, the quiet plaza erupted in cheers.

Cheem Sudra took the hand of the woman who was now his wife, and together they once again stepped up onto the pedestal.

After waiting for them to be seated, Baadu Fou accepted a wine bottle his wife was holding out for him. "They have exchanged their marriage vows before our mother forest! Now, let us enjoy a grand banquet and bless them with good fortune for their new future together!"

There was another round of cheering in response, but at the same time, I was suddenly yanked to the side by someone grabbing my collar.

"How wonderful! We may not be related, but as friends of the Fou and Sudra, we'll have to really enjoy ourselves!" It was the Liddo clan head, Radd Liddo. He was a really boisterous guy—pretty much just another Dan Rutim, except slimmer and with more hair. I felt like I could hear my neck creaking because of the headlock he had me in.

"Clan head of the Liddo, Asuta is not a hunter, so I ask that you not treat him so roughly," Ai Fa immediately said, only for Radd Liddo to turn her way and laugh.

"This much of a hold wouldn't be enough to take down even a woman or a young child! Now, let's fill our stomachs with banquet food!"

"Before we eat, I'd like you to release Asuta."

There was an intensely demanding light shining in Ai Fa's eyes, but Radd Liddo was one of the top hunters among the six local clans, so he simply laughed her off.

"Even looking as beautiful as you do now, you're still just as much

like a man as always, Ai Fa! Rather than letting the Fou and Sudra run ahead of you, I'd love to see you hurry up and get married too!"

"Clan head of the Liddo, I don't want to cause a commotion during such a happy occasion."

As she spoke those threatening words, Ai Fa's face went ever so slightly red. The whole kerfuffle with Yun Sudra and Jou Ran had become common knowledge among the Deen and Liddo as well, so everyone also knew what Ai Fa had said when she had turned down Jou Ran's marriage proposal.

"Never mind that! Let's focus on the food! I've been real curious about what sort of meal they were able to prepare without the help of the Fa or Deen!"

At that point, Radd Liddo finally removed his arm from my neck, but he didn't step away. He must have been wanting to tour the stoves together with us. I had no objection to the idea, but Ai Fa still looked rather displeased.

"The Liddo brought several people to this banquet, didn't they? Where are they now?" she asked.

"No clue. I figure they're probably strengthening their bonds with folks from other clans. Why don't you two take advantage of the situation and split up too?"

"We have our own way of doing things. I ask that you refrain from making impertinent remarks."

There was definitely a storm brewing around her, but the boisterous Radd Liddo didn't seem deterred in the least.

"Well then, why don't we head around to the stoves?! There's a real tasty smell coming from that pot there!" Radd Liddo said, and then he started walking away in high spirits. His hand was on my back, pushing me along, so Ai Fa had no choice but to follow.

"Asuta, why are you just going along with him?" Ai Fa quickly whispered into my ear, and I stared vacantly back at her.

"Well, I can't see any reason to refuse. I'm not sure how this looks to you, Ai Fa, but I'm happy to see him act so friendly."

"Even if it means letting him treat you as roughly as he is?"

"Well, I guess I'm just used to it after dealing with Dan Rutim and Rau Lea." Ai Fa shot me a serious frown from an angle where Radd

Liddo couldn’t see. “Don’t sulk. It’s a banquet, so we should enjoy it.”

“Are you saying I’m in the wrong for getting upset over something like this?”

“I’m not saying that at all. I simply want to enjoy the festivities with you.”

As we whispered back and forth like that, we arrived at the first stove, where a good-sized crowd was gathered. We shoved our way through and found a white soup boiling there in the pot.

“Oh, Asuta, Ai Fa, it’s good to finally see you!” Yun Sudra said, as she was the one portioning out the dish. She had let her usual side ponytail down today and was clad in banquet attire. It looked like she wanted to say something more, but then her eyes opened wide. “Wow!” she exclaimed. “So that’s what you look like in banquet attire, Ai Fa! You were always pretty, but now you’re downright stunning!”

It seemed that no matter who we encountered tonight, our conversations were destined to start off like that.

My clan head sighed as she stared back at Yun Sudra. “Why is everyone making such a fuss about it? You’re dressed in banquet attire yourself, are you not?”

“I mean, there aren’t many women out there as pretty as you, and, well...you’re really gallant like a man, so it’s more surprising to see you dressed like that than it would be with other women,” Yun Sudra explained with an earnest smile. “To be honest, I’ve seen lots of women sneak glances at you from time to time. As a hunter, you have your own unique sort of charm, Ai Fa.”

“Never mind all that. I’m not fond of people making a fuss over me.”

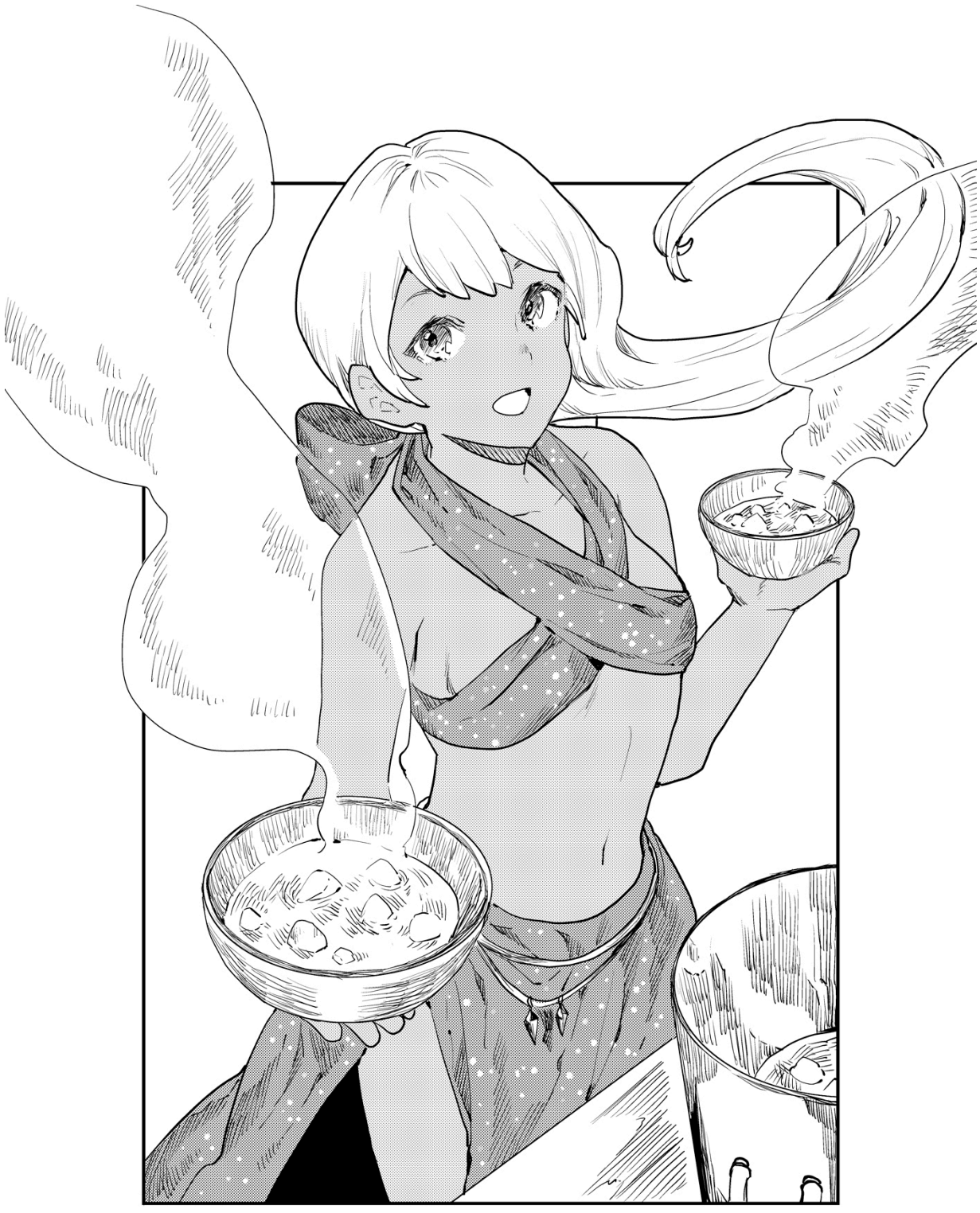
It was pretty rare to hear Ai Fa openly complain like that. It was a sign of how much she had opened up to Yun Sudra.

“Everyone’s excited about the wedding, so there’s nothing to worry about. Now, would you like some of this dish?”

“Yeah! This is the giba bone soup we had at the festival of the hunt, isn’t it?!” Radd Liddo loudly chimed in from beside us. And he was correct, it was definitely giba bone soup—a cloudy soup dish

made by slowly boiling giba bones over the course of half a day.

"This takes some real effort to prepare, so we don't get many opportunities to make it. Please, go ahead and have some," Yun Sudra said, skillfully pouring some soup into a wooden bowl.



There were plenty of solid ingredients too, with hints of vermilion nenon and green nanaar peeking through the liquid. On top of that, they had also used cabbage-like tino and bean-sprout-like onda, and the soup was full of thick slices of char siu.

"It certainly is delicious! I've been wondering about this since the festival of the hunt, but why does this taste so different from the stuff my clan makes? The meat and vegetables we use should be exactly the same," Radd Liddo inquired.

"I suspect it's because we use an ingredient known as seaweed. It's rather expensive, so we only ever buy it for banquets."

The way they had paired giba bone stock with broth from dried seaweed had added even more depth to the dish. They had also employed a variety of seasonings, including salt, sugar, pico leaves, tau oil, myamuu, and nyatta spirits, so it made sense that the flavor would change greatly depending on who prepared it.

"What do you think, Asuta?" Yun Sudra asked.

"It's delicious. I think it's at least as good as the soup that was served at the festival of the hunt."

Yun Sudra broke into a relieved smile. However, there was one thing about it that felt a bit lacking to me.

"You didn't make it a soup and pasta dish, though. That's the one part that I can't help but find a little disappointing."

"Ah, yes. We weren't able to prepare enough pasta to be able to use it for this. We made a different kind of pasta instead."

"A different kind?"

"Yes, the kind that you used in that gratin dish, Asuta."

That was a sort of dumpling-shaped chatchi pasta in the style of gnocchi. I checked my bowl, and discovered that there really was some in there close to the bottom. Scooping up a few pieces with some soup, I gave them a try and said, "Ooh. This type of pasta seems to pair really well with giba bone soup too. That's a pretty big discovery."

When I had been creating my version of giba bone soup with pasta, I had been aiming to make something similar to tsukemen, so I had never thought about using anything other than ramen noodles in it. The chewy gnocchi pasta was already tasty on its own, but the

thick white broth of the giba soup paired with it incredibly well, amplifying its delicious flavor.

"It was just something I wanted to try out. It didn't turn out half bad, huh? If you add ordinary poitan to soup, it dissolves and gets all gooey, so I thought that pasta, which contains fuwano as well, would work better in soups."

"Yeah, this is good. It's exactly the kind of work I've come to expect from you, Yun Sudra."

Yun Sudra was often overshadowed by Toor Deen, but she had grown quite a bit as well. In particular, she had become quite skilled at revising dishes to make them better.

"Yes, it truly is fantastic! If I were to stay here, I'd want to keep eating this until the pot was empty, so it's best that we move on sooner rather than later!" Radd Liddo remarked with a smile while putting his plate down on the surface next to the stovetop. I then followed him to the next stove, along with Ai Fa, who was still frowning quite deeply.

Everyone else also seemed to be moving around and enjoying the various dishes on offer. As I took in the sights, I casually glanced over at the pedestal with the newlyweds and noticed something. "Huh? People are delivering food to Cheem and Ia Fou Sudra?"

"Hmm? Yes, that's right. They aren't supposed to move around for a while, so the only way they can eat is if other people bring them food," Radd Liddo explained.

"At the Ruu clan's banquets, newlyweds only have to watch for a little while, and then they get to eat their own special meal."

"Hmm, well, we don't usually visit other clans if we don't have blood ties with them, so our customs do vary a bit."

Now that he mentioned it, I recalled that among the Ruu clans, they did that little ritual with the grass crowns that reminded me of wedding rings *after* everyone had enjoyed some food. During Gazraan and Ama Min Rutim's wedding, Ai Fa and I had watched them doing it from outside of the crowd.

Seated atop the pedestal, Cheem and Ia Fou Sudra ate the food that was being delivered to them while speaking with their relatives. They each must've been absolutely overjoyed to have been able to

marry the person they loved. Though I wasn't all that close to the young couple, I still felt truly happy for them.

Just then, Radd Liddo let out a strange, "Eh?" And when I turned my gaze back to the direction we were walking in, I almost did the same. There was a familiar figure approaching us.

He seemed to be heading from stove to stove too, but in the opposite direction. It seemed he had also been looking at Cheem and Ia Fou Sudra, but then he noticed us and stopped in place.

"Oh, Ai Fa, Asuta...and the Liddo clan head too," the man said with a faint smile, his eyebrows drooping. He was a fairly good-looking fellow, with straight hair that came down to his shoulders. It was none other than the oldest son of a Ran branch house, Jou Ran, who had recently been the cause of a lot of drama because of his feelings for Ai Fa.

"Yes, we just had the giba bone soup over that way! It really impresses me how they're able to make such delicious food without any help from the Fa or Deen!" Radd Liddo said with a hearty laugh. He was the only one in a good mood, though.

While he was speaking, I stole a glance at Ai Fa to check on her. However, my beloved clan head was completely and utterly expressionless.

"I really appreciate being invited to this wonderful banquet! But anyway, we'll see you later!"

"Yeah," Jou Ran replied, his eyes fixed on Ai Fa. But eventually, he shook his head really hard, then slipped past us and continued on his way.

As he watched the young man leave, Radd Liddo stroked his chin and said, "Hmm... He looks like a pretty strong hunter, but in terms of character, he seems a bit lacking! Well, you two don't need to worry about him!"

"I'm not worried," Ai Fa replied.

"Hmm. I do have to admit that he's fairly good-looking, though! I'm sure he'll find himself a suitable wife eventually!" Radd Liddo said before walking over to the next stove.

As we followed after him I whispered to my clan head, "Hey, are you really okay, Ai Fa?"

"Why do you ask? The clan heads have already forgiven him for his crimes, so there's no point in complaining about him any further."

"Yeah, but you look like you're trying really hard to keep a lid on your emotions."

"I must need more practice, then," Ai Fa said, bringing her hands up to her face. Like I had seen her do several times before, she started firmly rubbing her cheeks. "I've had ties to the Ran for a very long time. I have no intention of starting a quarrel with them over such a trivial matter."

"Of course not. It's the clan your friend Saris Ran Fou was born into."

"That's right," Ai Fa replied, wrapping up her face massage. And then, she suddenly smiled. "Well? Do I look more relaxed now?"

"Y-Yeah. You look so happy, it kinda took me off guard."

"Good. I suppose I've finally gotten used to this noisy atmosphere."

Thinking back, this was probably the first honest smile I had seen on her face since she had put on her banquet attire.

Illuminated by the bonfires, her transparent veil, blonde hair, and rainbow hair accessory all glittered beautifully. She was so wonderfully captivating that it felt like I had taken a blow to my heart.

"I've never been fond of crowds, but the Fou and Sudra are very special friends for both of us. Perhaps the joy of seeing them come together has finally taken hold of me," she said.

"Yeah, it really is a happy occasion," I said as I smiled back at her, trying to keep my heart from pounding its way out of my chest.

Once we reached the next stove, there would be too many people around who might take notice of her expression, but until we got there, Ai Fa's brilliant smile would remain in place.

4

We found fried dishes—cutlets and croquettes—awaiting us at the next stove. The croquettes came in two varieties: the standard type

made with minced meat and chatchi, and cream croquettes. Apparently, this was Radd Liddo's first time trying the latter, and his eyes shot open wide when he did.

"What strange little morsels! They're quite good, though, considering there's no giba meat in them!"

"Indeed. They were a little difficult for us to make, but Yun Sudra worked hard to prepare them," the Fou woman on serving duty replied with a smile.

The cutlets and standard croquettes had a bit of Worcestershire sauce on top of them, while the cream croquettes used a ketchup-style sauce. It must have taken quite a bit of work to prepare enough for fifty people, but it definitely seemed to have been worth the effort, judging from all the smiling faces around us.

A few of the guests happened to be hanging around the area too, namely Toor Deen and the members of the Zaza clan. I had spotted them earlier in the evening, but I hadn't said hello to them yet, so I gave them a quick bow.

"Geol Zaza, Sufira Zaza. Hey there. So this is where you were. It's been a while."

"Yeah," Geol Zaza bluntly grumbled in response while chewing some giba cutlet. Sufira Zaza carefully bowed back to me, as she was carrying a plate with a cream croquette on it. The two of them seemed to be the only people not smiling in pretty much the entire plaza.

I hadn't seen the two of them since the match with Leiriss at the Ruu settlement, and to be honest, I had only seen them from a distance then, so we hadn't spoken. In Sufira Zaza's case, this must have been the first time I had seen her up close in several months.

She wasn't clad in banquet attire. Following the customs of the Zaza, she was wearing a sash made from a pelt and had added some accessories to her outfit, but her hair wasn't down, and she looked the same as usual otherwise. She did seem rather serene, though. Sufira Zaza had always been curt with me in the past, but I couldn't sense any of her typical prickliness now. In fact, she appeared to be quite calm and collected. She had an aura about her that reminded me of an elder, which hadn't been there the last time

I had seen her.

"Um, Geol Zaza, if you just keep on eating giba cutlets, there may not be enough left for everyone else. Don't you think you should try something else?" Toor Deen chimed in. She was wearing proper banquet attire, and the silver accessories she had received from Odifia were in her hair and in front of her chest, sparkling in the firelight.

"Do we really have to worry about fussy stuff like that in the middle of a banquet? The Fou and Sudra said that as guests we can do as we please, didn't they?" Geol Zaza said.

"Yes, but wouldn't it be more enjoyable for you to try all sorts of different dishes too, Geol Zaza? Giba cutlets contain a lot of fat, so if you eat too many of them, it could be bad for you." Though she appeared to be a little concerned, Toor Deen didn't seem intimidated at all. Geol Zaza had a giba pelt on, and his face looked particularly fierce for a hunter his age, but apparently the young chef didn't have any trouble interacting with him.

"Ha! There's no way this would be enough to hurt me!" Geol Zaza insisted, but he set down his plate and started chugging fruit wine instead.

Radd Liddo—who had also been stuffing his face with giba cutlets—snorted, "Hmph. Geol Zaza, it looks like you've grown more mature in the short time since I last saw you."

"Huh? Are you trying to say you thought I was immature when you saw me before?"

"Yes, but you've completely shed your childishness now. Still, you've got a long way to go before you catch up to Gulaf Zaza!" Radd Liddo said with a laugh, not holding back at all, even when dealing with the heir to his parent clan.

"Hmph!" Geol Zaza snorted, looking away in a huff.

Then, with that calm expression still on her face, Sufira Zaza turned toward me. "Asuta of the Fa clan, is that Morun Rutim girl skilled at making dishes like these that use giba fat?"

"Yeah, definitely. As a highly skilled Rutim chef, Morun Rutim should be able to make these no problem."

"I see. I was taught how to make them during my time at the

Ruu settlement, but I've never gotten them to come out right. If I can learn more from her, I'm sure my family will be very happy." Her tone was fittingly steady and didn't betray anything of what she was feeling inside. And yet, there was a certain softness to her that hadn't been there before. It was hard to describe it in words, but it didn't seem like a bad change.

"Is that Rutim girl doing okay at the northern settlement? I haven't heard anything about that lately," Radd Liddo chimed in, asking the question I wanted to bring up.

"Yes," Sufira Zaza replied with a nod. "Morun Rutim has been getting along well with the members of the Dom clan. I've seen her every now and then myself, and I don't believe there's any need to worry about there being discord between them."

"Ah, I see. Well, considering she asked to marry the head of the Dom clan of all people, I was a bit concerned that some of the women might not look upon her fondly."

I had felt much the same way. For a comparison using the clans under the Ruu, it would be like someone completely unrelated asking to marry the head of the Rutim or Lea, so it was definitely a big deal.

"Well, there weren't any women at the northern settlement who were pursuing Deek Dom, because most assumed he and I were going to get married."

"Oh, really?"

"Yes. Though apparently, Deek Dom himself was of the opinion that he should marry someone from the Deen or Liddo, since his clan's blood ties with theirs have been growing thin."

"Considering this is the head of the Dom we're talking about, I'm sure our women would find that to be a rather intimidating proposition! Looking at him as a fellow hunter, I can't say there are many men out there who are as impressive as he is!" Radd Liddo remarked with a hearty laugh. "But I suppose we'll have to wait until the clan head meeting to find out if that Rutim girl's wish can be made a reality! Until then, I hope she keeps doing good work as a chef!"

"We have an even better chef than her among our relatives,

though," Geol Zaza said. He had been silently chugging down fruit wine, but now he was looking down at Toor Deen. "Hey, if you were to stay at the northern settlement, wouldn't it help the women there grow their skills faster?"

"Huh? B-But I have to help out with the Fa clan business, so I can't be away from home for too long," the young chef protested.

"Well, I can't say I see the sense in ignoring your own relatives in order to help out some other clan."

Toor Deen's gaze drifted downward. She seemed incredibly troubled, but before I could come to her aid, she looked up again, staring resolutely at Geol Zaza, who absolutely towered over her. "I was able to improve my cooking skills because I've been assisting the Fa clan. It would be incredibly selfish of me to suddenly abandon my job with them, wouldn't it?"

"Well, but..."

"And I still have a lot I need to learn. If I leave Asuta's side now, I won't be able to improve as much anymore. That would leave me with a lot of regrets as well."

Geol Zaza held his tongue, scowling like a sulking child. It was only at times like these that he looked his actual age. Toor Deen, however, offered him a timid smile as if trying to soothe him.

"But I could start visiting the northern settlement every now and then, the day before I am off from work. That way, I could keep helping the Fa while also giving lessons to the Zaza women."

"Hmm? The day before rather than the day off itself?"

"Yes. When we have business the following day, I need to do prep work in the evening. But after I finish work on the day before a break, I can head to the northern settlement then."

"So, how many days do you take off from business?"

"Our current schedule has us working for five days and then taking one break day."

"I see," Geol Zaza said, smiling brightly, which seemed to fluster Toor Deen a little bit.

"The Zaza and Deen clan heads will have to be the ones to make the decision, though, so we would need to get their permission first," she said.

"My old man won't put up a fight. So, where's the Deen clan head?"

"He's going from stove to stove with our clan members."

"Got it," Geol Zaza said with a nod, hurrying off.

Sufira Zaza gave Toor Deen a rather worried look. "Are you really okay with that? You don't need to force yourself to fulfill Geol's selfish requests."

"If it strengthens our relatives, then I'd be happy to do so," Toor Deen responded.

When she heard that, Sufira Zaza's eyes seemed to smile, even though her mouth didn't move. "I see. I have to say, I'm quite glad that you now fall under the Zaza clan."

"Thank you for saying so."

Sufira Zaza nodded once, then hurried after her brother.

After watching her go, Ai Fa turned to say something to the young chef. "You've grown strong, Toor Deen. The way you handled yourself just now was very impressive."

"Uh, no, it was nothing special... I mean, I *am* a relative of the Zaza and all," Toor Deen replied, her face going red as she stared down at the ground.

Radd Liddo, meanwhile, gave a hearty nod. "You really are the greatest chef under the Zaza, Toor Deen! I'd love to have you offer more lessons to the Liddo clan too!"

"Uh, of course, I'd certainly like to if the opportunity arises..."

"I'll be looking forward to it! Now then, why don't we move on to the next stove? Would you like to join us too, Toor Deen?"

And so, our group expanded to four members, all of whom I thought were great for spending time with.

The next stove had the whole-roast giba. It apparently hadn't been that long since it finished cooking, so there was still plenty left of each cut. But then my eyes went wide when I saw that Yun Sudra was the one serving it to people. "Huh? You're helping out tonight, Yun Sudra?"

"Yes. The others aren't that confident when it comes to cutting slices off the roast, so I was called over to handle it."

It seemed that Yun Sudra was acting as a jack of all trades today.

But, well, that made sense, as she was one of the most skilled chefs among the three clans—the Sudra, Fou, and Ran—who were putting on tonight's event. It was similar to how Toor Deen stood out among all the clans under the Zaza—the Deen and Liddo included.

"We only ever get to have this whole-roast stuff at banquets! I'm really fired up now!" Radd Liddo loudly declared while biting into the back meat that Yun Sudra had sliced off for him.

The banquet certainly seemed to be in full swing at this point.

While we were enjoying our pieces of whole-roast giba, Baadu Fou and the Ran clan head approached us. "Ah, Radd Liddo, Ai Fa. So this is where you've been. Are you enjoying the banquet?"

"Yes, I've been having a blast! The dishes are all so incredibly delicious I almost can't take it!" Radd Liddo said boisterously.

Ai Fa simply nodded.

"That's good to hear. By the way, I'd like to have a brief discussion with you regarding the next festival of the hunt," Baadu Fou said.

"Hmm? Is there some sort of issue?" Radd Liddo asked.

"No, not at all. It's just something the Deen and Sudra clan heads gave us their approval for a moment ago, so we'd like to discuss it with you now. Shall we talk over there where it's quiet?"

As the other three clan heads stepped away from the stove where we were standing, Ai Fa shot me a concerned look. I simply smiled to reassure her and said, "I'll be fine. I'll just stay here and talk with Toor Deen and Yun Sudra. There's nothing to worry about."

"Very well," she replied, then walked off to follow the others after a moment of hesitation.

"I wonder what that's about. I hope it's not any sort of trouble," Toor Deen said with a worried look, so I sent her a smile too.

"The clan heads didn't look all that serious, so I'm sure it's nothing to worry about. It's hard to imagine these three clans fighting in the first place."

"Yes, that's true," Toor Deen replied with a smile of her own.

While we were talking, Yun Sudra was splitting the legs off of the young giba. "I've removed the legs. Would you two like some of the meat from them?"

"Thanks, we'd love that," I said.

I hadn't gotten any at the last Ruu festival, so this was the first time in a while that I was able to enjoy whole-roast giba. With the crispy skin and juicy meat, it was delicious no matter the cut. It also seemed to have been coated in a tau-oil-based sauce, and that flavoring served to whet my appetite further.

"Have you eaten enough yourself, Yun Sudra? I know how easy it is to get so busy with work during a banquet that you forget to eat. Ai Fa's warned me about that plenty of times," I inquired.

"Yes, I'm fine," Yun Sudra replied, a bit of tension entering her voice as she spoke. Her well-shaped eyebrows knitted together sharply as she stared at something behind me. Following her gaze, I found that Jou Ran was suddenly standing there.

"Um, could I have a word with you, Asuta?"

"What do you want to discuss with Asuta?" Yun Sudra asked before I could answer.

Jou Ran's eyebrows drooped sadly. "It's nothing serious. At least, as far as anyone but me is concerned."

"People will get suspicious if they see you trying to involve yourself with the Fa clan, don't you think?"

"I suppose so," Jou Ran replied, his shoulders slumping. He looked so pathetic that I couldn't help but want to cut him some slack.

"I don't mind listening to what you have to say, if that's all you want. As long as it isn't anything people would get upset about. Is it?"

"No...it probably isn't."

Yun Sudra looked like she was about to start going after him, but I went ahead and accepted Jou Ran's request. Toor Deen also looked worried, so I gave her a quick smile before moving a short distance away with the Ran hunter.

"So, what did you want to talk about?"

"Well... Um, are you the man Ai Fa would like to take as a husband, Asuta?"

It wasn't exactly a surprising question. "I don't think we should discuss that when she isn't present. That goes against the customs

of the forest's edge, doesn't it?"

"But the members of the Ran and Fou have all been talking about it... Is it really true?"

"Like I said, it would go against the customs of the forest's edge for me to reply to that." I was sticking with that line because it was undoubtedly what Ai Fa would have said if she were in my position. Rather than confirming or denying anything, I decided to hit him with a question of my own. "And even if it were the truth, what would you do about it, Jou Ran?"

"I mean, Ai Fa has already made it clear that she won't have anything to do with me, so no matter who she has feelings for, there's nothing I *can* do about it," Jou Ran replied with a deep sigh. "But it seems that what everyone's been saying really is true. I can't believe you're the one she has feelings for. I want to dig myself a hole and just lay in it."

"Wh-What do you mean? How does the person she has feelings for change anything?"

"Ai Fa became angry with me because of what I tried to get Yun Sudra to do. And I didn't even realize that there were *two* reasons for her to feel that way. To think that I made the woman I fell for *that* upset. I truly, utterly despise myself." Well, it wasn't like I couldn't understand how he felt. Still, it felt kind of strange to see a man of the forest's edge be so open about his emotions. "Besides, you're someone I can never compete with no matter how hard I try. It's not like you can have a contest of strength between a hunter and a chef, after all."

"Yeah, I guess that's true."

"Was Ai Fa drawn to a chef like you because she's a hunter? You're as gentle as a woman, and you have a cute face too."

How was I supposed to respond to a statement like that?!

Anyway, Jou Ran was standing there with a look on his face that felt like a "boo-hoo" sound effect would have gone with it perfectly. "Still...I also feel a bit relieved in a way. No matter how good of a hunter I become, I won't be able to change how Ai Fa feels. Now that I know that, I think I'm finally ready to let this go."

"I-I see."

“If the two of you get married, I want to be able to give you my blessing from the bottom of my heart. Uh, but please don’t get married, like, tomorrow or the day after, okay? I can’t imagine being able to sort my feelings out that quickly...”

We had no plans to get married, but I didn’t feel like it would be appropriate to tell him that, so I simply replied, “Yeah, got it.”

“All right, excuse me... I have no idea how Yun Sudra is still able to act so normal. She really is a strong woman.” And with those final words, Jou Ran trudged away.

Feeling somewhat gobsmacked, I headed back to the stove. Ai Fa was talking with Yun Sudra, but when I approached, she suddenly turned toward me incredibly fast.

“Asuta! You said you would wait here, didn’t you?!” Ai Fa asked as she walked directly over to me and grabbed ahold of my shoulders. “I heard what happened from Yun Sudra. Did that fool go and say something ridiculous again?”

“U-Uh, he seemed to be sorry that he made you so mad. And he wanted to come to terms with his feelings, so he could give you his blessing no matter what happened.”

“If that was all he wanted to say, why were you the one he asked to speak to?”

“I guess he wanted to talk to me because he figured you wouldn’t be willing to hear him out. Also, he tried to get me to confirm who the person you want to marry is.” I whispered that last bit, and my clan head’s face went red as she kept gripping my shoulders. “But all I said was that I couldn’t tell him without you around. Was that okay?”

“He didn’t say anything else, did he?”

“Um, just that I’m cute like a woman,” I added as a joke, trying to soothe Ai Fa’s emotions.

Her eyes widened in surprise. “What’s that about? It’s weird for a man to say that about another man.”

“Yeah. I didn’t know how to respond, myself.”

With a sigh, Ai Fa finally let go of my shoulders.

Radd Liddo—who was once again getting his fill of whole-roast giba—then cut in, saying, “What’s going on? It’s all well and good to

be close, but you should probably show at least a little restraint when you're at someone else's wedding, wouldn't you say?"

"That's not what's going on! You shouldn't make such thoughtless jokes, clan head of the Liddo!"

"I wouldn't exactly say I was joking there," Radd Liddo replied with a laugh, not looking concerned in the least. Since Yun Sudra and Toor Deen were with us, it was my turn to feel embarrassed.

"S-So, what did Baadu Fou want to talk about?" I asked.

"Hmm? Ah, it wasn't anything all that important! Just some details about our next festival of the hunt! The main thing was about who should organize the banquet."

"Who should organize it? Oh, right, the job of organizing the celebratory banquet was supposed to be passed around among the clans, wasn't it?"

"Indeed. Based on the order we decided on before, the Sudra should have been next, but now the Sudra have become a subordinate clan to the Fou, so we were discussing whether we should have someone else handle it."

In other words, their thinking was that it would be wrong to have related clans take on that burden multiple times in a row, so either the Deen, Liddo, or Fa should take the Sudra's place. It was exactly the sort of reasoning I'd expect from an earnest guy like Baadu Fou.

"At any rate, it will be held here in the Fou settlement, and the food will all be based on Asuta's teachings regardless, so it won't be all that different no matter who does it. But there's also the honor of the Zaza clan to consider, so we decided that next time it should be either the Deen or the Liddo."

"Ah, I see. The festival will be next month, right? That's definitely something worth looking forward to," I said.

"Indeed! Thanks to the Fa clan, banquets have gotten a whole lot more fun than they used to be!"

Radd Liddo's boisterous nature had managed to completely wipe away the awkwardness Jou Ran had left in his wake. Ai Fa was rubbing her cheeks again to loosen them up, which was pretty adorable.

"Okay, I've had back, chest, and leg meat now, so why don't we

move on to the next stove?!" the head of the Liddo clan declared.

Yun Sudra still had work to handle, so our group of four once again got moving.

The other folks around us also seemed to be enjoying the banquet, regardless of which clan they belonged to. Though it had gotten quite dark out, the ritual flame and the bonfires were still burning brightly. These festivals at the forest's edge really got my heart pumping, no matter how many times I experienced them.

Less than ten days from now, Sheera and Darmu Ruu will be getting married. And we just had Granny Jiba's birthday recently too... I'm sure this must be the first time I've been to so many celebrations in a row. Still, I certainly wasn't getting tired of them. It wasn't like everyone was getting excited for no reason at all. No, after having completed their difficult work, they were celebrating their precious family getting married or the birthday of their elder and enjoying themselves as much as they could in the process. They always had a solid reason for throwing a banquet; it was never just out of habit. And incidentally, if they had been too inflexible about adhering to their old customs, they wouldn't have ever invited Ai Fa and me to celebrate with them like this. That was another reason for me to feel truly appreciative for all the bonds I had managed to form with everyone.

"Oh? Do we have sweets next?" Radd Liddo asked from the head of our group.

When I looked, I saw that sure enough there weren't any stoves in front of us. Instead, there were tables made of logs and planks, atop which sat a lineup of desserts. There were baked sweets, chatchi mochi, and a large plate of steamed pudding. Unsurprisingly, there were a lot of women and young children gathered there. However, it wasn't like there weren't any men at all, and Raielfam Sudra was even there in the mix.

"Well, if it isn't the head of the Sudra clan. What are you doing here on your own?" Radd Liddo asked.

"My wife was with me until just a short while ago. But she had to head back into the house, so I figured I would bring her something sweet."

Raielfam Sudra was even smaller than most women, and something about his size made the sight of him leaning forward as he tried to choose between the desserts on offer kind of humorous.

"Is Li Sudra not doing well?" I asked, feeling a bit worried.

"She'll be all right," the Sudra clan head replied with a shake of his head. "She's just resting up because she's trying to take care of herself. Her stomach has never gotten so big before, so she's been getting tired rather quickly of late."

"Hmm... She certainly does seem ample enough to give birth at any moment. But you're still expecting it to take over a month more?"

"Yes, that should be correct."

"In that case, your child is sure to be quite a large one! I'm looking forward to next month!"

Though they were both clan heads, the two of them were very different. Still, Raielfam Sudra never let anything shake him, and seemed to be able to interact with Radd Liddo just fine, without getting overwhelmed by the other clan head's boisterous nature. That was no surprise, though, since he didn't flinch even when dealing with people like Donda Ruu and Gulaf Zaza.

As I was thinking about that, Raielfam Sudra's eyes with their deep inner glow turned toward me and my clan head. "Ai Fa, Asuta, could I have a bit of your time?"

"Hmm? That shouldn't be any issue," Ai Fa said.

"Well then, please follow me."

It sure did seem like we were having an awful lot of private conversations today. At any rate, we separated from Radd Liddo and Toor Deen and walked over to the edge of the plaza.

"I've been quite busy, so I haven't had time to say hello, but I'm very grateful we were able to invite the two of you today."

"I feel much the same way. I'm so glad that we were able to celebrate this happy day for the Sudra and Fou with all of you," Ai Fa replied, and I nodded along in agreement.

Being about a head shorter than either of us, Raielfam Sudra stared intently up at our faces. "I know it's a bit late to be saying this, but I truly am grateful to the two of you."

"Hmm? Why are you speaking so formally?"

"Looking back, it is ultimately thanks to the Fa that Cheem was able to take a bride from another clan, and that the child in Li's stomach is growing so well. I have never forgotten that debt, not even for a single day."

Ai Fa suspiciously furrowed her brow. "What is this all about, really? The Sudra have helped us as well, many times, so I don't believe there's any need to worry too much about who owes whom."

"No, we've still barely repaid you at all for everything you've done for us. Perhaps it is wrong to belabor this point among friends...and yet, I feel the need to say it." Though Raielfam Sudra's expressions were often hard to make out on his wrinkled face, there was a deadly serious light in his eyes. "We Sudra were a clan left with no choice but to await our destruction. We couldn't even buy enough aria and poitan to feed ourselves, and were forced to watch our children and relatives starve to death. And before we realized it, there were only nine of us left. Four of them were young folks who were still unwed, but if they wouldn't be able to have children and raise them properly, we couldn't have them pair off."

"Indeed."

"Everyone gave up on even having children. Li and I knew the pain of losing a child all too well, so we had no other choice. Even with Cheem, I came to assume that one day he would simply hunt his last giba and perish out in the forest. But today, he was able to take a bride from a fine clan such as the Fou, so I'm sure he's every bit as grateful to the two of you as I am." As he spoke, he grabbed one of my hands with his right and one of Ai Fa's with his left. "I would like to offer my thanks as the head of the Sudra clan. And I swear that we shall continue to lend the Fa clan our strength wherever we can. Even if it means fighting the leading clans, we will never treat you as our enemies."



"We have no intention of making enemies of the leading clans ourselves. Besides, the leading clans have more or less accepted what we've been doing thanks to all the support the other clans have given us, the Sudra first and foremost," Ai Fa gently replied. "And out of all of our friends, you have helped us more than any other, clan head of the Sudra. I will never forget how you backed us at the clan head meeting with no fear of the Suun, or how you protected Asuta from Tei Suun."

"I'm honored to hear you say so." After one last firm squeeze, Raielfam Sudra let go of our hands. "I'm sorry for bothering you in the midst of this celebration, but I felt that I absolutely had to thank you today."

"Of course. I would like to continue walking forward with you, hand in hand as friends," Ai Fa said.

"Yeah. I'm glad that we'll always be able to count on you, Raielfam Sudra," I added.

Raielfam Sudra broke out in a smile. He really did have a strange face, but still, it was nice to see him grinning so brightly, considering he rarely ever did so.

Shortly after that, the sound of grass whistles started to fill the air. It seemed it was time for the unwed women to dance. However, there were only a small handful of women gathered in front of the ritual flame. Apparently, there weren't many unmarried folks left between the Fou, Ran, and Sudra.

"Are you not going to dance, Ai Fa?" Raielfam Sudra asked.

"No," my clan head replied. "I have no intention of taking a husband, so I have no reason to do so."

"That's true. It would be a shame if more men like Jou Ran were to become infatuated with you," Raielfam Sudra remarked, the smile still lingering a bit on his wrinkled face. "Ai Fa, Asuta, I most certainly am no longer young, but I've decided to live as long as I can to see my child grow up. And so...I'll be looking forward to seeing you two get married as well."

"What are you going on about, clan head of the Sudra?" Ai Fa questioned, going a bit red and looking taken aback. Of course, I was probably blushing about as badly as she was.

“What I just said was no jest. I owe you both a great debt, and I wish to see you find happiness. I’m looking forward to it every bit as much as I am to my own child’s wedding.”

“Ah, but...”

“My own child is not yet born, so it will be well over ten years before they can be wed. Don’t tell me you two will take even longer still.” With that final statement, the Sudra clan head walked off.

There in the dim light, we looked at one another, our faces turning red.

“Hey, Asuta, I...”

“I know. We have no way of knowing what will happen from here on out, do we?”

“That’s true,” Ai Fa muttered, turning away. Any redness on her face was mostly hidden behind her semitransparent veil.

The sound of the grass whistles continued to reverberate throughout the plaza, and for a while, we just stood there in the darkness, enjoying each other’s presence.

Chapter 3: Rimee Ruu's Birthday Party

1

It was now the sixth of the yellow month, the day after Cheem and Ia Fou Sudra's wedding.

We had the day off from business, but Ai Fa and I headed into the post town in the morning anyway alongside a few members of the Ruu clan. Our objective was to observe the meat market that opened at the upper fourth hour. Yesterday we had celebrated a wedding and tonight we were celebrating Rimee Ruu's birthday. It was quite the hectic schedule, but if we were to skip going to town today, we would have to wait six more days for our next day off. As such, we had decided that we needed to make the time to check out the market regardless.

The members of the Ruu clan with us included Reina, Rimee, and Ludo Ruu. Rimee Ruu seemed to be in an especially good mood, understandably so, considering that she was getting to spend time with Ai Fa in the morning, and had a party to look forward to in the evening.

I was the one holding Gilulu's reins as we headed to our first stop: The Kimyuus's Tail. We were going to have Telia Mas accompany us to the meat market as our guide. When we arrived at the inn and opened the door, we found the young woman seated there at the reception desk.

She greeted us with a smile. "Good morning. Dad! The people from the forest's edge are here, so I'll be heading out!"

In response to her report, shouted in the direction of their kitchen, all we heard back was a gruff "Got it," and that was it. We didn't even get to see Milano Mas's face.

"The workstation in the kitchen is slanted, so my dad's repairing it, even though I imagine it'd be quicker to just buy a new one."

"Well, it's good to value your possessions," I said.

As we were talking with the earnest and goodhearted Telia Mas, we headed around to the storehouse in the back, where we would leave Gilulu and the wagon in their care.

With that done, Telia Mas retrieved a hand-drawn cart that we would be taking with us. It was a rather simple one, with only two wheels supporting the load-carrying tray, and looked to be around a hundred centimeters long and sixty wide. Its handle was attached to what seemed to be the front.

"We buy enough meat for several days at once, which makes for a fairly heavy load. That's why most people use carts like this."

"Do you want to borrow our wagon, then? Wouldn't it be easier to have a totos pull it?"

"No, the market is crowded, so it would just cause trouble if people were to bring totos-drawn wagons there. They'd probably have a hard time moving around too."

After that, we headed straight to where the market was set up.

We normally started doing business at the upper sixth hour, and it was currently over two hours earlier than that. By my reckoning, the time was roughly equivalent to a little before nine in the morning. There weren't many people walking around in traveling clothes yet; most of the people who were out and about looked like they were residents of Genos.

"It won't just be people from inns at the meat market, but members of ordinary households too, right?" I asked.

"That's correct. You can buy small amounts of kimyuus meat from various sellers down this street, but for karon meat, everyone has to go to the market. It's forbidden to resell meat, you see," Telia Mas said.

"It is? Why's that?"

"You've heard that the price of meat changes depending on whether you buy in bulk or only get a little, right? So if a group of neighbors were to place a large order together, they could get it very cheaply. In order to prevent that sort of thing, buying lots of meat

for other houses is outlawed."

"Ah, I see. That's awfully strict of them, to have actually made a law against it."

"True. The punishment for trying to turn a profit through resale is supposedly pretty harsh too. After all, that would be a case of people stealing the profits that were supposed to go to the meat merchants. But as long as they don't buy enough to change the price, neighbors can still ask one another to pick some up when they're out running errands."

Meat prices were strictly regulated in Genos. Also, if too many kimyuus were raised, it would cause the price of their meat to crash, so that was carefully controlled as well. Since we were getting involved in such a delicate market, it was no surprise that the nobles would place all sorts of conditions and restrictions upon us.

Still, in Dabagg, nobody seemed all that worried about the possibility of us selling giba meat at Zasshuma's farm.

That led me to suspect that those regulations were more of a concern for the squabbling nobles in the castle town than they were for merchants. However, we still had no choice but to follow the nobles' laws when doing business.

"We'll be taking a left turn onto that street there. See how most of these people are all heading in that direction?"

Just as Telia Mas had said, the majority of the people walking along the main north-south street we were on were heading toward a T-shaped intersection where another road extended off to the west. It was a wide road with a cobblestone surface, but I had never gone down that way, as I'd never had business there before.

"There's a medium-sized plaza up ahead. Whenever the folks from the castle town announce new edicts, that's the spot they always use to do it. It's forbidden to set up any sort of stall there aside from ones involved in the meat market."

When he heard that, Ludo Ruu said from the rear of our group, "Ah, now I recognize this street. I think I remember the plaza you're talking about. So they sell meat there, huh?"

"Oh? You've been there, Ludo Ruu? That's a bit of a surprise," I said.

“It was a good while back. When that noble girl kidnapped you, Asuta, I was assigned to search this area.”

“Ah, I see... Sorry for asking.”

“Why? It’s our fault that you got kidnapped. You’ve got nothing to be sorry for.”

Even so, I couldn’t help but feel embarrassed about having reminded everyone of that incident.

“That caused quite a stir in town,” Telia Mas chimed in with a smile, as if trying to smooth things over. Thankfully, that was around when our destination finally came into view, as she was quick to point out. “Ah, that’s the place. We’re still a bit early, so there don’t seem to be that many people here yet.”

Despite what she had said, the plaza seemed rather crowded to me. There had to be over a hundred people in the space ahead of us, and they were packed densely enough that I couldn’t see through them to where the meat was being sold. It looked like everyone who managed to escape the congestion was either pulling a cart or carrying a leather bag.

“First up is the karon meat. Be careful not to get separated, okay?” And with that, Telia Mas plunged into the crowd without the slightest hesitation, and we all followed close behind her.

“Hey Rimee, make sure you don’t get trampled, okay you little runt?” Ludo Ruu warned.

“I’ll be fine. Except I can’t see anything...”

After thinking for a moment, Ludo Ruu grabbed his little sister and placed her up on his shoulders, making her excitedly exclaim, “Yay!”

I glanced over at them and the adorable sight they made, but then I felt someone’s pointed gaze on my cheek, and when I turned to look, I found that Ai Fa was staring at me.

“Uh, I’m fine. I can see okay on my own.”

“Understood,” Ai Fa replied, turning to look straight ahead once again. As a hunter of the forest’s edge, she could probably lift me up without any trouble, but I wasn’t so childish that I would find that kind of thing enjoyable.

At any rate, we finally managed to make it to the spot where the

meat was actually being sold. All the way in the back of the plaza, there were a number of boxy wagons lined up along the wall. Piles of wooden crates were stacked up next to them, with more being unloaded from the wagons all the time. The meat sellers were clearly working hard.

There were also totos standing there absentmindedly between the wagons. The merchants must have led them here before the streets got crowded. Certainly, the crates all looked so big enough that they'd be very hard to move with just a hand-drawn cart.

"Excuse me, I'd like to buy karon leg meat," Telia Mas called out loudly enough to not be drowned out by the surrounding crowd.

A short and stout merchant casually smiled at her and replied, "Ah, the girl from the Tail, eh? How much do you want today?"

"Three boxes worth, please."

"Gotcha. That'll be twenty-one white coins."

That was quite a high price, but the boxes she was buying were also rather large. Each one looked to be packed with around fifteen kilos of meat, and the salt to preserve it must have been included in the cost. After paying, Telia Mas lifted the boxes onto her cart, showing surprising strength, and then she did a smooth U-turn and exited the crowd.

"That's all there is to buying meat. Was it helpful?" she asked.

"Yeah, of course. So, are you getting kimyuus meat next?"

"Yes. That's sold over on the left side. I always buy it from around the end of the line of sellers, though."

Telia Mas then pulled her cart to the spot she had indicated. There, a large woman was loudly interacting with her customers.

Karon sellers came from the neighboring territory of Dabagg, but the kimyuus sellers lived in the Daleim lands. Apparently, in most cases, farmers considered raising kimyuus to be something of a side business. And they weren't just selling meat packed into boxes, but eggs as well. That was an ingredient that businesses didn't use too much. Instead, they usually went to individual buyers for their own personal use.

"Welcome. How much do you want?"

"Four boxes, please. And fifty eggs as well."

“Fifty eggs? Ah, you’re the girl from the Mas house, aren’t you? Thanks for the business, as always.” Some of the recipes I had taught the folks at The Kimyuus’s Tail used eggs, so they needed a fair number of them. The seller loaded the eggs into a woven basket that Telia Mas was holding out, then bound it shut with vines. “There you go. Take care not to crack them, okay?”

“Yes, thank you.”

After placing the basket between the wooden boxes, Telia Mas swiftly pulled away from the crowd again. Then, in a spot a short distance removed from the worst of the throng, she used some straw ropes to fix the boxes in place so that the eggs would be properly protected.

“That’s everything. Simple, right?”

“Yeah. But there are some people who buy small amounts rather than whole boxes, aren’t there?”

“Yes. You have to buy at least three boxes to get the cheaper price, but many inns will buy three and a half or four and a half boxes. And ordinary townsfolk will make small purchases like two karon legs or three kimyuus wings.”

“Hmm, I see... What do you think, Reina Ruu?”

“I imagine that most of us would be able to handle selling full or half boxes...but smaller amounts than that could prove to be a bit of a problem,” Reina Ruu said, bringing a finger up to her mouth in a rather cute thinking pose.

Telia Mas tilted her head in confusion. “What’s so difficult about it? The prices are fixed, so all you would have to do is hand over the amount people ask for, right?”

“The people of the forest’s edge aren’t accustomed to doing that kind of calculation. And the price of giba meat changes based on the cut, so at the bare minimum, they’d have to remember the prices for four different varieties: chest, back, shoulder, and leg meat.”

The people of the forest’s edge most certainly weren’t slow-witted or anything. They didn’t find doing business at the stalls to be particularly hard, for example. But it would be rather difficult to memorize and calculate the prices for four different cuts of meat like that. And with this many customers crowding around, it could easily

get overwhelming.

"Then why not just refuse to sell in small amounts? I can't imagine anyone from the inns would want to purchase a portion smaller than half a box," Telia Mas suggested.

"But then ordinary citizens wouldn't be able to buy any. I don't know how many would want to, but I'd hate to simply deny them the opportunity," Reina Ruu explained.

It was a problem that probably wouldn't have occurred to us if we hadn't come here to see the market with our own eyes. Reina Ruu and I had to take a moment to ponder the issue.

"I'm pretty sure the others would be able to master calculating the prices once they get a little experience with it," I said. "It would be best if I could always go with whoever we send, at least initially...but if I did that, I wouldn't be able to help out with morning prep at all."

"I suspect we'd have more issues if you could no longer help out in the mornings, and besides, that's an awful lot of extra work for you to take on, Asuta. It would be rather difficult to return to the forest's edge after selling meat and then come back to the post town in order to run the stalls," Reina Ruu noted.

"In that case, we'll have to rely on Tsuvai Rutim."

"Yes, you're probably right. I imagine she would be able to handle the work without any issue. We would simply have to remove her from stall and prep duty on the days when she would be coming to town to sell meat."

There was another issue, though. We were hoping to have the smaller clans handle business with the meat market. We hadn't decided which ones we would ask yet, but the candidates included the Fou, the Gaaz, the Ratsu, and the clans under the Dai. Would Tsuvai Rutim be able to interact with them okay all on her own? I couldn't help but feel a bit concerned about that.

"It wouldn't be any issue if we could leave everything up to the Rutim, but we can't do that, can we?" I said.

"It wouldn't be an issue in terms of workload or burden, but my father Donda and mother Mia Lea believe we need to let the other clans play a role wherever we can."

That had consistently been the stance that the Ruu clan had taken, based on their desire to avoid hoarding too much of the money we were making. Also, they wanted to broaden the viewpoints of the other clans. I was definitely in support of both of those goals, so we needed to solve this issue in a way that would be consistent with those two aims.

"Well, it's not something we need to figure out on our own. We should discuss it with Donda Ruu and Gazraan Rutim, as well as the members of the smaller clans, and of course Tsuvai Rutim herself."

"I agree," Reina Ruu replied with a nod.

Just then, Rimee Ruu seemed to spot someone from atop her brother's shoulders. "Ah! Hey, over here!" she excitedly called out, waving her hand. I figured she had probably seen the members of Dora's house, or someone like that, and turned in the direction she was looking in, only to be left at a loss for words, because the person I saw there was an exceptionally burly middle-aged woman we had recently become acquainted with.

"L-Lema Geit? I didn't expect to run into you here."

The man accompanying her was pulling a cart, while she herself shot us one hell of a frown as she glared our way. Looking at her now in the light of day, she had even more presence about her than I had sensed before. Though she was only around 160 centimeters tall or so, she looked like she probably outweighed me.

"Oh, it's you lot. Are you selling giba meat already?"

"No, today we're just here for a preliminary inspection. We haven't gotten permission from the castle town to go ahead with our plans yet."

"Hmph. I'm sure the nobles give you their approval for whatever you want to do without even thinking about it," Lema Geit grumbled, already moving away from us.

But then, Rimee Ruu called out from her perch, "Hey, have you managed to make any delicious sweets yet? Are you going to sell them at your inn too?"

Lema Geit came to a stop, her brow furrowing even more. "It's none of your business! Regardless of what I sell or don't, it's got nothing to do with you."

"But sweets can be pretty tricky to make, can't they? It wasn't too bad for me, since Asuta taught me all sorts of stuff, but I'm sure I never would have managed it on my own!"

Lema Geit roughly tousled her curly dark brown hair.

At that point, I went ahead and chimed in too. "Are you having some sort of trouble? You don't exactly have any examples to work from, so I'd imagine it must be proving difficult to get it right."

We had given out the basic recipe for pancakes and chatchi mochi back at the meeting, but afterward, even Milano Mas and Naudis had found them pretty tricky to make.

"It can definitely be difficult to get the correct proportions when it comes to sweets. I thought I could at least manage to follow your pancake recipe, but when I tried it, they came out too sweet and their taste seemed a little off...so I've been having a bit of trouble with them myself," Telia Mas commented.

If even she was having difficulty after she had tried our desserts at several banquets, the others were undoubtedly going to find it even tougher.

"And they feel kind of lacking somehow if they're only sweet," she continued. "Should I try using some of the more unusual ingredients that you guys do, like gigi leaves?"

"No, gigi leaves are very difficult to use. But you could try making stuff like jam out of fruit, or cream out of karon milk."

"By fruit, do you mean things like ramam, arow, and sheel?"

"Yes. Arow and sheel are sour, but if you boil them in sugar water, or even just steep them in it, they can be used as ingredients in desserts. Why don't you try that out too, Lema Geit?"

"Hmph!" the inn owner snorted, turning away. But since she didn't leave, she must have had some interest in the topic.

As for the man pulling her cart, he'd been sending some rather uneasy glances at Ai Fa and Ludo Ruu for a while now.

"It seems we didn't explain things well enough on the night of the meeting. Maybe we should borrow the kitchen at Tanto's Blessing sometime in the near future to hold a study session centered on desserts. Yang's been giving lessons there on how to work with new ingredients for a while now, hasn't he?"

“Hmph! Why should I have to beg you to teach me?!”

“Well, it would be Yang’s job to lead the lesson. We’d simply help out however we could, without getting in his way.”

Lema Geit looked us over with an appraising eye for a long moment without saying anything.

Then Rimee Ruu smiled earnestly at the grumpy woman, with her hands atop her older brother’s head. “If you make tasty sweets, I’d love to try them! I’m looking forward to it!”

“Hmph!” Lema Geit snorted one last time before finally stomping off.

As her burly figure vanished into the crowd, Ludo Ruu called up to his sister, “Hey, why are you bothering with that woman? What good does it do to go out of your way to mess with someone who hates us?”

“That’s not what I was doing at all! I just wanna get along with everyone! Besides, I’m sure she’s not a bad person!”

“It’s not like I think everyone who doesn’t like us is bad. But you shouldn’t go around poking your nose into trouble like that.”

“Eh? Mama Mia Lea is always saying you won’t grow up into a fine person if you always pick the easy path, right?”

“Don’t be so cheeky,” Ludo Ruu replied, and then he suddenly started jumping in place.

Rimee Ruu squealed with joy, clinging tightly to her brother’s head. Her birthday was getting off to a wonderful start.

2

After wrapping up our investigation of the meat market, we promptly headed back to the settlement at the forest’s edge.

Once we got everyone back to the Ruu settlement and returned to the Fa house, we took care of a few chores, like chopping firewood for our own use. When it came to bigger tasks, such as preparing the pico leaves and firewood for our business, we paid the nearby clans to handle it for us, but Ai Fa’s stance was that we should take care of as much of what needed to be done to meet our

personal needs as possible.

When the sun hit its peak, Ai Fa and Brave went hunting, while I set about preparing for business the next day.

On days off, I generally started on prep work around this time. It took about ninety minutes to finish, after which I would hold a long study session with the members of our neighboring clans. But since we had Rimee Ruu's birthday party today, I wrapped up the study session early. After all, the Ruu clan had asked me to prepare a dessert for after dinner.

Rimee Ruu was the most skilled chef in her entire clan when it came to making sweets, but it wouldn't be right to have her cook for her own birthday, so that task fell to me instead.

"When it comes to desserts, though, I really can't measure up to Rimee Ruu at this point. This is gonna be a pretty tough job."

"So what are you planning on making, then, Asuta?" Yun Sudra asked with open curiosity as we cleaned up together after the study session.

"We did some trial and error with baked desserts at that one study session a little while ago, remember? I'm going to go with the same thing we made that time, basically."

"Oh yeah, that was definitely tasty. But if that's all you're going to make, wouldn't it feel a little lacking?"

"Yeah, but I'm planning to add a variety of little twists. If I get the chance, I'd love to show them off to everyone eventually."

Of course, I was sure that once I did that, Toor Deen and Rimee Ruu would come up with better versions than mine in no time at all. But that was perfectly fine with me. I was fully aware at this point that my role was simply to give them a starting point to work from.

"Well, I'll see you again tomorrow. And we'll leave Fafa's wagon here as planned," Yun Sudra said.

Once we finished cleaning up, the Gaaz and Ratsu women headed home in a separate wagon—one of the three that had been bought for making purchases. We were keeping Fafa's wagon here so that Ai Fa could use it later.

After saying goodbye to everyone, I headed south. After meeting up with Bartha at the Ruu settlement, we took another quick trip to

the post town to pick up Tara, who had also been invited to Rimee Ruu's birthday party. Tara was basically Rimee Ruu's best friend at this point, so naturally, the farmer girl really wanted to come too. Fortunately, both girls' parents had agreed.

After picking up Tara, we turned around and went right back to the Ruu settlement. It was currently around the lower third hour, about when Dora would typically be wrapping things up in the post town.

"I'm surprised that you're still forbidden to head into the post town on your own, Asuta. In town, it's considered normal for even weak little girls to walk around by themselves," Bartha jokingly remarked along the way. Naturally, she had only come along because I had asked her to accompany me as a guard.

"Well, my clan head is a bit overprotective... And besides, we've been earning a fortune in town, so we have to be careful of outlaws."

"I see. Well, considering what happened to Mikel and Myme because of all the money they started bringing in, I guess it doesn't hurt to be cautious."

Not long after we finished that little discussion, we arrived at the Ruu settlement.

Since usually a person's birthday party was only attended by members of their house, there didn't seem to be anything different about the plaza as we entered it. Even the members of the branch houses were just going about their work like always. Though, since the Ruu clans were currently in the middle of a break period, there did happen to be a few lightly dressed men around, chopping firewood and playing with children. In fact, I could spy a ton of kids gathered around Mida Ruu in front of Shin Ruu's house.

After saying hello to everyone, I parted ways with Bartha and walked over to the main house, along with Tara. First we greeted Jiza Ruu's family inside the house itself, and then we headed around to the kitchen. There were around ten women there making dinner and handling the prep work for business the next day.

When I spotted Sheera Ruu, I called out, "Hey there. So you're working here today too, Sheera Ruu? The initial celebrations finally

start tomorrow, don't they?"

"That's right. I'm getting nervous, to be honest, so I've been trying my best not to think about it," Sheera Ruu replied, but she looked quite calm to me. Of course, I could sense some real joy behind that calm.

Then Tara, who was standing next to me, tugged on the sleeve of my T-shirt. "Hey Asuta, what did you mean by 'initial celebrations'?"

"Oh, the Ruu clan has a custom of going around to each of their subordinate clans before they have a wedding. Including the Ruu themselves, there are seven clans, and they go to one each night to eat a celebratory meal together."

The bride and groom would also be accompanied by the heads of their houses. In this case, that would be Donda and Shin Ruu. The wedding date had been set for the fourteenth of the yellow month, so that the initial celebrations wouldn't overlap with Rimee Ruu's birthday.

"I'm really looking forward to the wedding banquet. I'm sure you must have a lot to deal with right now, but I know you'll do just fine, Sheera Ruu."

"Yeah. Thank you."

Though I felt a bit reluctant to end our conversation so soon, I had my own work I needed to take care of.

As I started to get to work with Tara next to me, Mia Lea Ruu approached us and said, "Oh, hello. You're here as well, Tara? I believe Rimee should be over at Shin Ruu's house helping to tan pelts."

"Yeah, but I'm helping Asuta! I want to make a delicious dessert for Rimee Ruu to eat!"

"I see. Well then, once you're done helping, could you go see Rimee? Now that you're here, I'm sure she'll be very eager to see you."

With an energetic nod, Tara replied, "Okay!" Though she could be a bit timid compared to her friend Rimee Ruu, she was no longer even the slightest bit nervous about spending time here at the forest's edge.

There weren't any girls the same age as Rimee Ruu at the Ruu

settlement, so meeting Tara in the post town had made her incredibly happy, and the two of them had ended up becoming the best of friends. It was hard to believe that they had known each other for less than a year, considering how close they were now.

When they're old enough, I'm sure they'll spend a lot of time discussing romance and that kind of thing with each other. That abrupt bit of musing had probably come from all the talk of marriage lately. While it was a bit presumptuous, I kinda felt like a proud parent when I thought about those kids.

"Well then, first up is the poitan and fuwano. I hope you'll be able to remember the steps. It would be great if you could make this for your family back home," I said, and with that, the two of us set about preparing dessert.

A few hours later, around when the sun was setting, we gathered in the main hall.

There were thirteen members of the main house and three guests, bringing the total up to sixteen. Ai Fa didn't arrive until right before it was time to begin, but fortunately, we didn't end up needing to wait for anyone.

Normally, Rimee Ruu would have been seated the furthest down in the lineup, but today she was at the head of the group between the clan head and the elder. As a result, we guests were seated pretty far away, but she had met up with Ai Fa in the morning and had gotten to play with Tara for a while shortly before this, so she looked incredibly happy nonetheless.

"Today, we welcome the two members of the Fa clan and Tara from the Daleim lands as our guests... Normally, birthdays are to be celebrated with family alone, but the three of you are precious friends to our youngest daughter Rimee, and I hope that you will grant her your blessings as we do," Donda Ruu stated with a solemn look on his face, and we all nodded back. The clan head then slowly turned to face his daughter. "Let us celebrate Rimee living a healthy year, and pray that her next year goes much the same."

He then placed a bright red mizora flower in Rimee Ruu's hair with his large hand.

The young girl looked up at her father's face with a big smile. "Thanks! As a member of the main Ruu house, I'll live a life that won't bring any shame to the mother forest!" she stated, speaking with even more conviction than Lala Ruu had back at her birthday party.

Donda Ruu retained his perfectly solemn expression as he nodded and replied, "Of course."

After that, Granny Jiba, Jiza Ruu, Darmu Ruu, and Ludo Ruu all offered Rimee Ruu flowers one by one, all of which were a brilliant red. I remembered her also wearing a red flower as an accessory at celebratory banquets, so I had made sure to pick one of the same color from the forest.

Mia Lea Ruu, Granny Tito Min, Jiza Ruu's wife Sati Lea Ruu and his young son Kota Ruu, Vina Ruu, Reina Ruu, and Lala Ruu all gifted their flowers next. And then, it was finally time for us guests. We each said a few congratulatory words and offered her our flowers, starting with Ai Fa, and then me, and Tara last. But when Tara stepped forward, she fidgeted as she stared at Rimee Ruu.

"You like red flowers, Rimee Ruu? But I got you a white one..."

"I'm just happy to have you here!" Rimee Ruu replied, her eyes narrowing as she smiled happily. Tara gave a relaxed smile back, then placed the small white flower on her friend's chest.

Though it was small, it had fine petals that reminded me of a lily. Amid all the red she wore, that single white flower seemed to shine all the brighter.



"Well then, let us begin the celebratory dinner. Tara of the Daleim lands, you also helped to cook, did you not?" Donda Ruu said.

"That's right. She and I were in charge of preparing dessert. We'll bring it in once everyone is almost done with the main course."

Because of that, Tara's name was also included in the premeal chant. She looked kind of embarrassed to hear it, but also seemed very proud at the same time.

"Okay then, let's dig in! Birthday meals are always really extravagant, so I'm sure this is gonna be great!" Ludo Ruu earnestly exclaimed, grabbing hold of a plate.

He wasn't wrong; we had quite a selection to choose from. Most of the food was sitting on large plates, with utensils provided for us to grab portions for ourselves. This sort of buffet-style dining, where everyone could eat as much of each dish as they pleased, was something they did a lot here in the main Ruu house, and that made a lot of sense when you had so many people eating together. There were thirteen people in the main Ruu house, after all, so it would be quite difficult to dole out the right amount of each dish for everyone.

One of the plates had a big stack of thick sirloin steaks, and next to it there was a mountain of meat and vegetable stir-fry cooked in a sweet and salty sauce.

Then we had thin strips of raw daikon-like sheema and yam-like gigo, topped with a dressing made from pickled-plum-like dried kiki. On top of that, there was a potato-salad-esque chatchi salad, plus a tino-based vegetable salad. I had often told people that they should eat plenty of vegetables too in addition to meat, and Reina and Mia Lea Ruu seemed to have taken that advice to heart.

For the soup dish, they had made a spicy tarapa-based one. It seemed they had also employed kimyuus bones to make the stock, which was wonderfully seasoned. There were a variety of vegetables and mushrooms in it too, and it was sure it would become very popular if they sold it at the stalls.

For the final dish, they had taken a shot at preparing gratin, which I had taught them how to make after the Ruu festival of the hunt. Granny Jiba had really enjoyed it, so they were quite passionate when it came to studying the dish. Outside of

celebrations, the Fa house didn't have much use for the large plates meant for gratin, so we had let the Ruu clan borrow three of them (half of the total number we had). By now, the method for making it must have spread to the branch houses as well.

"Wow, amazing! They're all so tasty! My dad's gonna be really jealous!" Tara told me with a smile as she dug into the meat and vegetable stir-fry.

When she heard that, Mia Lea Ruu chimed in from a distance, "Has your father been very busy? You came on your own to the festival of the hunt as well, didn't you?"

"Yeah. He's been expanding the poitan fields again, and that takes a lot of work. He's gotta go out to the fields every morning, so the only time he'll be able to come over is during the next revival festival."

"I see. Your father is a very splendid man."

Tara smiled bashfully. Ludo Ruu, who had been chowing down heartily on chatchi salad, then gulped down his food and turned to talk to Tara as well.

"You're not going to be at Darmu's wedding, are you? I thought for sure you'd come along for that one too."

"My dad said I shouldn't intrude too much. I mean, I just came here for Granny Jiba's birthday celebration."

"Hmm. Well, I guess you're not all that close to Darmu or Sheera Ruu, so I suppose that makes sense."

Darmu Ruu simply kept biting into his steak as people talked around him. He was even harder to read than Sheera Ruu was.

"Well, it would be a little much to invite her to every single one of our events. After all, Ai Fa and Asuta did say they won't be coming to any more of our festivals of the hunt," Mia Lea Ruu said while portioning out some sheema and gigo salad. "I think that for the most part we should only invite townsfolk to banquets meant for that purpose, like we did back in the silver month. I'm sure that would be more appropriate than inviting them to events meant for clan members."

"Huh?! But I want to invite Tara, Ai Fa, and Asuta next year too," Rimee Ruu whined.

“It’s fine if you invite the people precious to you to your celebration, Rimee. That’s why they’re here today even though they’re going to stop coming to our festivals of the hunt, right?”

“Yes, though we made that decision at Jiza Ruu’s urging,” Ai Fa calmly replied.

Jiza Ruu set down his plate and turned toward us. “That’s what it means to draw a clear line, is it not? For example, if you had invited someone who wasn’t very important to Rimee today, I would likely have objected.”

“Hmm? Like Yumi or Telia Mas?” Rimee Ruu asked, and her older brother tilted his head ever so slightly in response.

“Do you consider those two to be as precious to you as Tara?”

“Huh? They’re important friends, of course, but Tara is special!”

“Then I would likely have objected to them. It is clear that Tara is an irreplaceable friend to you, so I have no problem with her coming.”

“I didn’t think you paid that much attention to their friendship, Jiza,” Ludo Ruu said, sounding suspicious.

“I do,” Jiza Ruu replied. “At the festival in town, in the Daleim lands, and at Ruu clan banquets, that girl was always by Rimee’s side. That is evidence enough.”

“Oh? I’m amazed you were able to see all that when you’ve got your eyes closed all the time... Uh, I’m just joking, so don’t get angry!”

Since Ludo Ruu had apologized right away, we thankfully didn’t get hit with that intense invisible aura Jiza Ruu had. The heir to the clan simply moved on, saying, “Anyway, these three guests are clearly all precious to Rimee. And the same goes for Ai Fa and Asuta when it comes to our elder Jiba. I have no issue with such close friends being invited to our family’s birthday celebrations.”

“Huh? Then what about my birthday? Ai Fa and Asuta were there last year, so it should be fine this year too, right?” Lala Ruu chimed in.

Reina Ruu, who was sitting next to her younger sister, chimed in before Jiza Ruu could respond. “That was because it was still hard for us to make really good meals back then, remember? After your

birthday and Granny Tito Min's, though, that stopped being a reason to invite them."

"But they're here now for Rimee's birthday!"

"That's because Rimee and Ai Fa have been friends for years now. And Asuta is the one who reminded Granny Jiba of the joy of living. Rimee is the one who invited Asuta to the Ruu settlement that first time, so her relationship with him is of a different sort than ours."

"It's no fair if only Rimee gets to do it, though!"

"Vina and I didn't invite them, you know...so from our point of view, it would be unfair if you get to."

"You two not inviting Asuta has nothing to do with me!"

"We didn't invite him because we believed it wouldn't be appropriate to invite outsiders to birthday celebrations so frequently. And it also wouldn't be fair to Asuta and Ai Fa to trouble them like that." Reina Ruu had simply been chiding Lala Ruu at first, but it seemed like she was steadily getting more and more angry. "It's not like you're closer to Asuta and Ai Fa than Vina and I are, right? So it wouldn't make sense to only invite them to your birthday, Lala."

"But I've gotten along with Asuta and Ai Fa pretty much since the beginning! Didn't you and Vina dislike Ai Fa at first?!"

"N-No, we didn't. And besides, it's not as if you were especially quick to warm up to Asuta. You didn't give him a tusk as a blessing that first night, remember?"

"Hey, you're really gonna bring up something from that long ago?! Besides, I gave him one pretty soon after that!"

"But you still didn't decide you liked Asuta right away, did you?"

"Maybe, but you two hated Ai Fa! Both of you wanted to get with Asuta, but you thought she was in the way!"

"Th-That's not true at all! And Ai Fa is an important friend to me now!"

"Enough," Donda Ruu grumbled, cutting through their arguing. "We're in the middle of dinner. This is no time to be going on and on like that. Seriously, what do you two think you're doing, fighting when we're here to celebrate your little sister?"

Lala Ruu held her tongue with a frown, while Reina Ruu's face went red from embarrassment.

Looking like she wanted to help calm them down, Granny Tito Min said, "If we were to always invite everyone we consider a friend, it would get out of hand very quickly. That was why Jiza wanted to draw a line. The Fa clan are very important to the elder and Rimee, so it makes the most sense for them to only be invited to those two birthdays."

"Huh? But..." Lala Ruu said hesitantly.

"We were just lucky that the two of us were able to invite them to our birthdays last year. But even if they aren't going to be invited to this kind of event as much, we can still deepen our bonds with the two of them, right? That's what I intend to do."

Last year, I was only invited to the birthdays of Lala Ruu and Granny Tito Min. Everyone else must have had birthdays as well after that, but it was true that I hadn't been invited to any other ones aside from Granny Jiba's and Rimee Ruu's. And it made sense that the reason was because the Ruu could now make elaborate food to celebrate with all on their own.

"That's true. And didn't Dan Rutim and Rau Lea want to invite them too? You've gotta set a limit somewhere, or there'll be no end to it," Ludo Ruu interjected.

However, this earned him a rather sharp look from Lala Ruu out of the corner of her eye. "Dan Rutim *did* invite them to his birthday!"

"Oh, yeah. Still, I mean, we're talking about *Dan Rutim*, y'know? I consider them important friends too, but I didn't try to invite them to my birthday either. Celebrating our birthdays with family is plenty," Ludo Ruu said, and then he shot us a smile. "Still, it was really fun getting to come to your birthday, Ai Fa! You'll be inviting Rimee and Granny Jiba again next year, right? So I guess I'll tag along to guard them again."

"What the heck?! You're being the most unfair of all, Ludo!"

And then the commotion that had been settling down flared right back up again. Donda Ruu had seemingly lost the motivation to put a stop to it, and was now just gulping down fruit wine. Jiza Ruu also did nothing more than shrug before resuming his meal.

Rimee Ruu, thankfully, smiled happily through all of it. She must have been feeling quite satisfied, considering that she had

essentially been given permission to keep inviting the two of us and Tara every year. Ai Fa and Tara were looking back at her from the other end of the group with incredibly fond expressions on their faces.

3

"Well then, I guess it's about time to get dessert ready," I declared around half an hour later, when I saw that most of the food on the large plates had been eaten.

When I did, Ludo Ruu looked at me dubiously as he ate some baked poitan dipped in tarapa soup.

"Aren't you being pretty hasty? We'll be completely done with dinner before too much longer, so why not just wait until then?"

"Tonight's dessert needs a bit more work to finish up, and I want to bring it out right when everyone's done eating."

"Hmm? I don't really get it, but I guess it's fine as long as there's a reason."

"Of course there is. Asuta would never do anything without thinking it through," Lala Ruu said to her younger brother in a rather harsh tone, perhaps still feeling a bit sore because of their earlier argument. Though they most certainly didn't have a bad relationship, I felt like they fought the most out of the seven Ruu siblings.

As I listened to them arguing behind me, I went ahead and exited the room along with Ai Fa and Tara. Ai Fa was holding a candlestick to help with visibility, and she was carefully glancing around. Though giba rarely ever approached houses, we had to be cautious of giiz and mundt at night.

"Now then, let's finish this up quickly."

"Yeah!"

Having made it safely to the kitchen, Tara and I got to work. And as she watched us out of the corner of her eye, Ai Fa remarked, "Hmm. You don't seem to even be close to finishing right now. Did you not have enough time?"

"Ah, no. It seemed like it would probably fall apart if we let it sit too long, so I decided to prepare it right before it would be eaten. I sure hope Rimee Ruu likes it."

"I know she will! I've never seen such a wonderful dessert before!" Tara said, brimming with excitement. She didn't often get to cook at home, so it seemed like she was really enjoying this opportunity to prepare a delicious treat for someone important to her.

Around ten minutes or so later, we wrapped up our work. Ai Fa guided us back to the main building, and it seemed the argument between Ludo and Lala Ruu had wrapped up. All of the plates of food were now empty, and everyone was enjoying fruit wine and chatchi tea.

"That sure did take a while. I was getting worried that you might have messed up somehow," Ludo Ruu commented.

"Don't worry; everything is fine. And thank you for waiting, everyone."

I walked over to Rimee Ruu, carrying a plank in place of a serving tray, which in turn had a large plate on it where the dessert we had prepared was sitting. Ai Fa took her seat again, while Tara followed after me.

"Rimee Ruu, once again, let me say happy birthday. Tara and I made this for you to celebrate."

"Whoa!" Rimee Ruu exclaimed, her eyes sparkling brightly. Aside from a few of the men, almost everyone else made surprised noises too.

"What a delightful treat! You're going to cut it into portions for everyone, right?" Mia Lea Ruu said, having cleared away the empty plates.

"Yes. I made it big enough for all sixteen of us to have some," I replied as I set it down in front of Rimee Ruu.

The dish was thirty centimeters in diameter and ten centimeters tall. Under the candlelight, the white cream and red arow fruit positively sparkled. It was a whole three-tier birthday cake made with poitan and fuwano batter, slathered in whipped cream and decorated with arow.

“Amazing! How’d you get the cream to make these shapes?!” Rimee Ruu asked, looking at the whipped cream decorations. I had utilized a metal nozzle meant for transferring fruit wine from casks to jars in order to make decorative whipped cream shapes on the top of the cake.

After I had smashed the nozzle as flat as I could, I had been able to use it to make ruffles with the cream, which gave it a pretty showy appearance. Decorating food wasn’t really something anyone did at the forest’s edge, so that alone was enough to surprise them.

Then, in between the ruffles of whipped cream, I had added some arow, which looked like raspberries. Normally, arow were too sour to be eaten like this, so I had steeped them in sugar for a full five days. When I had been asked to make a dessert for Rimee Ruu’s birthday, I had gone to Yang for advice on how to make arow taste better, and this was the first time I was showing off the results.

Arow were small like raspberries, but their color was closer to that of strawberries. Those bits of bright red really stood out among all the sparkling white of the whipped cream. Yes, this was the birthday cake that I had thought up for Rimee Ruu.

“Okay then, time to cut it. Would it be all right to give Kota Ruu a small piece?”

“That’s just fine. If he leaves any extra, Jiza and I will take it,” Sati Lea Ruu said.

Kota Ruu’s eyes were sparkling with anticipation as he sat there next to his mother. He was a bit older than Aimu Fou, and it felt like he was getting bigger and bigger every time I saw him.

Taking back the kitchen knife that I had previously left in Mia Lea Ruu’s care, I carefully began cutting into the cake. With its whipped cream coating, it was incredibly soft, so it required even more concentration than it normally would have.

Its fluffy texture was yet another reason we had waited until the last minute to get it ready. There weren’t any refrigerators here in this country, so working with fresh cream was very difficult. It was one thing when you wrapped up the cream in dough like with a roll cake, but when it was on the outside of a decorated cake, it would probably slough off if we left it out for more than a few minutes.

"Here's Rimee Ruu's piece first."

When I portioned out a slice onto a plate and set it in front of the birthday girl, she once again exclaimed, "Amazing!" Naturally, I had added fresh cream between each of the three layers as well. On top of that, I had kneaded some chopped up bits of ramam and minmi fruit into the batter, both of which tasted good naturally, even if you didn't do anything special to them.

From there, I kept on cutting slices and passing them around. The women and Ludo Ruu all let out an excited "Ooh!" or "Aah!" when theirs reached them.

"Thanks for being patient. Enjoy, everyone," I said, as nobody had touched their cake until Tara and I returned to our seats.

With an excited "Yay!" Rimee Ruu picked up a wooden spoon. Both the cream and the cake itself were very soft, so eating it that way would be no problem. And as she took her very first bite of cake, Rimee Ruu's already big eyes opened even wider. "It's so yummy! The poitan is really soft too!"

"I felt like the roll cakes we made before were a little too tough, so I tried out all kinds of things to make this cake even softer."

This was the result of lots of trial and error at the Fa house over the past few days. Ultimately, I had figured out that separating the whites from the yolks of the kimyuus eggs I was going to mix with the fuwano and poitan, and then beating the whites as if I were trying to make meringue, would give me the softest end result.

Also, since we had baked it in an oven, that was how I was finally able to create something soft enough to qualify as sponge cake.

The sponge cake and whipped cream had a relatively restrained sweetness to them, and I went rather light with the cream spread over the surface, which I felt would better fit the tastes of the people of the forest's edge. Even so, karon milk cream was very flavorful, and the apple-like ramam and peach-like minmi added some more sweetness. Plus, the sugar-steeped arow definitely added a strong accent to the dish's flavor in addition to the visuals.

"It's very good. You didn't change all that much, aside from making the dough so soft, and yet...for some reason, its taste is outstanding," Reina Ruu added. Though she wore a bright smile, her

eyes were shining with more than just one emotion. “I never would’ve imagined that there could be a method to make fuwano and poitan come out so soft. This is something you came up with and mastered recently, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. I worked on it in secret at the Fa house.”

“You avoided revealing it to the Ruu clan in order to surprise Rimee, right? Like when you unveiled those gratin and pizza dishes at the festival of the hunt.”

“Exactly. I figured unfamiliar dishes would make people happier.”

“I understand. But now, I can’t help but feel impatient to learn how to make this myself as soon as possible.”

I was pretty sure Reina Ruu was the only person who felt that way. Pretty much everyone else was just enjoying the birthday cake with beaming smiles.

Among the group, only one of the hunters wasn’t smiling: Donda Ruu, who grumbled, “This thing seems like it probably took a lot of unnecessary effort. I can’t say I see the point.”

“That’s true. You may well be able to achieve the same taste in a simpler form. But this dish is meant for a celebration, so I wanted it to look a bit extravagant too,” I replied, and then I hurriedly added, “I know that you hate unnecessary effort, Donda Ruu. But I believe that food can taste even better when it looks good as well. Giba dishes are also tastier when they’re served up neatly rather than sloppily, right? That’s why I went with a bit more effort here.”

“Hmph.”

“If you still find it displeasing, then I apologize. But I was only thinking about what would excite Rimee Ruu the most, so I hope you’ll understand.”

“Our clan head isn’t trying to criticize you, Asuta. There’s no need for you to look so perturbed,” Mia Lea Ruu interjected with a smile. Then she turned to her husband. “And the same goes for you. Asuta always gets worried when you make a face like that. But you aren’t really feeling angry, are you?”

“What does it matter? All I said was that I didn’t get the point of it,” Donda Ruu grumbled.

“You’re grateful that Asuta tried to make Rimee happy, aren’t

you? Ah, now look, you've gone and got cream in your mustache!"

"Stop that. I'm not a little kid."

"If you try to wipe it with your hand, you'll only make a mess. Just stay still."

And so, I got to observe the rare sight of a grumpy Donda Ruu getting his mouth wiped with a hand towel.

Next to her father, Rimee Ruu was happily smiling with an even larger amount of cream all over her face.

"Asuta, Tara, this is super delicious! Thank you so much!"

"I'm glad you like it. Aside from baking the batter, Tara helped me with everything else. Isn't that right?"

"Yeah!" Tara replied with a nod and a smile, her face coated in cream as well.

As Ai Fa silently watched the two young girls—while also eating her own slice of cake—even she couldn't help but smile faintly.

"This really is quite good. I appreciate it very much, just like I enjoy softening my poitan bread with soup," Granny Jiba remarked.

"Oh, right, if you don't add any sugar you should be able to eat this alongside other dishes, so I was thinking I'd teach everyone in the Ruu clan how to make it as soon as tomorrow," I said.

"How will it taste if it isn't sweet, I wonder? I'm very interested to find out," Sati Lea Ruu mused.

"Ah ha ha, you really do like poitan dishes, don't you, Sati Lea Ruu?"

"And you say you're not as good at making sweets as Rimee or Toor Deen, Asuta? I find that hard to believe."

"Rimee Ruu and Toor Deen should be able to use this as a base to create something even more delicious. And if you only add cream in the middle, like with giba burgers, it shouldn't be too hard to make."

It was then that I noticed the oldest Ruu daughter sitting in total silence.

"Is it not to your liking, Vina Ruu?" I asked.

"No, I like it very much. But I think I might have overeaten a bit again today."

"You still want to get even skinnier, Vina?! You know most women

are seriously jealous of you already, right?!" Lala Ruu said.

"Lala, don't be nosy," Vina Ruu scolded.

Once all the cake was finished, everyone seemed to be feeling closer than ever. And right when I was thinking that, Rimee Ruu suddenly popped up between me and Tara.

"Thanks so much for coming today, everyone! I'm super happy!"

"I'm really glad to hear that," I replied, sliding back a bit. Rimee Ruu quickly occupied the space I had cleared, which put her in the center of her three guests, Ai Fa included. The birthday girl's gaze was darting all around, as if she was having trouble deciding who to look at. "Ai Fa, Asuta, Tara, I really want you all to come next year too! I'll be looking forward to it!"

"Yeah. And you'll come to the Daleim lands again for the day of the downfall, won't you?" Tara replied, taking hold of Rimee Ruu's hand. For her, that was the day when she grew a year older.

Ai Fa brought her face close to Rimee Ruu's so everyone else wouldn't see, and then showed the girl a dazzling smile from the heart.

"It makes me very happy as well that we could celebrate our birthdays together. I wish you good health until your next one, Rimee Ruu."

"Yeah, you too, Ai Fa!" The birthday girl then grasped my clan head's hand with her own.

Everyone was smiling happily, including me.

And so, Rimee Ruu's ninth birthday came to a nice, harmonious close.

◇

After another half an hour or so of pleasant chatting, Ai Fa and I got ready to head home.

Tara was staying overnight, but we were planning to spend the night with the Ruu on the day of Darmu and Sheera Ruu's wedding, so we were refraining from doing so today.

"Thanks, Ai Fa and Asuta! Take care on the way back!" Rimee Ruu shouted from the entrance to her house, energetically waving

her hand. Tara was holding her other hand and also waving along in sync.

I then turned to Mia Lea Ruu, who had come out with us, and said, "Well then, we'll be leaving Fafa in your care, Mia Lea Ruu. I'll have one of the women pick him up tomorrow when we drop by on our way to the post town."

I wasn't comfortable with driving wagons at night, so Fafa and his wagon that Ai Fa had rode over in would be spending the night here. Tomorrow, someone who wasn't manning the stalls would accompany us to the Ruu settlement and then return with him.

"We should play again sometime too, Brave! I'll come over to the Fa house next time!" Rimee Ruu shouted again.

After I, Ai Fa, and our hunting dog Brave were seen off by Rimee Ruu and Tara, we hopped into Gilulu's wagon. I lifted the flap in the back, and saw that a few of the Ruu were still waving and calling out to us.

"Thanks for everything! See you tomorrow!"

"Yeah, take care!"

"See you again!"

"Here's to working together again tomorrow!"

As the wagon advanced, they steadily vanished from view, eventually becoming nothing but black silhouettes in the distance. When I could no longer tell who was who, I started to pull my head back inside the wagon...but just then, I noticed a figure fly out of the house and head toward us with incredible speed.

"Huh? Ai Fa, it looks like somebody's coming after us. Could we stop for a moment?"

"Hmm?" My clan head sounded surprised, but she did as I asked.

The tall figure steadily got closer. I didn't have to wonder who it was for long, as I soon recognized him as Darmu Ruu.

"What is it, Darmu Ruu? Did we forget something?" I asked, knowing that probably wasn't the case. If we had forgotten something, Ludo Ruu would probably have been the one to deliver it to us. And besides, Darmu Ruu was completely empty-handed.

"Asuta, I have something to discuss with you."

"What is it?" I replied.

Ai Fa then peeked around the side of the wagon at us as well.

Darmu Ruu furrowed his brow lightly and glared at her. “Asuta is the one I want to speak with.”

“Is it something you don’t want me to overhear?”

“I’m sure Asuta will tell you later either way, so there’s no need for you to listen in.”

Ai Fa looked rather suspicious, but she settled back into the driver’s seat nonetheless. I got down from the wagon and stepped over to the Ruu hunter.

“So, what is it? Some sort of secret?”

“On the day of the wedding, I want to have you cook.”

“Huh?” I questioned, a bit taken aback. “Y-You mean the wedding between you and Sheera Ruu?”

“Do you know anybody else who’s about to get married?” Darmu Ruu shot back, bringing the blazing blue wolflike eyes he had inherited from his father close to my face. The scar on his right cheek looked bright red for some reason.

“If that’s what you want, then I’d gladly do so...but are you sure you want me to?”

“I’m the one asking here, you know.”

“G-Got it. Then I’ll have to make a request for some chefs to assist me.”

“You won’t need any help. You should be able to do it alone.”

This was beginning to sound troublesome. And as I was starting to feel a touch uneasy, Darmu Ruu brought his face even closer.

“You only need to make enough for one person. You can do that without help, can’t you?”

“Only one person? What do you—?”

“I want you to make one of the dishes that the married couple eats as their first meal together.”

That left me full-on at a loss for words. Darmu Ruu was talking about the most important and sacred dish to be prepared for a Ruu clan wedding. At Ruu weddings, the new bride and groom didn’t eat anything for a while, instead simply watching over the proceedings of the banquet. Then, after they exchanged their woven crowns, they ate a selection of dishes prepared just for them as their first

meal together.

Previously, it had been something like meat from a giba caught that day or the finest giba meat they had preserved. They would grill enough of that meat for two people, and the couple would split it up and eat it together.

For Gazraan and Ama Min Rutim's wedding, I had prepared hamburger steak and fillets. On top of that, I had used high-quality fruit wine to flambé it, adding a little something to the presentation.

And now, Darmu Ruu was asking me to make such a precious dish again.

"Reina will be making one of the two dishes. I want you to make the other. What do you say?"

"Y-Yeah, of course. I'm incredibly honored...but why me?"

"Because that's what Sheera Ruu wants," Darmu Ruu replied, almost whispering, even as the blazing inferno in his eyes grew ever more intense. His scar was steadily getting redder as well. "But she thought it wouldn't be proper to entrust such an important role to someone unrelated to us, so she dropped the idea immediately. I have already talked this over with our clan head Donda, though."

"Oh, so Donda Ruu already gave his approval?"

"He did, and so did Reina. Nobody else knows about this, so make sure you don't tell anyone either."

"Huh? But Ai Fa—"

"I don't mind if you tell her. But I will be less than pleased if Ludo or Lala get word of this." In other words, he'd find it embarrassing if his wild younger siblings knew about all the effort he was putting in for his future wife's sake, huh? "I plan to only inform Sheera Ruu after the wedding banquet has started, so seriously, you'd better not tell *anyone*."

"Got it. I'm really glad that you're entrusting me with such an important job," I replied with the most sincere smile I could manage.

Darmu Ruu stepped back, looking like he was having to stop himself from clicking his tongue. "If this gets out, I'm going to punch you. Make sure you tell Ai Fa that too."

"Understood. I'll really be looking forward to the big day."

Darmu Ruu turned away, and then he started walking back to his

house. After watching him go for a bit, I climbed back into the wagon.

"Sorry for the wait. We're all done talking now."

"I see that. It wasn't anything troublesome, was it?"

"No, it was a good thing. I'll explain on the way back."

"Very well," Ai Fa answered with a nod, lifting up the leather whip and prompting Gilulu to start running forward.

Before the euphoria of Rimee Ruu's birthday party could even begin to cool off, I had been given something else to be happy about. I stroked Brave's back as he dozed next to me, and took a moment to consider exactly what to say when I told Ai Fa the news.

Chapter 4: A Day of Fulfillment

1

Several more days passed, and the fourteenth of the yellow month rolled around—the day that Darmu and Sheera Ruu were to be wed.

On that momentous day, we carried out our work with the stalls as always. Though Darmu Ruu had entrusted me with a task that I was honored to receive, I was essentially only going to be making enough food to feed one person. Since I would still have a few hours to prepare the food after finishing up at the stalls, I hadn't seen any reason to take the day off.

Of course, the Ruu clan *were* taking today off. To compensate, the Fa clan was operating four stalls and had prepared eight hundred meals, the same way we'd handled things on the day of the festival of the hunt.

"The big wedding banquet is finally happening today, right?! Ugh, I wish I could go too!" Yumi complained as we were about to start shutting down for the day. She had wanted to attend the wedding banquet, but both the Ruu clan and her own parents had chided her for it. The pair getting married weren't especially close to Yumi, and on top of that, she had gone to the festival of the hunt only half a month prior, so this time she ended up having to exercise some self-restraint.

"So if Sheera Ruu and I were as close as Tara and Rimee Ruu, it would've been okay? I guess I really missed out on that, then!"

"The Ruu clan might have given their permission in that case. But if you keep on slipping out, won't it be a problem for your family's inn?"

"There are plenty of people to help out, so it's no big deal! And I'm always working my butt off, so I don't see how they could

complain about it."

"I see. But, well, if you try to rush things too much, you might trip yourself up. Why don't you take your time and let your bonds with the people of the forest's edge develop naturally from now on?"

"My parents keep on bugging me about taking a husband, though. Think they have any clue that I want to marry into the forest's edge? Ugh, I can't stand this," Yumi said as she stood in front of the stall and sipped her cream stew. Then she gave a strangely anguished sigh. "Is it just impossible to get close enough to someone to make them want to marry you when you hardly ever get to interact with the group they come from? If I could, I'd love to become a person of the forest's edge first and take my time picking a partner."

"Yeah. But weren't you saying you would work up your resolve to move to the forest's edge after you found someone you were seriously in love with?"

"That's right! Honestly, though, I mostly just meant the resolve I'll need to talk to my parents and convince them. If they were okay with it, I'd gladly become a person of the forest's edge right away!"

It sounded like Yumi was pretty troubled about all that. But then, I was sure her parents were going to be pretty troubled too, once their daughter told them about her wild idea.

"Well, whatever. It's stupid to be worrying about something like that on their big day, so congratulate them for me too, okay?!"

"Got it... Though with that said, I'm sure Sheera Ruu will be back in town again the day after tomorrow. She's supposed to take some shifts at the stalls after her time off."

"Heh heh, then I'll be sure to tease her a lot the next time she comes to town! But anyway, I'll see you around!"

Soon after Yumi departed, we sold the last of the food we'd brought. Checking our sundial, I saw that we hadn't even been working for two whole hours. Myme was on break today too, so that meant there were a hundred fewer meals than usual being sold, which explained why we had sold out so quickly.

Adding up all the stalls offering giba meat, we're selling nine hundred meals a day. Our sales have stabilized at an unbelievably

high level.

On top of that, the post town in general seemed more lively to me than it used to be. At first I had thought that it was simply because we were coming out of the rainy season, but that didn't seem to be the whole story. There appeared to be more people visiting Genos than there had been before the rainy season.

I didn't know why that was, but I had a number of hypotheses. For example, now that there were so many new ingredients available in the post town, the merchants selling them were probably making all kinds of new deals, which would directly cause an increase in the number of people visiting.

Then there was the grandiose plan Polarth had boasted about, to make Genos a town famed for its fine cuisine... I didn't know how much progress he had made on that, but news of the changes in Genos had likely spread pretty far by now. There must have been talk in Sym and Jagar and all sorts of places about the unique giba cooking being sold here, as well as the wide variety of ingredients that had once been monopolized, but were now readily available.

And there was one other point. The bad reputation surrounding the people of the forest's edge had been wiped away. There must have been some nasty rumors about Genos in the past, about a band of barbarians who wandered freely around the post town—a consequence of the wrongdoings of the Suun clan from ten years ago, as well as what Doddo and Mida Ruu had gotten up to more recently. It made sense that people would avoid Genos if they heard about that, as well as how the nobles would unjustly protect those criminals, no matter what they did.

But it had already been many months since those criminals from the forest's edge had been punished, by official decree of Duke Marstein Genos. If the people who actually visited Genos were able to see that things had really changed, they would bring that news back home with them and help clear away the town's bad reputation.

Genos has certainly undergone some major changes in the past year. And if that's led to the town becoming more lively, well, that's a good thing, I thought to myself as we headed back toward the

forest's edge.

Toor Deen and the other people riding with me transferred to another wagon in front of the Ruu settlement. We had done the same thing before the last festival of the hunt.

"Well then, see you tomorrow. And thanks for taking care of the prep work," I said.

"Thank you, and you take care, okay?" one of the women told me. Then the nine of them in their two wagons headed off to the north. After watching them leave for a moment, I stepped into the Ruu clan's plaza.

It was just as lively there as it had been back during the festival of the hunt. A lot of women from the clans under the Ruu had been invited to come today, and they were working hard to man the stoves.

Originally, it had been customary for the members of the clan hosting a banquet to handle the preparations alone. That was why only Ruu women had been involved in preparing food for Gazraan Rutim's wedding. But they had started finding themselves coming up shorthanded due to the elaborate dishes they had been making lately, so the Ruu had adjusted their customs to allow them to borrow the help of their subordinate clans during such events.

"Hey there, Asuta. Welcome back to the Ruu settlement."

"Oh, Asuta. It's been a while."

"You sure are here early. Could you not wait for the banquet?"

Friendly voices called out from all around as I walked across the plaza. Only a very small number of people had been informed that I would be preparing food today, so whenever someone greeted me like that, I laughed them off with a "Ha ha, yeah," as I headed toward the main house.

It's true that I can't wait for the banquet, so it's not like I was lying, right?

Still, the idea that I was supposed to prepare food in secret under these conditions was pretty ridiculous. That was why I had worked together with Reina Ruu in advance to prepare for today, as she was also in on the secret.

"Darmu just doesn't want Ludo and Lala to tease him, so we

should be able to let a few women who need to know in on it. I'll explain things to Darmu myself," Reina Ruu had said a number of days back. And as we had planned, after I said hello to the people in the main house, I headed straight over to Shin Ruu's kitchen.

"Oh? You're here already, Asuta?" Mida Ruu asked, his cheeks trembling. He was playing with a number of young children in front of Shin Ruu's house today.

"Yeah. I was asked to take care of something. So, as of tonight, you're a member of Shin Ruu's house, right?"

"Yup. I'm really happy about it."

Since Sheera Ruu was leaving the house, they were about to have an unoccupied bedroom, so as of tonight, Mida Ruu would be joining Shin Ruu's household.

Then Darmu Ruu would become the head of a new branch family and move into the house where Mida Ruu had been living, along with Sheera Ruu. There had been some discussion about whether to build a new house, but unused houses tended to fall apart quickly, so they had decided that the new family should live there.

As for their dinners, Sheera and Tari Ruu would continue to make them as they had up until now, and the two households would eat together. Mida Ruu had already been eating dinner at Shin Ruu's house anyway, so Darmu Ruu would be the only new addition. There would be eight people there in total: Shin, Mida, Ryada, Tari, Darmu, and Sheera Ruu, as well as the two younger brothers. Thinking about how that interesting collection of people would interact with each other made me feel all warm and fuzzy inside.

"Well then, I'll be off for now, Mida Ruu. But my work shouldn't take too long, so we can talk later."

"Okay. I like talking to you, Asuta."

As Mida Ruu and the little kids all waved, I circled around to the back of the house, where I found Ryada Ruu silently chopping firewood.

"Oh, Ryada Ruu, sorry to interrupt. Are you working back here?"

"No. I just felt on edge, so I decided to find something to do. That's why I didn't ask Mida Ruu for help," Ryada Ruu explained while wiping the sweat from his brow. From my point of view, he

looked pretty much the same as always: calm and composed. But it made sense that even a guy like him would get a little antsy on the day of his daughter's wedding. "I already heard from Tari. You're going to be cooking food for them, right? Thank you for doing that."

"You don't have to thank me. I'm grateful to have been given such an important task."

"I'm not simply talking about today. I can never thank you enough for everything you've done, Asuta," Ryada Ruu said, setting aside his hatchet and walking over to stand in front of me, dragging his injured leg a bit as he went. "Before meeting you, Sheera was a rather gloomy girl. She's always been a bit weak, and that made her feel inferior to others as she grew up. If she hadn't met you and gained confidence through her work as a chef, I don't think there's much of a chance that she would've ever had such a happy wedding day."

"I disagree. Sheera Ruu was a wonderful person to begin with."

"Even so, the old Sheera never would have been able to ask Darmu Ruu to marry her. That's why I'm so incredibly grateful to you," Ryada Ruu said, lowering his chin in a small nod. "I want to thank you, as Sheera's father. I hope that you'll continue to light her path forward."

"I owe Sheera Ruu a great deal myself. And I'll be glad to keep working with her in the future."

Ryada Ruu gave a slow nod, laugh lines forming around his eyes.

After that, I completed my journey to the kitchen, feeling a little worked up as I went.

"Oh, Asuta, welcome back to the Ruu settlement. Thank you so much for your help today," Tari Ruu said as I stepped inside. There were six or seven other chefs with her in the room. They seemed to belong to several different clans, but the only one I knew by name other than Tari Ruu was Granny Tito Min. "The women here have already heard what's going on. Please, do your best for Sheera and Darmu Ruu."

"Of course. I'll give it everything I've got." With that, I went ahead and lined up the ingredients I had brought along atop a workstation. Across from me, Tari Ruu was slicing meat, and her

eyes narrowed as she watched me. “Sheera and Darmu Ruu are away since they’ve been visiting the subordinate clans, right?” I asked.

“Yes. The majority of our women were asked to come here today, but fortunately we’re in the middle of a break period. The two of them should be receiving blessings from the men, young children, and old folks of the last subordinate clan right now.”

“I see. It’s really starting to sink in that the two of them are finally getting married. Are they already wearing their wedding clothes?”

“Of course. They should be here soon.”

Granny Tito Min, who was tending to a boiling pot, looked at me with a smile too. “It’s been almost a year now since the Rutim and Min wedding, hasn’t it? There have been a few more weddings among the Ruu clans since then, but you haven’t been to any of the others, have you, Asuta?”

“That’s right. And the Ruu clan’s plaza hasn’t been used for a wedding banquet since then either, has it?”

“It hasn’t. As long as it’s not the head of a main house or their oldest son, none of the subordinate clans use the Ruu plaza,” Granny Tito Min replied, her smile widening across her plump face. “I feel just as happy as Tari Ruu. It’s quite rare for one’s grandchildren to be married to each other here at the forest’s edge.”

“Oh, yeah, Sheera Ruu is your grandchild too, isn’t she? That should’ve been obvious, but it never occurred to me before.”

Granny Tito Min was the wife of the previous head of the main house, which made her the mother of Donda and Ryada Ruu.

“I can understand why it didn’t. Donda and Ryada Ruu aren’t alike at all. And Darmu and Sheera Ruu are as different from each other as their fathers. But those two will surely bring great strength to the Ruu clan.”

Apparently, the official custom at the forest’s edge was to address children who left your household with their clan names included. So in the future, Donda Ruu and the rest of the main house would call Darmu Ruu by his full name, and Tari Ruu and her family would do the same for Sheera Ruu. It felt a bit sad, but at the same time, it

seemed like the custom was meant to show the greatest possible respect to the young men and women who left to start new families.

As of today, Darmu Ruu would become the head of a new branch house, and Sheera Ruu would be the wife supporting him. Then they would either go on to have lots of kids and form a fine household like Ryada Ruu had, or prove to be lacking in strength and end up needing to join another branch house. That would all depend on their own actions.

"Now that I think about it, Ryada and Tari Ruu got married, and now we have Sheera Ruu and Darmu, and it seems likely that Shin Ruu and Lala will eventually be wed as well... Your household certainly does seem to make a habit of marrying people from within the Ruu clan, don't they, Tari Ruu?" Granny Tito Min remarked.

"I suppose so," Tari Ruu replied with a smile. "But that's not a bad thing, is it? Deepening bonds with our subordinate clans and within the Ruu clan itself are both equally important. Besides, you get the greatest joy from marrying someone you have feelings for."

"Yes, that's certainly true," Granny Tito Min said with a gentle smile. The two of them weren't directly related, but they really felt like a mother and daughter all the same. They were around the same height and were healthily plump, plus they were both kind women with a lot of inner strength, so they were incredibly similar.

Everyone seems so happy. Well, I'm bubbling with joy myself, despite belonging to a different clan, so I guess that's no surprise, I thought to myself as I got started. But since the food wouldn't be eaten for several hours yet, I was just doing prep work for now. As such, I was able to finish up quickly and then exit the kitchen.

After giving a small bow to Ryada Ruu as he continued chopping firewood, I headed back toward the plaza, where I found Mida Ruu and the little kids playing tag. Perhaps it was meant to be a bit of extra stamina training for the young hunter; I couldn't say for certain. But I decided to indulge in my childish side and joined in.

"By the way, I haven't seen Rimee Ruu anywhere. Is she helping to prepare the feast?" I asked while we were taking a breather after playing for a bit.

"No," Mida Ruu replied. "Rimee Ruu is going around to the other

clans with Sheera Ruu and the rest. She's Darmu Ruu's little sister, so she's with them."

"Oh yeah? Then, are Sheera Ruu's little brothers with them too?"

"Yeah. The younger of the two is."

Sheera's youngest brother was roughly Rimee Ruu's age, while the older one was probably around eleven or twelve, so he would probably become a hunter in training soon.

"Sheera Ruu's little brothers get along well with you, don't they, Mida Ruu? Are you happy that you'll all be living together?"

"Yeah. Really, really happy."

Mida Ruu had just been granted a clan name, but soon the members of Shin Ruu's house would simply be calling him "Mida" again. Up until recently, he had been called by his given name alone after losing the Suun name, but now he would be called that because he would have a new family. It was only natural that he would be happy about this development.

As we chatted away, some more little kids gathered around us. None of the kids from the subordinate clans should've arrived yet, but there were already a lot of them. The crowd around us likely included every young Ruu child that was capable of walking on their own.

A number of them asked about the post town and castle town, so I had some fun playing the role of an amateur storyteller. Their eyes sparkled as I told them about the travelers coming and going down the road, the rows of houses and inns, and the paved streets and finely dressed nobles of the castle town. I normally never would've found myself in a situation like this.

After about half an hour of that, things started to get lively around the entrance to the plaza. The group that had been going around to the subordinate clans had made it back. The kids all excitedly cheered, and Mida Ruu and I stood up and headed in that direction.

There was quite a crowd coming into the plaza, probably around thirty people in total, and almost all of them were tough-looking men. The women were already busy preparing the banquet, so it was pretty much only men who were returning with this group.

At the head of the party was Donda Ruu, and he was flanked by two small figures at his sides: Rimee Ruu and Sheera Ruu's youngest brother. Rimee Ruu was already clad in banquet attire, while Sheera Ruu's little brother was wearing a tiny hunter's cloak. In their hands, they held woven baskets filled with a ton of tusks and horns.

Behind them stood Ludo and Shin Ruu. Then there were a number of young folks I didn't know by name from the branch houses, as well as an older hunter covered in scars. Ryada Ruu had difficulty walking long distances, and Mida Ruu was watching the young kids, but aside from them, the group probably included every single Ruu hunter.

And last but not least were Darmu and Sheera Ruu, who were being guarded by several of the burly hunters.

Darmu Ruu was wearing a giba pelt cloak with the head still attached. However, he wasn't wearing the beast's head over his own like the northern clans did. Instead, just like at the wedding a year prior when Gazraan Rutim had worn a similar cloak, he had the giba head facing frontward over his right shoulder.

At his hip, he had a sword and a dagger. However, rather than the usual rigid leather scabbards, they were held in ceremonial ones with all sorts of adornments. On top of that, there was an emerald green grass crown atop his head. But even though that was all that was different about him, he looked even more gallant and awe-inspiring than he had when he'd been dressed up in the banquet clothes of the castle town.

Sheera Ruu was walking alongside him, dressed in brilliant banquet attire that looked a lot like what Ama Min Rutim had worn.

Iridescent, translucent fabric wrapped around her entire frame. Her long black-brown hair was hanging loose, and a large number of accessories had been woven into it. She had rather slender limbs for a Ruu woman, and they too were well adorned. She was slowly walking forward with her hands held together in front of her.

Underneath her veil, which was being held in place by her own grass crown, Sheera Ruu's gaze was cast downward. The iridescent shine was half concealing her face, leaving me to wonder what kind of expression she was making. I raised myself up onto my toes to try

to check, but then the plaza was suddenly filled with cheering voices. The women in the kitchens had noticed the group's return, and they were all rushing outside to offer the happy couple their congratulations. Rimee Ruu gave a bright smile and energetically waved her hands, while Ludo and Shin Ruu were pumping their fists in the air and saying something to stir everyone up.

The noise of the crowd got Sheera Ruu to raise her head and look around at everyone. And when she saw me and Mida Ruu, I could tell that behind her shining veil she was smiling at us with more joy than I had ever seen from her before. And when I saw that, I couldn't stop myself from crying.

My self-restraint crumbled to dust as I flashed back to how she had timidly greeted me when we had first met, then to her helping Tari Ruu cook banquet food, her working so incredibly hard at the stalls, and her staring longingly at Darmu Ruu.

If Ai Fa had been there, she probably would have poked me in the head and told me not to get worked up over every little thing. However, Mida Ruu was the only person standing close to me now, excitedly waving his log-like arm back and forth.

I'm so, so happy for you, Sheera Ruu. As I thought those words—words that I would surely say to her again and again in the future—I started waving at her as well. She then raised one of her hands up to around chest level and waved back.

I couldn't see her face very clearly, but behind Sheera Ruu's shining veil, she seemed to be crying too as she smiled at everyone around her.

2

Around the time when the sun started setting in the west, the wedding banquet kicked off. The world was awash in twilight, and over a hundred people under the Ruu were now gathered in the plaza, looking like black silhouettes.

Only four people present didn't have blood ties with the clan: Ai Fa, me, Mikel, and Myme. Shumiral hadn't been granted a clan name

yet, but he was still considered to be a member of the Ririn.

"Tonight, the second son of the main Ruu house, Darmu Ruu, and the eldest daughter of Shin Ruu's house, Sheera Ruu, shall be wed. May they show one another affection and bring new strength to both the Ruu clan and the forest's edge until the day their souls return to the forest," Donda Ruu called out from the center of the dimly lit plaza, his voice coming across clearly through the calm night air.

Darmu and Sheera Ruu were seated atop the stage behind him. Illuminated by the reddish twilight, Sheera Ruu had a divine presence about her, like a carved idol or a priestess delivering a revelation from the gods.

"This is an incredibly happy day for me as well, seeing my elder sister Sheera wed as everyone grants her their blessings. I'm glad that we will be able to continue following the correct path alongside the rest of the Ruu clan," Shin Ruu followed up from his position beside Donda Ruu.

After waiting for the cheers to die back down, Donda Ruu held up a bottle of fruit wine. "Now, let's all fill our stomachs with the blessings of the forest we have gathered! And cheers to Darmu and Sheera Ruu!"

"Cheers!" echoed out throughout the plaza, and at the same time, the ritual flame was set alight.

The bonfires located all around the plaza were also lit one by one, quickly filling the area with light and warmth.

A hundred people were cheering and tapping fruit wine bottles together. I had gone to a wedding at the Fou settlement just the other day, but the smaller clans really couldn't compete with how lively Ruu clan banquets were. In addition to them having so many more people, they were also one of the greatest powers at the forest's edge.

The energy in the air was almost overwhelming as it flooded my senses. I felt like I needed to straighten my spine so I wouldn't be bowled over as I turned to face Ai Fa.

"It feels like tonight's party is as wild as one on Granny Jiba's birthday. How about we step back and watch for a bit until things settle down?" I suggested.

“Sure,” Ai Fa replied with a nod. She was in banquet attire once again today. Vina and Lala Ruu had helped her to get dressed.

There were already sizable crowds forming around the simple stoves that had been set up here and there. Also, everyone who saw my clan head kept reacting with obvious surprise.

“Whoa! It’s been a while since I’ve seen you in banquet attire, Ai Fa!”

“I was wondering who was over here, but I never thought it would be you. That really is a stunning outfit.”

“So pretty... It suits you incredibly well, Ai Fa.”

Though there were over a hundred people gathered, there probably wasn’t a single one of them who didn’t know our names. My clan head maintained a dignified expression as she nodded back in response to the compliments.

“You seem really calm today, Ai Fa. I’m impressed,” I remarked, earning me a glare from out of the corner of her eye.

“Enough people poked fun at me at the Fou banquet that I’ve gotten used to it. I still find it just as unpleasant, however.”

Ai Fa had also worn banquet attire to the wedding between Gazraan and Ama Min Rutim, but that didn’t stop pretty much everyone from offering her an admiring comment. Of course, that last wedding banquet had been almost a year ago now, and the actions of the Fa clan hadn’t been fully accepted at the time, so even if they had admired Ai Fa’s beauty back then, they wouldn’t have had the sort of relationship that would’ve allowed them to express that directly. But now, nobody hesitated to speak to her when they wanted to. Seeing how much our bond with them had developed over the past year made me seriously happy.

“I’m getting all emotional again,” I mumbled to myself as I stared at the stage.

Illuminated by the ritual fire, Sheera and Darmu Ruu seemed to shine. The groom was sitting cross-legged, while the bride had her legs out to one side. In accordance with the Ruu clan’s traditions, no food was delivered to them, but people were constantly climbing the stairs and offering their blessings. Until their relatives had filled their own stomachs a bit, the pair to be wed were expected to simply

watch over the proceedings.

During the Rutim and Min wedding, I was so busy dealing with the food that I didn't really have time to observe. That time, I had come up with the menu all on my own *and* I had handled the preparations while also teaching everyone the things I needed them to do. I had at least had the twenty or so women who lived at the Ruu settlement working with me, but we had lacked eating utensils and had been using suurub leaves in place of plates. I had never handled anything close to a banquet with a hundred participants when I was living in Japan, so I'd been nervously fumbling in the dark the whole time, trying to figure out how to get everything done.

And that was when I first met Sheera Ruu.

The Ruu clan had a lot of lively and jovial members, so a reserved girl like her stood out among them. But she had been a really quick learner when it came to cooking, and I had ended up entrusting a lot of the important tasks to her and Tari Ruu. That had soon led to Sheera Ruu helping out at the stalls. Mia Lea Ruu had been the one to choose her, but her efforts during the wedding banquet had been a major factor in that decision.

Then Darmu Ruu got that injury to his head and face and couldn't hunt for a while, so he ended up coming with us to the post town for a while when Reina Ruu joined our team. That was when I first realized how Sheera Ruu felt. Back then, Darmu Ruu had been still fixated on Ai Fa, so Sheera Ruu and I had had worries that were somewhat related to each other.

Then I had confirmed how she felt directly at my first festival of the hunt, when almost everyone had been watching the contest of strength and I'd been left alone with her in the kitchen. Though she hadn't openly discussed her feelings, she had gotten all flustered during the conversation and had been desperate to hide how red her face had turned.

And then Sheera Ruu said she wasn't worthy of having a husband, seeing as how she couldn't even properly carry a water jug.

When I had heard that timid statement from her, I made the

roundabout suggestion that she deliver the banquet food she made to Darmu Ruu. Of course, I never heard if she really did it or not. All I had seen in the dim light was a figure that looked like the Sheera Ruu following Darmu Ruu. But I did get the impression that her behavior had shifted after that point.

Now that I've gotten everyone to see the appeal of good food, cooking skills are sure to be highly valued here at the forest's edge in the future. That should mean even someone without much strength and stamina like Sheera Ruu ought to be able to live with her head held high. That's what I was hoping for back then, and Sheera Ruu has really exceeded my expectations.

Darmu Ruu had also cast aside his fixation on Ai Fa during that first festival of the hunt. When he lost to my clan head in the contest of strength, he decided he no longer had the right to criticize her way of life, and completely gave up.

That was undoubtedly the point when things started developing between Sheera and Darmu Ruu. Though the two of them had been childhood friends who lived together at the Ruu settlement, Darmu Ruu had become obsessed with Ai Fa two years before I showed up, while Sheera Ruu had come to believe that she was worthless. But eventually, both of them were set free from the curses that bound them.

While we were staying at the Sauti settlement to help take down the lord of the forest, I overheard a conversation between the two of them. If I remember correctly, Sheera Ruu was so worried about Darmu Ruu that she ended up crying... No, wait, I think the actual *reason she cried was that she was happy to see him trying to acknowledge how she felt. I was feeling pretty anxious back then.*

Ever since that first festival of the hunt, I had made an effort to not meddle in Sheera Ruu's affairs any further unless I really needed to. From then on, she had pursued Darmu Ruu with her own strength alone. And tonight, they were finally being joined together.

I can't even imagine a happier outcome. If I could, I'd love to chat with Sheera Ruu all night about everything that's gotten her to this point, I thought as I finally pulled my gaze away from the stage.

"Okay, it looks like things have finally settled down around the

stoves. Why don't we get some food too and... Gah! What's the matter, Ai Fa?!" I suddenly realized that my clan head was staring at my face really closely, her blue eyes deadly serious. "Is there something stuck to my face? I haven't cried or anything today."

"Did you mean to say you aren't crying right now, rather than that you haven't today? The corners of your eyes are a little red."

"H-Hey, you don't have to scrutinize me that closely."

"You were spacing out. I'm right here beside you, but you've been ignoring me this whole time," Ai Fa said with a frown as she shot me another glare.

"Sorry about that. I was reminiscing. Come on, why don't we get some food?"

And so, we headed over to the nearest stove. The initial rush had settled down, but there was still quite a crowd gathered around. When we went to get in line, though, someone called out to us from atop a nearby mat that had been laid down. "Why, if it isn't Asuta and Ai Fa!"

When I turned to look, I saw the members of the Rutim clan there, with Dan Rutim being the one who had spoken. It reminded me of when we had encountered them at the last festival of the hunt. The only differences were that Morun, Tsuvai, and Oura Rutim were there too, and that Mida Ruu had joined them as well.

"You're all here together, huh? How are you feeling, Ama Min Rutim?" I inquired.

"I'm doing just fine, and so is the child inside of me."

It had only been half a month or so since the festival of the hunt, so Ama Min Rutim didn't look all that different. Even so, seeing her sitting there beside Gazraan Rutim, radiating affection, was enough to cause my heart to flutter.

"Oh, and how is your leg doing, Dan Rutim?" was my next question.

"I've been able to run around in the forest again without any issues for the last few days! Whenever this break period ends, I should be able to go back to work no problem!"

It had been nearly half a month since the festival of the hunt, so their break period wouldn't last much longer. It had started with a

banquet, and it would end with one too. It had been a pretty incredible few weeks for the Ruu clans.

"That banquet attire looks wonderful on you, Ai Fa. I heard about it from Lala Ruu and the others, but I was very much looking forward to seeing it myself," Ama Min Rutim said.

With a nonchalant expression, my clan head brushed the comment off with an "Is that so?"

"Why don't you two take it easy with us?! Morun, could you go get some food?" Dan Rutim asked.

"Of course. I'll be back in a moment."

"Oh, but you must have a lot to talk about too, right, Morun Rutim?" I said. "I mean, this is the first time you've come back from the northern settlement in half a month or so."

"Not really. It hasn't been long enough for much to have changed. Besides, we'll have plenty of time to talk later," Morun Rutim replied with a smile, and then she headed off toward a stove.

We sat down on top of the cloth mat too, and Dan Rutim let out a hearty laugh.

"Ai Fa! You're dressed in banquet attire, but you're acting just the same as always!"

My clan head was sitting cross-legged with one knee raised. As Dan Rutim's laughter washed over her, she gave a curious tilt of her head. "No matter how I may be dressed, I am still me. I have no intention of changing my behavior."

"But sitting cross-legged in banquet attire just looks silly, don't you think? And it's technically against our customs for a woman to sit with her legs wide apart like that!"

"I don't really know how to reply when you try to bring up customs to a female hunter such as myself... Does it really look comical?"

"It does! Not that I would normally pay attention to that kind of thing!"

Ai Fa stopped and thought for a moment, then brought her raised knee down so she was in a more feminine posture with her legs out to one side.

"Yes, that's a much better pose for when you're in banquet

attire!”

“I see. Then I suppose I shall follow that custom, at least for tonight.”

She was being surprisingly docile. And honestly, I wasn’t sure I had ever seen her sit with her legs to the side like that. Together with her dazzling banquet attire, it was leaving me seriously flustered.

Since she had entrusted her sword to the care of the main house, she just looked like a beautiful woman. If you examined her appearance carefully, you’d be able to see that the muscles on her arms and stomach were much stronger than the average woman’s, but that most certainly didn’t mean that she was lacking in charm. Instead, she looked graceful in a way similar to a leopard or wildcat resting in the shade of a tree.

“Still, seeing you in banquet attire, Ai Fa, I can’t help but think back to the wedding between Gazraan and Ama Min,” Dan Rutim said. Then he turned to face Mida Ruu. “That was when you and those other two dumped that old giba corpse on the ground in the middle of our celebration, wasn’t it?! I got so mad that I could barely breathe!”

“Yeah... Sorry,” Mida Ruu said regretfully.

“You three did all kinds of stupid stuff when we weren’t around, huh? But I’m sure you only went because Diga and Doddo dragged you along with them, right?” Tsuvai Rutim commented, turning a prickly gaze toward Mida Ruu.

The large hunter’s cheeks began trembling sadly. “Yeah. They asked me to carry that giba all the way here. It was really hard work, because it was so heavy.”

“Working hard to do something bad is nothing to be proud of. I’m amazed you weren’t cut down just like that giba for doing something so barbaric at a Ruu banquet!” the young girl said.

“I know. I won’t do anything bad again.”

Dan Rutim then cut into their conversation with a hearty laugh. “There’s no need to get all worked up over something we’ve long since put behind us! Mida Ruu has already atoned for all his crimes, so there’s no need for him to apologize any further!”

"You're the one who brought this up, you know! I swear, you're such a bothersome old man!"

I didn't think I'd ever get bored of watching Dan and Tsuvai Rutim interact like that.

"By the way, Tsuvai Rutim, have you put any thought into our discussion about you helping to sell giba meat at the market in town?" I interjected, earning me a glare from the big-eyed little girl.

"Hmph! What's there to think about? It's not like I can refuse the work allotted to me."

"That's not true at all. If you don't want to do it, no one will force you to do so," Gazraan Rutim calmly chimed in.

However, his words only made the look on Tsuvai Rutim's face grow even more hostile. "If you leave it up to someone other than me, some crafty townsperson is probably going to swindle them! Seriously, why can't anyone keep track of money properly?!"

"Because it hasn't been necessary in the past. But if you provide lessons on how to do it, everyone should be able to gain that skill eventually."

Tsuvai Rutim went silent with a pout, so I added, "It would really help us out if you could do it. But we'd like you to teach people from other clans as well, so if you're worried about that—"

"What do you mean, worried? You think I'll get into arguments with them or something?"

"No, I wouldn't go that far, but it might be difficult for you to interact with people in that way when you don't know them very well, don't you think?"

"Hmph! They should be the ones worrying about that! No matter who I'm dealing with, it makes no difference on my end!"

"Yes, it's rare to find anyone as direct as Tsuvai! She can open up to anyone right away!" Dan Rutim remarked with another chuckle, patting Tsuvai Rutim's head with its onion-like bun.

"Stop touching me!" the girl shouted, but Dan Rutim's glove-like hand remained in place for a few moments longer.

The day after being given their clan names, Tsuvai and Oura Rutim had officially joined the main Rutim house. There had been an extra room available for them, since Morun Rutim had left, and Ama

Min Rutim was pregnant, so she needed to have women around. And besides, the members of the main house were quite fond of the two of them, Dan Rutim most of all.

"We're currently discussing which clans to task with the work. But we'll be counting on you once we figure that out, Tsuvai Rutim," I said, bringing the topic to a close just in time for Morun Rutim to return. She was holding some of the herb-grilled meat that was one of Reina Ruu's signature dishes. The aroma of the spices filled the air, seriously stimulating my appetite.

"Go ahead and eat as much as you'd like."

"Ah, thanks for the food."

Ai Fa and I went ahead and each started eating from our own plates. The dish contained giba meat and vegetables grilled with three different herbs. It was quite popular at the stalls, especially among easterners. There was plenty of aria, tino, and onda in it, and it had a powerful flavor that had become well-known for going great with fruit wine.

But when I took a bite of the rather familiar dish, I tilted my head with a "Huh?" It seemed to taste even better than the herb-grilled meat I remembered. To be specific, the sirloin and thigh meat seemed even juicier, and the flavor of the herbs seemed to stand out more strongly. "Did they use an oven to cook this meat?"

"I'm amazed you could figure that out from just one bite, Asuta. Still, I guess I shouldn't be surprised," Morun Rutim said.

"Ah, no, I was half guessing there, but I figured that might be the case based on how it was cooked through."

"You're right. They mentioned that they used an oven when I was getting this for you all. That pizza and gratin from before were also quite tasty, so maybe the northern clans should have ovens built as well." Morun Rutim smiled brightly at me, and then she turned toward Ai Fa. "What do you think? Is it to your tastes as well?"

"Indeed. I've liked this dish for some time, though. It isn't as spicy as it smells."

"Yeah. I really love it too."

When Morun Rutim was added to the mix, she really did a lot to make the atmosphere feel warmer and more relaxing. Mida Ruu and

Oura Rutim were also happily eating away. Even Tsuvai Rutim—despite the sour look on her face—and the elder Raa Rutim must have been feeling very much at ease. Personally, I adored the dynamic of the main Rutim house.

"Are you two still planning on walking around the stoves?" Dan Rutim asked.

"Yeah," I replied with a nod. "It's become something of a habit for us to start with a lap around the plaza. It also helps us run into lots of different people while we're here. Though honestly, I'd be perfectly happy to keep talking with all of you from the Rutim clan the whole time."

"Oh, I'm glad to hear that! You'll come back around later, won't you?"

"Yeah, for sure."

"In that case, it wouldn't do for us to monopolize your time! Go ahead and mingle as much as you like!"

With those words from Dan Rutim urging us onward, Ai Fa and I rose to our feet.

This momentous day was still only just getting started.

3

After saying farewell to the members of the main Rutim house, Ai Fa and I headed toward the stage where the bride and the groom were waiting.

It seemed that most people had already offered their blessings to the happy couple, as there weren't very many coming and going around the stage anymore. Granny Jiba, Rimee Ruu, and a bunch of others were eating atop another cloth mat spread out in front, so we said hi to them first, then started up the wooden stairs.

"Congratulations, Darmu and Sheera Ruu," I said.

Darmu Ruu simply gave me a "Mm-hmm," while Sheera Ruu smiled and replied with "Thank you." Seeing that joyful smile on her face was enough to almost make me tear up, but I somehow managed to restrain myself and smile back.

"I really am as happy about this wedding as I would be if it were for someone from my own family. I hope you two build a happy home together, Darmu and Sheera Ruu."

Once again, Darmu Ruu didn't say anything except "Of course." Then he glared at me as if remembering something. I wondered what in the world that was about and waited for the Ruu hunter to say something, but his mouth remained firmly shut.

"Thank you as well, Ai Fa. I'm so glad that we were able to invite the two of you here tonight," Sheera Ruu said, and Ai Fa couldn't stop herself from smiling.

"Sheera Ruu, I have not spoken with you all that much, but I feel truly glad to see you so happily wed."

"I very much appreciate it. It's true that even though I've seen you many times, we really haven't really interacted very often."

"Indeed. However, you have held my interest ever since the day of Gazraan and Ama Min Rutim's wedding. I have always felt that were I a man, I would wish to marry a woman like you."

"My," Sheera Ruu replied with a smile.

She didn't seem to be taking Ai Fa's comment too seriously, so I interjected from the side, "It's true. I've heard Ai Fa say that a bunch of times."

"You're overstating it. I've said it two or three times at most."

"Two or three times is plenty, isn't it? Besides, you don't say stuff like that about other women... Well, maybe you do about Ama Min Rutim?"

"My," Sheera Ruu repeated. But this time around, her eyes opened wide in surprise. "You really said such a thing, Ai Fa? I find that hard to imagine."

"But it is the truth. It is a crime to speak falsely, so I do not lie."

Sheera Ruu hung her head and brought her hands together in front of her chest. "I'm sorry... I feel like I'm going to cry a bit."

"If you start crying, then I'm sure I will too. This is a happy event, so try to hold it back, okay?" I joked.

"Right," Sheera Ruu replied with a smile.

After watching our brief exchange with a satisfied look, Ai Fa turned her gaze toward the groom.

"Darmu Ruu, there have most certainly been issues between us, but I consider them to be nothing more than incidental matters brought about by the Suun clan's wickedness. That's why as someone who's worked alongside you and the rest of the main Ruu house, I'm very happy that this day has arrived for you."

"You certainly are talkative today, Ai Fa," Darmu Ruu said with a sour look.

Ai Fa stared straight back at him. "I am simply conveying how I truly feel. And I hope that you will accept my blessing as well."

With that, Ai Fa pulled out an especially large giba tusk and added it to the woven basket sitting in front of the bride and groom. I followed suit, placing a large horn Ai Fa had given me beside her offering. All of their relatives must have already offered up their blessings, and seeing that pile of over a hundred horns and tusks was really something.

"At any rate, it must be quite difficult for you to have to wait so long to eat. You haven't had anything since midday, right?" I asked.

"That's right. But I feel so emotional that I may not be able to get anything down anyway. Still, I'm looking forward to the celebratory food Reina Ruu prepared," Sheera Ruu said.

"Hmm?" I turned to look at Darmu Ruu, only for him to send a frightening glare back at me.

Oh, so he still hasn't told Sheera Ruu that I made a celebratory dish too, huh? I guess he must be worried about me running my mouth. I nodded stealthily at him so that Sheera Ruu wouldn't notice, and Darmu Ruu gave a little snort, which I took to mean that he was satisfied.

"Well then, we'll see you later. I look forward to talking to you again once the wedding ritual is finished," I finally said.

"Of course. Thank you," Sheera Ruu replied.

And so, Ai Fa and I turned and stepped away.

When we reached the bottom of the steps, however, Ai Fa suddenly found herself getting pounced on by Rimee Ruu, who had apparently been waiting for us. Thanks to her banquet attire, the young girl looked even more adorable than usual. The red mizora flower adorning her poofy hair seemed especially bright today.

"Welcome back! Let's eat some food together, Ai Fa and Asuta!"

"Ah, sorry. We'd like to make a lap around the plaza first, but we can take our time talking after that, okay?"

"Oh, I see. All right then! Well, I'll be with Granny Jiba, so make sure you come back and see us!" Rimee Ruu said, reluctantly giving Ai Fa's torso one more tight squeeze before heading back over to Granny Jiba.

As we walked toward the nearest stove, I turned to look at my clan head and said, "Sorry, did you want to stay with them? We can still turn around and go back if you want."

"You needn't worry about that. I'll be sleeping next to them tonight anyway, after all."

"Got it. In that case, let's continue with our lap. I'd like to make it all the way around before the ritual starts if we can."

When we arrived at the stove, we lined up behind the crowd gathered there. A few moments later, though, the person in front of us turned around and decided to start a conversation when he saw who we were.

"Oh, if it isn't Asuta and Ai Fa. Whoa, you're really dressed up, Ai Fa!" I had pretty much already guessed based on his blond hair, but it was none other than Rau Lea speaking to us and looking my clan head up and down with his blue eyes. "Yup, you really are a beauty! It sure is strange for such a pretty woman to make a living as a hunter!"

"You really have no care at all for the customs of the forest's edge, do you, Rau Lea?"

Despite how she had mostly grown accustomed to having other people praise her, Ai Fa still furrowed her brow pretty deeply at that. It went against the accepted customs of the people of the forest's edge to needlessly praise the appearance of someone of the opposite gender. But Rau Lea didn't seem discouraged in the least and just kept on staring at Ai Fa.

"You wore banquet attire back at Gazraan Rutim's wedding too, didn't you? But I only saw you from a distance that time. Seeing you like this up close, though, I really am impressed."

"Like I said, you shouldn't go around needlessly praising women's

__”

“And yet, Yamiru is every bit your equal! If you think I’m lying, then why don’t you try comparing yourself to her?!” Rau Lea declared, grabbing the woman next to him by the arm and turning her around to face us.

Sure enough, it was Yamiru Lea. She was also clad in banquet attire. She already wore a lot of accessories normally, but she looked totally different dressed like that. Plus, this was my first time ever seeing her in such an outfit.

Just like Ai Fa and the other women, the clothing around her chest and waist was even more colorful than what she usually wore, and she had on an iridescent veil and shawl. Not only that, but her figure was on par with Vina Ruu’s, so in that outfit, she really was impressively beautiful.

After a quick glance directed at me and Ai Fa, Yamiru Lea turned to look at Rau Lea, then harshly pinched the back of the hand that was grabbing her arm.

“That hurt! What was that for, Yamiru?!”

“Touching a woman you are not wed to is an even more serious infraction than praising one’s appearance. As Ai Fa said, you really should restrain yourself more.”

“We’re both members of the Lea, so why worry about it?”

“It would be one thing if we had always lived together from a young age, but since that is not the case, boundaries are important.”

These two really were the same as always.

As he rubbed the back of his hand, Rau Lea looked between Yamiru Lea and Ai Fa. “Well, whatever. It really is quite a sight, seeing you two beside one another! You aren’t similar at all, but each of you are beautiful in your own way! Just looking at you is enough to fill one’s heart with joy! Isn’t that right, Asuta?”

“I’d prefer it if you would avoid asking my opinion about that kind of thing.”

“But why? No matter how hard you’ve fallen for Ai Fa, surely you cannot deny Yamiru’s beauty.”

“I’m telling you, I have no desire to join you in breaking traditions.”

Dan Rutim and Rau Lea were a lot alike in terms of how frank and open they were, but they were totally different when it came to how they treated the opposite sex. Dan Rutim was earnest and direct, but he was also a middle-aged man who was still faithful to his late wife, so he never did anything even remotely close to the kind of leering Rau Lea indulged in.

Rau Lea, on the other hand, was around the same age as me and Ai Fa, and he was also unmarried. He also was quite taken with both Ai Fa and Yamiru Lea, so he tended to stir things up at times like these.

"Well, whatever. We're starving, so we don't have time to bother with you," I told him, somewhat harshly.

"Don't be so cold! We can deal with our hunger together!" Rau Lea said with an earnest grin. Despite his frank manner of speaking, he was a somewhat androgynous, good-looking man. He was also skilled enough as a hunter to make it into the Ruu's top eight, so anyone other than Ai Fa and Yamiru Lea would probably have a hard time turning him down if he asked to marry them.

At any rate, we got back in line and were eventually given some of the food being served at the stove. It was some kind of soup, which seemed to have a tau oil base, and the stock had some wonderful depth to it.

"Ah, this is good. I'm sure they must've used both giba and kimyuus bones when preparing the stock," I noted.

"Yeah!" Rau Lea agreed. "I certainly don't have any complaints! I've never bought kimyuus bones, but maybe the Lea clan should start buying them as well!"

"Bones aren't goods that are sold. The inns have just been giving us the bones they don't have a use for. If you ask the Ruu clan, I'm sure they'll share some with you," I replied, then I tilted my head. "But I'm pretty sure only the Ruu clan chefs know how to handle bones at this point. You haven't had a proper lesson on that yet, have you, Yamiru Lea?"

"I haven't," she replied.

Rau Lea raised an eyebrow. "Why not? You head to the Ruu settlement pretty much every single day, don't you, Yamiru?! So why

haven’t you ever studied how to work with bones?”

“Because there isn’t enough time,” I explained, as Yamiru Lea gave an annoyed shrug. “It takes half a day to prepare stock with bones, so our afternoon study sessions aren’t long enough.”

“Hmm...” Rau Lea grumbled, holding a wooden dish in his hand. “But the Ruu women learned how to do it, didn’t they? So how did that work?”

“Mikel and Myme are more knowledgeable about working with bones than I am, so Reina Ruu and the others visited their house in the mornings and studied with them. I’ve gone there a number of times myself on our days off from running the stalls.”

“Then what if you visit the Ruu settlement in the morning too, Yamiru?” Rau Lea suggested. “Hmm, but if we do that, I’ll have even less time to see you.”

“I can’t say that makes any real difference to me,” Yamiru Lea said.

“That can’t be true! Our break period will be over soon, and then you’ll be back to only seeing me early in the morning and after the sun sets.”

“Again, that doesn’t really matter to me,” Yamiru Lea repeated.

Rau Lea pouted and turned toward me when he heard that. “We’ve spent so much time together, but she still acts like this around me! Don’t you think she should be showing me a bit more affection at this point, Asuta?”

“W-Well, I have trouble answering that, honestly.”

“Here we are at a wedding banquet, but she doesn’t look excited in the least! Don’t you think you should consider getting married yourself soon, Yamiru?” Rau Lea whined.

“Aren’t you the very person hindering that, my dear clan head?” Yamiru Lea countered.

“As if I could accept you taking a husband from another clan! Why does everyone keep on making light of me?!”

“I have nothing to say about that either,” she said.

Apparently, a lot of people in the Lea clan strongly believed that Rau Lea’s wife should be chosen carefully, as he was the head of the main house. Normally, he would have had the final word on the

matter as the clan head, but since he was still young, he wasn't able to disregard the opinions of the branch houses. And considering Rau Lea's wild side, it was important to keep a tight hold on the reins with him.

"But if we both want to be wed, nobody would be able to object, right? The reason they aren't giving their consent is because I'm the only one talking about it!"

"Yes, I'm sure you're right."

"Then if you ask to marry me, it will settle everything!"

"And why is it that I should wish to marry you?"

"Because I'm a fine hunter and *I* want to marry *you*!" Rau Lea said while puffing out his chest proudly, earning a deep sigh from Yamiru Lea.

"I'm sorry, but as long as the people around us object, I do not share that desire."

"But why?! It's not like you have some other guy you like, right?"

"The Lea are one of the strongest clans under the Ruu, alongside the Rutim, so becoming the wife of the clan head is not something to be done lightly."

"Ah, but—"

"Also, I don't have much confidence that I'd be able to find happiness with someone as noisy as you for a husband."

Now it was Rau Lea's turn to sigh. He turned toward me once more, his eyes looking like those of a hunting dog who'd had his food snatched away. "This is how things always are with her. What exactly am I supposed to do?"

I decided to deflect. "I think you should consult someone more experienced about that. I can't imagine I'd be any help."

"But you've tamed Ai Fa, and she's every bit as stubborn as Yamiru!"

"What do you mean, tamed?!" Ai Fa snapped, her voice dripping with resentment as she thrust her spoon at Rau Lea. Whether it was from anger or embarrassment, her cheeks had turned slightly red.

"A-Anyway, this is supposed to be a happy day, so you should probably just try to enjoy it too, Rau Lea," I quickly said.

"The fact that this is a wedding banquet is the reason my

thoughts keep drifting in this direction. I mean, I can hardly believe that Darmu Ruu is finally getting married."

"Darmu Ruu will be twenty soon, right? You're still eighteen, Rau Lea. You don't have to be in such a rush," was the most I managed to say.

However, Rau Lea was still frowning discontentedly. "*I* may only be eighteen, but Yamiru will be twenty-two soon, so *she* should hurry up and get married already."



“That’s none of your business,” Yamiru Lea fired back with a scary look.

That kind of comment was probably really hurting Rau Lea’s chances. It seemed to me that he’d be a lot more appealing if he would just take the time to figure out how to be a bit more delicate.

“W-Well, we’ll see you later, since we’re making a loop around the plaza.”

Having finished our helpings of the wonderful soup dish, we said farewell to Rau and Yamiru Lea and got going.

“Phew. That was a surprise. I know Rau Lea’s always teasing Yamiru Lea, but it’s unusual for him to be so direct about wanting to marry her, isn’t it?”

“As he himself said, being at this wedding banquet seems to have set his feelings aflame,” Ai Fa replied as we weaved through the crowd.

When we made it to the next stove, we found another man and woman awaiting us there: Shumiral and Vina Ruu.

“Ah, h-hello. Uhm, y-you see...” Vina Ruu trailed off as she tried to greet us with a red face. She was holding a plate of delicious-looking food in her hands.

“Huh? What is it?” I asked.

“W-Well, Uru Lea Ririn was with us until just a short while ago...but she wanted to look in on the young children staying at the branch house, so she left us alone here.”

This wasn’t really a situation that required any sort of explanation. Still, Vina Ruu seemed like she would probably combust if I tried to press her on the matter, so I simply said, “Ah, I see. Anyway, this really is a wonderful banquet. Are you enjoying yourself too, Shumiral?”

“Yes. This is my first, Ruu clan, wedding banquet, so I am, quite moved,” Shumiral said, also with a plate in his hand. He had participated in one of the subordinate clan’s weddings before, but only a fraction of their total number of relatives had been there, so this was a much bigger event. He looked really happy, judging from his narrowed eyes.

It was Shumiral’s wish to one day marry Vina Ruu, and since she

was the oldest daughter of the main house, their wedding would also be held here at the Ruu plaza. Just picturing the two of them up there on the stage in wedding clothes made me feel all warm inside.

"Ai Fa, you are wearing, banquet attire, are you not?" Shumiral asked, causing my clan head to narrow one of her eyes.

"I am, as you can clearly see. Do you have some sort of issue with that, Shumiral of the Ririn clan?"

"No. I simply thought, you look beautiful. Of course, I believe that, Vina Ruu, is prettier still."

When Vina Ruu heard that, it wasn't just her face that went red. Her skin flushed all the way down her neck, and she even started squirming a bit.

"Wh-Wh-What are you going on about? It's against the customs of the forest's edge for you to needlessly praise a woman's appearance, you know."

"Ah... It is forbidden, to lie, so I suppressed, my shame, and spoke, my true feelings. The laws of, the forest's edge, are quite complex."

Vina Ruu looked like she was at a loss for words. It wouldn't have been surprising if she had squatted down to make herself as small as possible at any moment. Ai Fa, however, remained perfectly calm as she turned away from the two of them and toward me.

"Asuta, I'm feeling hungry."

"Oh, yeah, right. Um, what exactly is being served here?"

"Deep-fried giba meat. It is, very delicious."

Like Shumiral had said, there was giba meat being fried on the stove and giving off a sizzling sound. The dish was being cooked on the spot rather than being prepared in advance. Also, it was a simpler form of deep-fried giba than our usual giba cutlets. The meat was thinner, and it was only coated in egg and fuwano flour before being swiftly fried. It wasn't a dish that the Ruu clan usually served.

"Oh, Asuta and Ai Fa! Go ahead and have some!"

"Hey there, Lala Ruu. So you're in charge of the frying here? That's a pretty big job."

"Hee hee! I can handle this without Reina around, no problem

now!” Lala Ruu bragged, dipping some thin meat into the heated lard. There was also a big bowl of vegetable salad—mostly shredded tino—for serving with the meat.

“That’s impressive. Still, I’m surprised you went with deep-fried giba instead of giba cutlets.”

“Well, yeah. It takes a lot of time to prepare giba cutlets, but with this recipe, we can serve it right after it’s done frying! And, actually, now that I think about it, don’t you sell this at the stalls too?”

“That’s right. And it’s true that when you can serve them fresh, they’re every bit as tasty as giba cutlets prepared in advance.”

It was exciting seeing stuff like this happen when there was a celebratory banquet I wasn’t involved in planning. And it was also an idea I definitely wanted to keep in mind for our own festival of the hunt.

“Here you go. Take care not to get burned, okay?”

“Sure, thanks.”

As I bit into the freshly fried giba meat, an exquisite savory flavor filled my mouth. The egg and fuwano coating also had shredded gyama dried milk mixed into it. The richness of the melted dried milk created a really unique texture, and it was incredibly delicious.

“This is super good. Gyama dried milk is a favorite of yours too, isn’t it, Shumiral?”

“Yes. It reminds me, of my former, home country,” Shumiral replied, and then he quietly turned toward Vina Ruu. “But now, I have something, more important to me, than my old home.”

“Do you really need to keep saying stuff like that all the time?” she said.

“I said it, because I felt, that it was necessary. I am enduring, the embarrassment.”

“If it’s that embarrassing, then you just shouldn’t say it.”

Despite what he had said, Shumiral looked perfectly calm. Vina Ruu, on the other hand, seemed to be writhing from the embarrassment.

While I did my best to hide how happy that made me, Ai Fa whispered into my ear, “It’s honestly hard to tell which of them is interested in marrying the other. They’re a rather unusual pair.”

"Yeah, but they're a really good match."

We moved on shortly after that, before Vina Ruu's endurance could be completely depleted. I got the sense that the couple up on the stage would be coming down soon, and yet we had still only sampled three dishes so far.

"Okay, let's hit up that stove next."

As we were approaching our next destination, though, we were intercepted by a pair of people, one large and one small, and I found them to be such a strange duo that my eyes widened a bit as I greeted them. "Oh, Deem Rutim and Ji Maam?"

I hadn't interacted with the former much, and the latter hardly at all. Ji Maam was the tallest man in all of the Ruu clans, and on top of being huge, his body rippled with muscles like boulders. He was the biggest hunter that I knew, aside from Mida Ruu.

Meanwhile, Deem Rutim was a hunter in training who was still only thirteen years old. He was shorter and more slender than I was, and despite the courageous expression he wore, he still had a childish face. He had come along with us on the trip to Dabagg. Both of them looked pretty serious as they stood before us, and there was tension building in the air.

"Ai Fa and Asuta of the Fa clan, we have something to discuss with you."

"Yes? What is it, exactly?" Ai Fa asked calmly.

Ji Maam towered over us as he stared back at her, his eyes blazing brightly.

"We heard that you aren't going to be participating in Ruu festivals of the hunt from now on. To avoid the contest of strength. Is that correct?"

"Indeed. I am not one of your relatives, so I believe it is not appropriate for me to be a part of your contest of strength. I know that you wish to compete against me again, Ji Maam, and I am truly sorry that I will not be able to do so."

Ji Maam had challenged Ai Fa twice and lost both times. His furrowed brow tensed up even more. "So it really is true. You won't be participating in our festival of the hunt any longer because I was so persistent about hounding you to take part in the contest of

strength?”

“Hmm? What do you mean?”

“I apologize. I simply wished to test my strength against a powerful hunter such as you.” Ji Maam hung his head and slumped his shoulders, which made Ai Fa look rather troubled.

And then, Deem Rutim stepped forward with a brooding expression. “I’ve also heard that you won’t be coming any more so that inexperienced men such as myself won’t get upset about an outsider beating members of our clans. So I am sorry as well.”

“What are you two going on about? There’s no reason for you to be bowing your heads to me,” Ai Fa said.

“But when I heard you fought a nearly equal match with Dan Rutim, I really ran my mouth about it. If you aren’t able to take part in our festivals of the hunt anymore because of narrow-minded people like me, then I can’t help but feel some responsibility.”

“No, I’m at fault for being so stubborn about asking to face her in the contest of strength. The responsibility is mine,” Ji Maam argued.

“I’m more responsible than you, Ji Maam.”

“Hold on. You two seem to be misunderstanding something,” Ai Fa interrupted. “Ji Maam, you aren’t the only one who wanted me to participate in the contest of strength, and you, Deem Rutim, were not the only person displeased about my victories, so neither of you have any need to do this.”

“But that doesn’t change how responsible I am for this.”

“Yeah. That goes for me too. I can’t just forget about this without at least bowing my head.”

Ai Fa stared at the two of them for a long moment, then calmly stated, “I understand. I am grateful that you see me as such a strong hunter, Ji Maam, and I acknowledge your reasons for not liking to have outsiders intrude on your contests, Deem Rutim. However, the fact of the matter is, I have decided that it is correct and proper for festivals of the hunt to be for relatives only. So as I said, I do not believe there is any need for you to bow your heads to me.”

“But—”

“You needn’t argue further. We may not be related, but I still

consider the two of you to be friends, and our friendship shall remain even if I don't take part in your festivals of the hunt. But still, it makes me glad to know that you have been thinking of us," Ai Fa said with a faint smile and a very calm expression. "Especially you, Deem Rutim. I had thought that you hated me."

"No, I didn't hate you. I just didn't see your match with Dan Rutim with my own eyes, so I had trouble believing that you were actually that skilled." Only around seventy percent of the Ruu relatives had been present for the festival of the hunt where Ai Fa and Dan Rutim had faced off. The young Deem Rutim must not have been one of them. "But I realized how wrong I was at our last festival of the hunt. Since you were able to fight an even match with Jiza Ruu that time, then it's obvious that you must be about as strong as Dan Rutim as well."

"I lost to both Dan Rutim and Jiza Ruu, though. Neither of those fights should have threatened the pride of the Ruu clans."

"Indeed, it would be ridiculous to see either of those fights as a threat to our pride! It's just that I was an immature, unreasonable child before," Deem Rutim replied, biting down on his lip in frustration.

Ai Fa slowly shook her head. "You are still only thirteen years old, correct, Deem Rutim? I believe I was even more immature than you were at that age. As long as a hunter can gain the strength needed to stand on their own by the age of fifteen, that is enough."

"But—"

"Perhaps it is true that a full-fledged hunter would not have been displeased, no matter how many victories I had in a Ruu contest of strength. And I'm sure you will not let such things upset you from now on. But the Ruu clans are going to continue to raise and train new hunters. Because of that, there will always be a danger of offending those young hunters if I participate, like I offended you before. That is why I decided to rethink my actions. It is all out of a desire to form a proper bond with the Ruu clans," Ai Fa said in a calm yet solemn tone. "Allow me to say this once more... Even if I do not participate in your festivals of the hunt, the bond between the Ruu and Fa remains unchanged. And I am happy to be able to

build bridges not only with the Ruu but with members of the subordinate clans such as yourselves. So rather than bowing your heads, why not continue to strengthen our bonds as friends instead? That is what I wish for, as the head of the Fa clan."

Deem Rutim slumped his shoulders dejectedly, but then he looked up at Ai Fa, now with far less tension visible on his face. "Ai Fa, you really are a fine person. I've felt that way ever since I was able to visit the town of Dabagg with you."

"I see. Well, I am eighteen years old now. I can no longer afford to be immature at my age."

"You're also incredibly skilled, to be able to throw a man as huge as Ji Maam despite your small figure. I wish to become as fine of a hunter as you are."

"Hey, don't go using me as an example like that," Ji Maam complained. Then he scratched his head. It seemed that the two of them were back to normal now—their usual brazen and confident selves. "I understand your point now, Ai Fa. Talking about this further would just be wasting your time. At any rate, I truly am impressed by your magnanimity, Ai Fa."

"I'm glad that you understand."

"Naturally. Still, you've beaten me twice, and I can't simply let that go. I would like to challenge you again sometime outside of a festival of the hunt."

"I will gladly take you on when I have strength to spare. You're not the sort of hunter I can defeat at my leisure, after all."

"Hmph! I'll have to start by making the top eight among the Ruu clans! My challenge to you shall wait till after that!" And with that, Ji Maam's massive frame turned the other way and he rejoined the crowd.

Deem Rutim, meanwhile, stared at my clan head with a complex mix of competitiveness and admiration. "It will be a few years yet until I can challenge you. Please don't perish out in the forest before then, Ai Fa."

"Of course. And the same to you."

Deem Rutim nodded, and then he headed off in a different direction than Ji Maam.

As she watched him go, Ai Fa gave a sigh. “I’m feeling tired after that drawn-out conversation. They shouldn’t be getting so worked up at a wedding banquet.”

“That just goes to show how responsible they felt about how things turned out. And that’s something to be grateful for in its own way, don’t you think?”

“I suppose so,” Ai Fa replied with a nod, right before someone new approached us from the direction Deem Rutim had gone.

“Ah, I finally found you, Asuta. The wedding ceremony will start shortly, so let’s get the food ready.” It was none other than Reina Ruu, also dressed in banquet attire. It seemed that we had just about arrived at the next phase of the banquet while we had been talking to Deem Rutim and Ji Maam.

“Okay. I’m going to take off for a bit, Ai Fa.”

“Understood. I’ll be waiting with Granny Jiba and Rimee Ruu.”

“Got it!” I replied, and then I rushed off.

My heart started pounding uncontrollably in my chest. At last, Sheera and Darmu Ruu would be officially bound together. But I had to save my tears for later, as I had an important job to take care of first.

4

And then, the moment arrived. The bride and groom descended from atop the stage, escorted by their mothers Mia Lea and Tari Ruu. With a hundred of their relatives watching, they stepped in front of the ritual flame, where Granny Jiba and Vina Ruu awaited them.

The pair knelt down before the Ruu elder, and then each placed one of their hands on their own shoulder, the right hand for Darmu Ruu and the left for Sheera Ruu.

Mia Lea and Tari Ruu circled around to the opposite side of the ritual flame, where they then tossed a handful of herbs into the fire. They were different from any of the ones we used in cooking, and gave off a mysterious smell. Those herbs grew in the forest of

Morga, and were not permitted to be used outside of wedding ceremonies.

Granny Jiba removed the woven crowns from atop the pair's heads, then passed them through the smoke, which had taken on the fragrance of the herbs. Then, she placed the crown Darmu Ruu had been wearing atop Sheera Ruu's head, and the one Sheera Ruu had worn on Darmu Ruu.

This was the third time I had watched one of these wedding ceremonies, but this time, it was Sheera and Darmu Ruu being wed. It felt as if I were watching some sort of happy dream.

The people gathered all around the ritual flame watched the ceremony without so much as blinking. And then, Granny Jiba's solemn voice filled the air.

"I offer these blessings... Tonight, Sheera Ruu of the Ruu clan becomes the wife of Darmu Ruu of the same clan. With this, the bonds within the Ruu shall deepen, bringing about greater strength and prosperity for our forest's edge..."

With that, Granny Jiba removed a giba horn and tusk from the front of her necklace, and offered one to Darmu Ruu and the other to Sheera Ruu.

Then, holding the offerings to their chests, the two of them declared their vows.

"I, Darmu Ruu, bestow Sheera Ruu upon the forest."

"I, Sheera Ruu, bestow Darmu Ruu upon the forest."

Cheers erupted from the crowd, and I hit my limit. As I stared at the two of them standing before the ritual flame, the tears started flowing. They were now married, and the two of them would live together, starting a new household with one another. Eventually, they would probably have a child. And then, that untalkative and unfriendly man with more than a little rage inside of him, Darmu Ruu, would become a father. And the reserved, dainty woman who was kinder than anyone I knew, Sheera Ruu, would be a mother.

I thought back to the times when Darmu Ruu would forcefully glare at me, or when Sheera Ruu would offer me a weak smile. Or when Darmu Ruu would fall asleep and let his guard down, or when Sheera Ruu would give her all at work.

A dead drunk Darmu Ruu, and Sheera Ruu looking after him with a motherly smile. Darmu Ruu casually praising Sheera Ruu's cooking, causing the girl's face to go bright red. The two of them clad in the banquet clothes of the castle town. Sheera Ruu confessing her feelings, and Darmu Ruu accepting them... I had more memories of the two of them together than I could count.

My relationship with Darmu Ruu had never exactly been all that great...but he had been acting out of genuine concern for Ai Fa's future. And he had eventually entrusted her safety to me, and had started walking his own path once more. In a way, he had left a stronger impression on me than anyone else.

As for Sheera Ruu, she had put a tremendous amount of effort into helping me out, even compared to the other Ruu chefs. Before Reina Ruu had started working at the stalls, she had been the most important person on our team, other than me, and she had kept assisting me on numerous occasions as we got bigger and bigger. Without Sheera Ruu, there was no way our business in the post town would have developed as well as it had.

And now, the two of them were joined together for life. A brilliant warmth filled me up inside as I wished them endless happiness.

Gazraan and Ama Min Rutim had gotten married only a few days after I had met them. And as for Cheem and Ia Fou Sudra, I wasn't exactly that close to either of them. That was why this wedding was making me so much more emotional.

I clapped hard for them with the rest of the crowd, warm droplets trailing down my face and falling to my chest, but I knew I wouldn't be able to wipe them all away at the rate they were coming, so I gave up on even trying.

While everyone else was applauding, a woman from a Ruu branch house stepped forward with a large plate. Vina Ruu accepted it, and then held it out toward the newlyweds. Atop it sat the celebratory dishes that Reina Ruu and I had prepared for them.

The dish I had made was crispy roast giba, which was something I had basically never served anyone before. Though I had made roast giba with the skin still attached before, we hadn't had ovens at the time, so I had needed to employ some tricks with a pot in order

to get it to at least look the part. This time, though, I had used an oven in order to get it closer to what I was envisioning. My aim had been to create something similar to Chinese crispy pork belly, with a nice crust of skin on it.

After giving a thick cut of rib meat a hot saltwater bath, I had rubbed a variety of herbs and spices into it, and then opened up a lot of holes in the skin using a metal skewer. Next, I had slowly baked it in the oven. It sounded easy enough, but managing the heat level was actually quite difficult. It was a dish I had intended to unveil at the festival of the hunt, but I hadn't been able to master it in time. However, in the half a month or so that had passed since then, I had finally been able to get it figured out.

The final version shed just the right amount of fat as it baked, leaving it nice and juicy on the inside. And as for the skin, it had a nice crispy crunch to it. Since I had seasoned it in advance, there also wasn't any need for additional flavoring afterward. Through a lot of trial and error with using varying amounts of salt, pico leaves, sugar, tau oil, mamaria vinegar, myamuu, keru root, panam honey, and numerous herbs I didn't even know the names of, I was able to arrive at a flavor I could feel satisfied with.

The meat was also plenty thick, so I'd imagine even Darmu Ruu with his preference for tough food wouldn't complain. A long time back, I had presented Donda Ruu with roast giba to celebrate his victory in their contest of strength, and today I had essentially prepared an improved version of that dish.

Reina Ruu, meanwhile, had gone with giba cutlets, freshly fried right before the ceremony in order to give her precious brother and Sheera Ruu the best possible experience. She hadn't done anything extra with them, though. She had simply chosen a dish that was incredibly well-liked by the people of the forest's edge for this celebration. Perhaps that was yet another reason they had gone with deep-fried giba for the general banquet.

Sheera Ruu began cutting into the food with a meat knife handed to her by a woman from a branch house. As she was doing so, Darmu Ruu suddenly brought his mouth close to his bride's ear. Her hands suddenly came to a stop, and she gave him a surprised look.

And then, she glanced around the crowd as if searching for someone, which made me smile, knowing who that someone was.

You didn't wait till just now to tell her that I was the one who made that, did you, Darmu Ruu? You've been up there on the stage alone all this time. You had plenty of chances to tell her. Still, considering Darmu Ruu's nature, I wasn't surprised. He was curt, not especially open, and quite reserved. Thinking about that was causing even more warmth to fill my eyes.

Vina Ruu then shouted something out in confusion, which seemed to make Sheera Ruu regain her composure and start cutting into the food once more. Then, the newlyweds each took a bite of the crispy roast giba and giba cutlets...and cheers erupted throughout the plaza yet again.

"Darmu and Sheera Ruu look so happy," I faintly heard Granny Tito Min say through the cheers. Rimee Ruu was clapping her hands together with a big smile on her face. Everyone was celebrating the new bride and groom with all their might.

"The wedding vows have been exchanged! As of today, Darmu Ruu, second son of the main Ruu house, has become the head of a new branch house, while Sheera Ruu has become his wife!" Donda Ruu shouted out over the roaring cheers.

There was even more of a commotion in response, and folks all around lifted up containers of fruit wine.

"That's enough now," a voice said as my vision was suddenly blocked. Ai Fa had reached over to me from the side and started roughly wiping my face with a hand towel. "You were crying like a baby. You're the only one who got so out of sorts, Asuta."

"That's not true," I replied, my voice going all nasally. And yet, the hand towel was so drenched that it seemed like it would need to be wrung out.

"It's all finished now! So let's eat some food too!" Rimee Ruu exclaimed as she clung to Ai Fa's waist. Though we had still only gone around to half of the stoves, I wanted to just let these positive feelings wash over me for a while, so I went ahead and sat down.

Darmu and Sheera Ruu were being swarmed by a crowd of relatives, with women and children running all about to bring them

plates of food and bottles of fruit wine. The two of them would finally be able to enjoy as much banquet food as they wished.

I'll have to wait until later to congratulate them, I thought to myself right before Granny Jiba returned, accompanied by Mia Lea and Tari Ruu. And there were two other figures who split off from the crowd and approached us.

"We've finally run into you, Asuta. Sorry it took so long to say hello."

It was none other than Shin and Lala Ruu. The former—the one who had spoken—wore the same composed expression as always, while the latter had a big earnest grin on her face.

"Hey there, Shin Ruu. It's been a great day, hasn't it?"

"Indeed. Without you, Sheera... Or Sheera Ruu, I should say, would not have been able to claim this happiness for herself," the Ruu hunter replied, kneeling down on top of the cloth mat we were sitting on and bowing his head.

Lala Ruu sat down beside him. "That's enough stuffy talk! And by the way, Shin Ruu here was bawling his eyes out a moment ago!"

"Hey, Lala Ruu..."

"Don't worry, I won't tell Ludo. All it means is that you're super happy!" Lala Ruu said with a joyful grin.

Shin Ruu brushed his hair aside as his cheeks went a bit red. "At any rate, I'm very grateful to you, Asuta. It's ultimately thanks to you that Sheera Ruu was able to gain so much strength."

"I was nothing but the impetus. Everyone Sheera Ruu has been interacting with all this time has helped her grow," I earnestly replied.

Shin Ruu's eyes narrowed even further. Then he smiled and remarked, "Of course."

"Papa Donda must be really relieved too. Darmu's about to turn twenty, after all!"

"Huh? You're still referring to Darmu Ruu like that even after he's married, Lala Ruu?" Shin Ruu asked.

"Hmm? We're siblings, so it's fine! Honestly, I don't think you should have to force yourself to do that, Shin Ruu."

"But it's technically our custom to do so. And as the head of my

house, I want to do things properly."

Even if he changed how he referred to her, Shin Ruu's feelings toward his sister would stay exactly the same. As the young hunter spoke solemnly about what he saw as his duty, his mother watched him with an affectionate gaze.

Lala Ruu then decided to change the subject. "Okay, let's eat too! If we wait around too long, it'll be time to dance!"

Everyone picked up their plates. Since the elder was sitting with us, we were getting lots of food delivered right to our mat, which let us simply enjoy some small talk and bask in the energy filling the plaza.

Someone new approached us around ten minutes or so later. Lala Ruu turned to see who it was, and when she did, her eyes started sparkling. "Congratulations, Darmu! Is Sheera Ruu not with you?"

"Yeah. Now that the ceremony is done, there's no need for us to stay constantly beside one another."

I quickly glanced over at the spot where Sheera Ruu had settled down, and saw that a large number of young women were gathered there.

Everyone then started offering Darmu Ruu their congratulations, starting with Rimee Ruu. He only gave brief responses like "Yeah" and "Right" in return.

"Congratulations, Darmu Ruu. I hope that we'll keep on getting along from here on out," I said after everyone else.

However, my words seemed to make an intense light appear in the groom's eyes. "Asuta, I have something to discuss with you."

"What, another secret chat? You're always sneaking around and whispering with Asuta, Darmu!" Lala Ruu complained.

"Quiet, you," Darmu Ruu bluntly replied. His tone and attitude sort of reminded me of Donda Ruu. "It won't take long. And I'd like you to come along too, Ai Fa."

"Understood," Ai Fa replied while rising to her feet, and I followed alongside her.

The three of us stepped away from the cloth mat, heading toward a dimly lit spot without people around in front of an empty house, at which point Darmu Ruu stopped and turned toward us.

"Firstly, I want to thank you for preparing the celebratory food. It made Sheera really happy too."

Hearing him refer to her like that was enough to make me get all emotional again. I felt as if my voice might crack if I tried to speak, so I just silently nodded my head in response.

"There's one additional matter I must discuss with the two of you. It involves the agreement I once made with you, Asuta."

"An agreement with Asuta?" Ai Fa said suspiciously.

"Yeah," Darmu Ruu replied with a nod, his face unusually calm. "Some time ago, I pressured Asuta into accepting an agreement...that I would take his life if you perished out in the forest, Ai Fa."

"What did you just say?" my clan head questioned, her eyes now blazing bright.

Rather than letting himself get fired up in response, though, Darmu Ruu simply stared back at her. "I believed that you should live as a woman, and I thought that Asuta was the only one that you would listen to, so I told him that he should convince you to quit being a hunter. He refused. Asuta insisted that he wished to protect not only your life but your feelings and pride as well." That conversation had also occurred at a celebratory banquet, the first Ruu festival of the hunt Ai Fa and I had participated in. After he had lost to Ai Fa in the contest of strength, Darmu Ruu had pulled me aside, his eyes blazing intensely. "I couldn't accept that. And so, I insisted that if you were to die out in the forest, I would take his life."

"I see... I wasn't aware that the two of you had such a concerning discussion," Ai Fa said, shooting me a glare out of the corner of her eye.

I tried to use my expression to say "Sorry" to her as best I could.

"So, what now? This is certainly not something that I can ignore," she continued.

"That's why I asked the two of you to come over here. Asuta, I forced that agreement upon you that night, so allow me to revoke it here and now," Darmu Ruu declared, his tone still perfectly calm. "My feelings have changed a great deal since that night. And

besides, I had no right to interfere with the affairs of the Fa clan to begin with. What's more, I have come to believe that your perspective was correct, not mine. I didn't want Ai Fa to perish, but my desire came from nothing more than my own obsession with her."

Neither of us said anything in response.

"In the end, I believe that even if you had perished out in the forest at some point before now, Ai Fa, I would not have taken Asuta's life regardless. I felt I should make all of this clear." At that point, Darmu Ruu went silent for a bit, as if catching his breath. He was a quiet person most of the time, so it was rare to hear him talk this much. "Tonight, the forest has granted me Sheera. It would be deeply wrong of me to obsess over another woman now, and even more so to harm Asuta because of such feelings. Were I to do something so foolish, it would plunge Sheera into the depths of despair, which would be unforgivable of me."

"That much should be obvious," Ai Fa angrily retorted.

"Yeah," Darmu Ruu replied with a nod. "It's only natural. I simply wanted to tell the two of you that perfectly obvious fact. The incorrect notions I had on that night were based on what I honestly felt at the time, so I felt it necessary to explicitly revoke that agreement before the two of you and the mother forest," Darmu Ruu said, and then he turned his gaze directly at me. "I, Darmu Ruu of the Ruu clan, cast aside the agreement made with Asuta of the Fa clan, as my words that night were mistaken. I swear to never again meddle in the affairs of the Fa."

"Got it... I accept that statement," I replied, feeling a tightness in my chest.

What was Darmu Ruu feeling, though? We stood there silently for a while, staring into one another's eyes. However, that came to a sudden end when Ai Fa pinched my cheek.

"I can't believe you hid something this important from me. What in the world were you thinking?"

"Ow, ow, ow! Sorry! I apologize for keeping secrets from you!"

"An apology alone isn't enough, which is why I'm punishing you like this."

It seemed that Ai Fa was seriously angry, as she wasn't showing my cheek any mercy at all.

"You can let him go now. I already said that I have no intention of following through on that foolish agreement," Darmu Ruu eventually chimed in, and Ai Fa finally released my cheek. I rubbed it while tearing up a bit as he calmly continued, "Also...I'm sure that Asuta simply didn't want you to hate me, Ai Fa. That's just the kind of guy he is."

"Hmph! You've certainly started speaking with more wisdom since getting married!" Ai Fa said in a huff, crossing her arms.

And then, someone else approached. It appeared to be Sheera Ruu.

"Um, is everything all right? I thought that I heard someone calling out in pain," she said.

Forgetting the pain in my cheek, I quickly shot her a smile. "We're fine. And sorry; I should have been the one to come to you."

"Oh, no. I'd like to thank you, actually. I very much appreciated that wonderful dish you made, Asuta," Sheera Ruu said, coming over to stand beside her husband.

I wasn't sure what sort of expression I should have been making to show how I felt at that moment. Even though they had just been sitting up on the stage beside one another, the atmosphere surrounding them instantly shifted. It wasn't like the two of them were leaning against one another or anything. They were simply standing there side by side at a normal distance. But even so, it was impossible to see them as anything but a married couple.

Sheera Ruu gave her usual gentle smile, wrapped up in the iridescent shine of her veil. Darmu Ruu tilted his head ever so slightly, quietly looking over at his wife. That alone was enough to show me how much they trusted and adored one another.

"I never would've expected that I'd be eating your cooking tonight, Asuta. I felt like the luckiest woman in the world. I mean it. Thank you so very much."

"Ah, no, you should be thanking Darmu Ruu instead."

"I've already told Darmu that more than enough times," Sheera Ruu replied with a bashful smile.

In the past, Darmu Ruu probably would have snorted, “Hmph!” and turned away. But now, he just kept on calmly looking at his wife.

“I shall never forget this joyous night my whole life long,” Sheera Ruu continued. “And my heart will always remember how incredibly precious you are to me, Asuta and Ai Fa.”

“I don’t believe I’ve been any help to you at all, Sheera Ruu,” Ai Fa calmly replied.

“You’re wrong,” Sheera Ruu said with a shake of her head. “All of the people I’ve encountered have helped me get to this happy day in one way or another. And the time when I met Asuta and the time when Darmu met you, Ai Fa, have had the greatest impact on me by far. Through our interactions with the Fa, we have found ourselves anew. That is what I believe,” Sheera Ruu said, looking up at Darmu Ruu. He had been staring at his wife that whole time, so their gazes now finally met.

With tears in her eyes, Sheera Ruu stared up at Darmu Ruu, and he looked back at her with an incredibly gentle gaze. It almost made me start crying again.

“Well then, let’s head back over to the others. Have you finished with your business, Darmu?” Sheera Ruu asked.

“Ah, no... I still have one last thing to take care of.” Darmu Ruu’s gaze once again shifted over to me. Then he reached into his ceremonial hunter’s cloak with his right hand as he approached me. “Asuta, this is for you.”

“Huh?” I questioned with a tilt of my head as Darmu Ruu held out his hand. In it, he held a single fine giba tusk.

“This is for the celebratory dish you made. We both enjoyed it very much.”

“Th-Thank you,” I said, accepting his offering while feeling a little awestruck.

There were ten horns and tusks in total hanging from my neck. They had been given to me by all of the members of the main Ruu house old enough to do so, aside from Darmu and Jiza Ruu. And now, after nearly a year had passed, that number had increased to eleven.

“The Fa clan has defied countless customs of the forest’s edge.

But I acknowledge that you were always in the right. I am truly grateful for your actions that have brought Sheera and me such joy, and I grant you my blessing." And then, Darmu Ruu smiled openly at me for the first time ever. "Now you just have Jiza left. Of course, he's a real tough one."

A few of my tears fell on the tusk from Darmu Ruu that I held in my hands.

I was never going to forget this day either, and especially not this very moment.

On the fourteenth of the yellow month, I felt an unimaginable joy filling me all the way down to my very core.



Intermezzo: Eventually, This Night Will Also...

The leading clan head of the forest's edge Donda Ruu and his wife Mia Lea Ruu were watching the wedding of their second son Darmu Ruu. The ceremony had concluded without any issues, and the newlyweds were being congratulated by their multitude of relatives now that they were free to move about. Donda Ruu and his wife sat alone atop a cloth, observing it all from a distance.

"My. It's not only Jiza now; Darmu has finally found himself a wife too. You must be relieved as well that he managed to get married before the age of twenty, right?" Mia Lea Ruu said with a smile.

"Hmph," Donda Ruu snorted in response. "Jiza's the one who probably feels relieved, not me. He's much more concerned about the honor and prestige of the clan."

"Well, that's certainly true. But I'm sure that's because the current clan head is such a fine man that he feels the need to make a strong showing of himself as your successor."

"Enough of that," Donda Ruu said, taking a swig of fruit wine.

Mia Lea Ruu stared happily over at the newlyweds and chuckled. "It may also be the blood of the previous clan head in him. That man might have looked every bit as fierce as you, but he was surprisingly meticulous and thoughtful."

"Hmph. Sorry for being such a reckless, thoughtless man."

"I didn't say that. Still...Darmu really is exactly like you used to be when you were young."

"Unlike me, though, he picked a rather reserved woman for his wife."

"Oh? Are you getting back at me for before? Well, sorry for not being a reserved woman," Mia Lea Ruu replied with a bright smile, turning toward her husband. "It's been quite a while since we've

spoken like this, hasn't it? You rarely ever let your guard down, even at home."

"Hmph. As if I could just casually chat with anyone, surrounded by a crowd like that."

"Yes, but it's truly wonderful to see all seven of our children growing up so well. Still, I have no idea when the next wedding is going to be."

With the sour look still on his face, Donda Ruu stared at his grinning wife, causing her to smile all the more brightly as she continued.

"With Vina, a lot depends on Shumiral. Reina is fixated on her cooking, and Ludo is still rather childish. The next one to get married might actually be Lala, even though she hasn't even turned fifteen yet."

"Hmph. I've got no interest in discussing anything that far off."

"But eventually, everyone will leave the house like Darmu is doing. It feels a bit lonesome, doesn't it?"

Donda Ruu adjusted his sitting posture atop the cloth, shooting Mia Lea Ruu an intense look. "By then, Jiza and Sati Lea will likely have had two or three more kids. If that happens, you'll probably be complaining that it's too noisy, not too lonesome."

"My, I must've looked terribly sad to you just now. I'm sorry for worrying you."

"Never mind. I was simply chiding someone for having foolish concerns," Donda Ruu grumbled, earning another chuckle from his wife.

"Still, in another ten years, even Rimee, our youngest, will be over twenty. I wonder what the forest's edge will look like then. I can't help but feel excited, trying to imagine it."

"What, we're talking ten years in the future now? I'm feeling less and less interested."

As Donda Ruu stared off into the distance, Mia Lea Ruu took her husband's robust hand and placed her own on top of it.

"Even among the Ruu, there aren't many men who live past the age of fifty. But you'll be just fine. You're such a strong hunter, and now we have the hunting dogs. I hope that you'll have a long life so

you can watch over our adorable children and grandchildren."

"Hmph. And then I'll be the elder, huh?"

"Oh, no, I'm sure Jiba will make it to the age of a hundred just fine. If you're aiming for the title of elder, then you'll need to live for at least another thirty or forty years."

"I'm not aiming for anything," Donda Ruu said, finally breaking out in an awkward grin of his own.

When she saw her beloved husband smiling for the first time in a while, Mia Lea Ruu's own smile grew even happier.

But then someone shouted "Hey!" causing Donda Ruu to go right back to his usual frown and pull back his hand. "You two are Darmu Ruu's parents! What are you two doing hiding away in a place like this?! He's going to leave home tonight, so you should make sure to talk to him as much as you can!" It was the former Rutim clan head, Dan Rutim. He was holding a container of fruit wine in his right hand and a plate of food in his left, and there was a childish grin on his huge face.

When she saw him, Mia Lea Ruu laughed and said, "Oh my. You seem quite fired up, Dan Rutim. Then again, you seem to enjoy any banquet you attend."

"True! But today, we're celebrating your child getting wed, so I feel as happy as you do!" Dan Rutim set his wine container down on the blanket, then picked up some rib meat from his plate and took a hearty bite. "Ah, delicious! So, what are you two up to? Shouldn't you be talking with Darmu Ruu?"

"We've talked with him quite a bit over the last several days, and even if he's leaving home, he'll still be here at the Ruu settlement, so we felt it best to let our other relatives have this time with him," Mia Lea Ruu explained.

"Oh, I see! When my second son got married and left home, it made me so sad that I could hardly bear it! But I guess you two should just handle things however you like!"

"That's exactly what we're doing. You really don't ever change, no matter how old you get, do you, Dan Rutim?"

"Wah ha ha! I'm still me, so of course I'm not going to change!" Dan Rutim remarked with a hearty laugh, and then he looked back

and forth between Donda and Mia Lea Ruu. “Still, with all three of us gathered together, I can’t help but remember that one night!”

“Which night?”

“The night when I first met you, Mia Lea Ruu! You know, the night of Donda Ruu’s younger brother’s wedding!”

“What an ancient bit of history you’re bringing up. Clan head, which do you prefer, talking about the far-off future or the distant past?” Mia Lea Ruu asked teasingly, causing Donda Ruu to turn away with a frown.

Dan Rutim nodded. “Yeah, you were acting the exact same way that night as well, Donda Ruu! But I was really impressed by how you asked Mia Lea Ruu to marry you!”

“You sure are noisy. Do you want me to kick you in that bloated stomach of yours and send you flying?”

“Wah ha ha! Today’s a day for enjoying delicious food, not contests of strength!” Dan Rutim replied, breaking out in an even wider grin. “Anyway, it’s quite an amusing coincidence that both that night and this one were the weddings of the second son of the main Ruu house! Even more so, considering how Darmu Ruu is just like you when you were younger!”

“Ah, that’s true. And the three of us were also watching the excitement in the plaza from a distance back then too,” Mia Lea Ruu said with a nostalgic smile. “It’s hard to believe that more than twenty years have passed since then. Twenty years from now, will Jiza and Darmu’s children be getting married, I wonder?”

“Yeah, and Gazraan and Ama Min’s children too! And then they’ll be the ones to carve a path forward for the forest’s edge!” Dan Rutim remarked triumphantly, thrusting a picked-clean rib bone toward the sky. “I’m sure by then things will be even more lively at the forest’s edge than they are now! We should follow our elder’s example and watch over them for a long time to come!”

“We’ve actually been discussing exactly that,” Mia Lea Ruu said.

The three of them turned their gazes toward the plaza at the same time, as if they had planned it out in advance.

Darmu and Sheera Ruu were standing together in their banquet attire, still surrounded by a huge crowd of their relatives. Alongside

the ritual flame, everyone's excitement and energy easily pushed back the silence of the night.

In the past year, the forest's edge had undergone some remarkable changes. However, a great deal still carried on unchanged from generations past. It was the duty of the people born to this age to carry the proper teachings forward, and to revise the ones that were mistaken.

"If we find ourselves watching over our darling grandchildren getting married twenty years from now, will we think back on this night as a precious memory too, I wonder?" Mia Lea Ruu whispered after staring out at the plaza for a while. Then, she turned toward Donda Ruu and Dan Rutim with an incredibly happy look in her eyes. "If that time comes, I would love for the three of us to talk again. Please continue living for a long time yet, my clan head and Dan Rutim."

Dan Rutim gave an energetic "Of course!" Donda Ruu remained silent, but his blue eyes were shining every bit as brightly as Mia Lea Ruu's and Dan Rutim's.

Group Performance: Two People on a Rainy Day

1

Roughly three months before Darmu and Sheera Ruu's wedding, when Genos was in the midst of the rainy season at the start of the brown month, Shumiral woke up feeling dull pain in various places, and having difficulty breathing. But also, he found the beloved girl he had been dreaming of right there before his eyes, leaving him rather confused.

Am I still dreaming?

Vina Ruu was sitting beside him. A faint bit of morning sunlight streamed in through the window, beautifully reflecting off of her hair. She was using one of her hands to fiddle with her other wrist at the moment, so she must not have realized that Shumiral was awake.

On her wrist, she was wearing a gleaming bracelet meant to ward off disaster, a gift Shumiral had once given her. Her fingers ran along the small stones as she gave a listless sigh. With her long eyelashes, she had a beautiful profile.

By the standards of beauty in Sym, her face was a bit too plump. But even so, Shumiral still found it dazzling. Regardless of the structure of her face or the presence or absence of fat, the shine in her eyes, her expression, and the feelings she elicited in him all caused him to find Vina Ruu absolutely beautiful.

As thoughts like those wandered through his mind, Vina Ruu casually turned toward him. Her slightly drooping eyes then suddenly shot wide open—yet another expression that Shumiral found quite charming.

"How long have you been awake?" she asked.

"I just, woke up," Shumiral replied. However, doing so caused a

throbbing pain to crop up deep in his chest. He furrowed his brow, which made Vina Ruu lean in with a worried expression.

"You don't have to force yourself to speak. Should I fetch you some romu leaves?"

"No. It is dangerous, to take too many, romu leaves."

"Then why don't you drink some water? You've been sweating quite a lot, so you must be feeling terribly parched."

"Yes. Thank you."

Shumiral turned on his side and tried to sit up, but that caused another stabbing pain in his chest, so it seemed he couldn't even handle that much movement. It felt as if burning coals had been shoved into his rib cage.

Yesterday, Shumiral had been injured while out hunting giba. They had come across a starving giba and everyone had tried to retreat up into the trees, but he had gotten hurt shielding a Ririn hunter who had been charged at by the beast after failing to escape. Fortunately, its tusks and horns hadn't pierced his body, but he had still been struck head-on, which had been enough to crack his ribs. Even so, the Ririn clan head Giran Ririn had said that he hadn't broken any bones.

After being carried back to the Ririn settlement, some of the medicine that he himself had brought there had been applied to his injuries, and then bandages had been wrapped around his chest. The Ririn had provided the pain-relieving romu leaves themselves, though. After taking them last night, he had fallen into a deep sleep. And now, he was finally awake again.

Vina Ruu stood up and drew some water from a jug into a dish, but then she directed a very concerned look at Shumiral. "Can you still not move? Uru Lea Ririn and the others have already left to handle their morning chores."

"I cannot. My apologies, but could you, lend me a hand?"

Vina Ruu's eyebrows drooped. She appeared to be quite troubled, but before long, she looked up resolutely, set the dish on the floor, and held out her arm toward Shumiral. After grasping her slender hand, he somehow managed to sit up. The strength she possessed far exceeded his expectations.

Shumiral was still in pain, but it was nothing he couldn't cope with, and he managed to get his breathing under control as well. Once he did, Vina Ruu leaned in from the side and brought the plate in her hands to his mouth. He drank just a bit of the cold water it held, but even that was enough to cause intense pain to lance through his chest once again.

"You can take your time, but please drink a little more. You didn't eat yesterday, so if you don't drink at least some water, your body will give out on you."

"Of course. Thank you, Vina Ruu."

This was the first time Shumiral had ever felt her so close to him.

It was currently the rainy season, so Vina Ruu was wearing a long-sleeved overcoat as well as a long skirt. Seeing her dressed like that was rather novel for him, and he found the look quite charming. He continued to stare at her for a long moment, which quickly made her cheeks turn red.

"Could you please not stare at people's faces so intently? Do you have some sort of issue with me?"

"No. I just, found it strange, to see you here. I thought, we said farewell, last evening."

Vina Ruu had visited the Ririn settlement along with Asuta and several others the previous evening. However, it wasn't like they had come to see Shumiral. They'd had business at the Sauti settlement and had simply happened to stop by on the way back. He had taken the romu leaves after they had departed, and that was pretty much the last thing he remembered.

Vina Ruu glared at Shumiral, still blushing quite strongly. "I'm the reason you're staying with the Ririn clan in the first place, so it's only natural for me to lend them my aid, isn't it? I don't see why anyone would take issue with that."

"So did you, stay here, last night?"

"Hmph... You were asleep the whole time, so there was nothing for me to do. The clan head Giran Ririn was the one who stayed by your side through the night." Naturally, it wasn't permitted for someone of the opposite sex who wasn't even family to sleep in the same room as him. The people of the forest's edge lived under

stricter rules than the townsfolk. “At daybreak, Giran Ririn returned to his bedroom, and the other women went off to do the washing.”

“I see. I am grateful, Vina Ruu.”

“As I just explained, I haven’t done anything to help yet.”

“No. You sat me up, and gave me water, which was, a great help.”

With an angry look on her red face, Vina Ruu thrust the dish out toward him again. “I told you, don’t look at me like that! Just drink some water already!”

What sort of look did she mean, exactly?

Well, whatever she meant, all that Shumiral could feel in his chest right then was joy over getting an opportunity to talk to Vina Ruu for the first time in a while.

2

“We’re off. Make sure not to push yourself too hard, Shumiral,” Giran Ririn told the injured man a few hours after Shumiral had awoken, when the sun was about to hit its peak and he was about to head out into the forest along with the branch family hunters and the clan’s dogs.

Shumiral had taught them plenty about how to use the dogs by that point, so they would have no difficulty working with their animal comrades while he was absent. And fortunately, none of the dogs had been injured during the incident the previous day.

And so, the only ones left in the house were Shumiral, Vina Ruu, and Giran Ririn’s wife Uru Lea Ririn. The latter woman’s children were in the care of the branch houses. Shumiral continued to rest in the main hall like before, while the two women worked on tanning hides.

The man had recovered somewhat, so all he needed to do was let his body heal. However, he still couldn’t sit up on his own, which meant that he always had to have someone by his side. As he lay there atop the bedding, Shumiral observed the two women as they worked.

“The Ririn clan doesn’t have many members, so it’s a big help having you around, Vina Ruu,” Uru Lea Ririn said. She was a beautiful woman with auburn hair and pale blue eyes, who was so young that it was hard to imagine she was a mother of two, and she was as slender as the women of the grasslands. And on top of being pretty, she also had a strange, almost spirit-like aura about her.

“It’s only natural for the Ruu to lend aid to their subordinate clans. And as I’ve said again and again, I share some responsibility in the first place.”

“Oh, not at all. But I’m still very happy to welcome you into our home,” Uru Lea Ririn replied with a smile while applying some sort of sap to the back of a pelt. The way she was being so openly expressive made it seem as if she was probing Vina Ruu.

“Shifting topics, how old are you, Uru Lea Ririn? I can’t imagine you’re that much older than me.”

“You’re right. In fact, I just turned twenty-four.”

“Twenty-four. Then you were only seventeen or eighteen when you married into the Ririn clan, correct?”

“Yes, it’s been around six years now. How nostalgic.”

Having originally been a member of the Lea, her marrying Giran Ririn was what had made the Ririn a subordinate of the Ruu. In contrast to his wife, Giran Ririn was forty-two years old.

“Perhaps it isn’t proper to say this, but isn’t Giran Ririn old enough to be your father? Why did you decide to marry him?”

“It’s hard for me to say. But, well, Giran is a fine hunter, so I was quite honored to have a man like him ask to marry me.”

“I see... Yes, it’s certainly true that Giran Ririn is a fine hunter, but still...”

Vina Ruu seemed to be finding the conversation difficult to maintain. Shumiral felt kind of bad for her.

“Vina Ruu, I believe, I will, fall asleep shortly, so please, hold on, just a bit longer.”

“What exactly am I supposed to hold on for?” Vina Ruu asked in confusion.

“If I am asleep, you will then, be able to, talk freely, will you not?”

Vina Ruu's cheeks went a bit red again, then she raised an eyebrow and said, "You know that I came here to help nurse you back to health, don't you? So could you please not say things like that for no reason?"

"Of course. My apologies."

Shumiral had managed to eat a little after the sun had risen, and the romu leaves he had been given with his meal seemed to be working a bit. His head was getting a little fuzzy, and it felt like only a matter of time until he drifted off.

"Shumiral is a rather pleasant person, isn't he? It's only been half a month since he started living here, but the children and I all very much enjoy his presence," Uru Lea Ririn casually remarked, causing Vina Ruu to turn her way with a rather troubled look.

"Shumiral has been living here at the main house the whole time, hasn't he?"

"Yes. After all, it is our clan head Giran who must determine whether he will be granted the Ririn name."

"Our clan head hasn't been living with Mida, though."

"Mida's and Shumiral's situations are rather different, wouldn't you agree? And the main Ruu house has thirteen members, so I would imagine it would be difficult for them to add anyone new."

Uru Lea Ririn always seemed to have a tactful reply ready, no matter how birdbrained the things Vina Ruu said were. There were many calm and composed women at the forest's edge, but she was especially unshakable.

"You know, I have to say, I feel like you're as impressive as your husband, Uru Lea Ririn. I hadn't had many opportunities to speak with you in the past, so I never realized how remarkable you really are."

"Is that so? I don't consider myself to be particularly exceptional in any way."

"If that's true, then I'm utterly hopeless," Vina Ruu replied with a listless sigh.

She seemed to put herself down quite often, probably because she was something of an oddball for a person of the forest's edge. Or at least, that was how Shumiral saw it. In the past, she had

longed to see the outside world, which was highly unusual for one of her people. The people of the forest's edge lived with great pride, rooted in their strength and honesty. It was almost unthinkable for one of them to yearn for something outside the forest. Such feelings had likely led to Vina Ruu developing a strong sense of guilt, and that was why she was always saying those kinds of things.

Even so, you chose to live as a child of the forest, so there's no longer any need to feel ashamed, Shumiral thought to himself, but he wasn't able to voice the sentiment. Thanks to the romu leaves, he was drifting off to sleep and into the world of dreams as he stared at Vina Ruu's disheartened profile.

Shumiral next awoke around sunset. In fact, it looked like the sun was right on the verge of setting. It was raining outside, so a number of candles were lit there in the main hall, and the cute face of a young child was staring down at him from above.

"Ah, Shumiral's awake!" the child energetically called out. He was Giran and Uru Lea Ririn's first child, a four-year-old boy with a bright gaze that resembled his father's. "Hey! Don't touch Shumiral! He's hurt!" The boy rose in a fluster, then he leaped right over the bedridden hunter. His little sister had been trying to lay down on Shumiral from the other side. She was a precious, adorable girl who would soon be turning two.

When her brother grabbed her, the girl started squealing happily until their father approached them from behind.

"You two woke Shumiral up with all your noise, didn't you? I swear, what am I going to do with you?"

"No, we were quiet until he was awake!"

"Yes, he speaks, the truth," Shumiral added, causing Giran Ririn to break out in a wide grin.

"Well, dinner will be ready soon anyway, so it's fine. How's the pain in your chest?"

"I believe, it has settled down, a fair bit."

"Then you should eat as much as you can manage. Food and rest are the best things for healing wounds."

"Yes. I can feel, the hunger, in my stomach." He had fallen asleep

without eating anything last night, and this morning, he'd only had a bit of soup with finely diced meat and vegetables. Down below the throbbing pain in his chest, his stomach was noisily demanding a more proper meal.

"Uru Lea and Vina Ruu are working hard to prepare dinner now. Or, actually, it sounds like they just finished."

There was a knock on the door, and the two women entered, returning from the kitchen. Instantly, an exquisite aroma filled Shumiral's nostrils, and the young boy excitedly shouted, "Yay! That's giba curry, right?! Mama Uru Lea, you can make giba curry now?!"

"No. Vina Ruu prepared this using ingredients Asuta of the Fa clan delivered."

The two of them were carrying a pot, which they placed on the stove at the far end of the main hall. Despite the wooden board that had been placed on top of the pot as a lid, it was still giving off an intense aroma, as was normal for the giba curry Asuta had invented.

"We've got some other food to bring in as well, so hold on for just a little longer."

Beside the gently smiling Uru Lea Ririn, Vina Ruu was staring down at the ground for some reason, but she left so quickly that Shumiral was unable to ask why. With Giran Ririn's assistance, he was able to raise himself into a sitting position with his body leaning up against the wall.

Grinning widely, the boy cleared away the now-empty bedding, and with tottering steps, his younger sister started to follow after him, only for her father to scoop her up.

"Did Asuta, visit the Ririn clan, again today?"

"Yeah, he dropped by on his way to the Sauti settlement. It seems he's trying to come up with new dishes for the northerners to eat."

That was news to Shumiral. During this rainy season, a group of slaves from the north had been dispatched to carve a path through the forest's edge. Their meals were supposed to be prepared at the Sauti settlement, which was why Asuta was heading there.

"The leading clan head Dari Sauti was the one who asked Asuta

to help out. I don't know much about the situation, but I'm sure he has a proper reason for making that request."

Dari Sauti was one of the three leading clan heads of the forest's edge. Shumiral had only seen him a couple times, but he seemed to be a fine man worthy of his role.

Incidentally, Shumiral had only learned about the full sequence of events that had led to the current leading clan heads taking up their roles in place of the Suun clan after his arrival at the Ririn settlement. Of course, he had already known that the Suun clan had been deposed because they had committed a number of serious crimes—he *had* been staying in the post town when all of that had gone down, after all. Only after coming to live in the forest had he been told the full story. When he had learned that Asuta had been the one who revealed their crimes during the clan head meeting, he'd been incredibly shocked.

Well, he is a starless one, after all. Such people do not possess a star of their own, but greatly influence the stars of the people around them.

And now, Asuta was trying to help the northerners. Thinking about the kind of changes that might result from that was enough to cause Shumiral's heart to start beating a bit faster.

My fate shifted greatly after I met Asuta too. If he had not opened his stall in the post town and had Vina Ruu help him run it, I'm sure I never would've changed gods.

Even so, Shumiral's destiny remained his own. Even if meeting Asuta had changed its course, he was still the one who had to determine the right way to walk the path ahead of him.

"Sorry for the wait. Now, let's begin dinner."

A plate of giba curry was placed in front of Shumiral, rousing him from his deep thoughts with its intense aroma.

Giran Ririn gave the premeal chant, and his three family members and Vina Ruu repeated it.

As soon as that was done, his son excitedly exclaimed, "Yay! I love giba curry! When will you be able to make it, Mama Uru Lea?"

"Only Asuta of the Fa clan and members of the Ruu know how to make giba curry starting from the initial herbs. It's a dish that

requires a great deal of effort.”

As he listened to the mother and child conversing with each other, Shumiral picked up his plate. It was a dish from Asuta’s homeland, but it used six kinds of herbs from Sym. Just smelling it was enough to make his mouth water, and he felt like his stomach might let out a loud grumble at any moment.

“You must’ve had this before too, right, Shumiral?” Giran Ririn asked with a smile as he tore off a bit of poitan and dipped it in the giba curry.

Shumiral felt a little emotional as he replied, “Yes, but only once. The night that, I was accepted, as a person, of the forest’s edge.”

“Oh, right, the Ruu clan held a banquet then, didn’t they? Serving giba curry that night was really thoughtful of the Ruu women,” Giran Ririn said, but then he tilted his head confusedly. “But you were staying in the post town before that, right? You didn’t have an opportunity to try giba curry before that even once?”

“What do, you mean?”

“I mean, Asuta sells that dish to some inns, and I heard you were staying at one of them. Or am I remembering that wrong?”

Shumiral was more than a little surprised to hear him say that. “You know, of my activities, in town?”

“Well, in order to decide whether you should be given our clan name, I need to know everything I can about you, so I’ve been asking the Ruu and Rutim whatever questions I can think of whenever I visit them.”

Shumiral didn’t know how to respond to that. Giran Ririn’s words had thrown him off so much that his gaze ended up wandering until it met Vina Ruu’s. When it did, she went red and glared back at him as she asked, “What is it?”

Giba curry was sold both at the stalls in town and at The Sledgehammer where Shumiral had been staying, but Asuta had told Shumiral not to eat it. It had taken an incredible amount of willpower to sit beside his fellow members of the Silver Vase as they had enjoyed the dish. Shumiral had struggled against the temptation to try it for five whole days, wondering why Asuta had asked such a thing of him. Honestly, it had almost felt like torture.

The answer had come on the day that Shumiral had been permitted to become a person of the forest's edge. Donda Ruu had arranged a banquet, and giba curry had been served there. And when he had heard Ludo Ruu say "Vina is the one who made it," then he had finally understood. Asuta had wanted the first giba curry he tasted to be Vina Ruu's. Though the chef had not said so himself, that was the only thing that made sense.

Anyone born in the east would undoubtedly find giba curry to be more delicious than any other dish prepared using that kind of meat. In fact, giba curry was better than anything Shumiral had ever tasted back in his former homeland. And when he had heard that Vina Ruu had been the one who'd made it, an incredible sense of joy had washed over him. He was convinced that those five days of perseverance were a trial, and the happiness he had felt that day was his reward.

"So, you never got to have it at that inn?" Giran Ririn remarked with a smile before taking a swig of fruit wine. "Well, whatever. Just go ahead and eat up. If you let your giba curry go cold, that would be a real waste."

"Right," Shumiral replied, taking a bite of his meal. It was the first time in half a month that he was able to savor that wonderful flavor. The various flavors and aromas of the herbs came together in perfect harmony. Though Shumiral was well acquainted with all those tastes and smells as an easterner, eating them together as curry was like encountering them for the first time all over again. It was a rather strange experience.

The dish used finely minced giba rib meat, along with aria, chatchi, and nenon. At the Ruu settlement, all sorts of other vegetables had been added to it as well, but this giba curry seemed in no way inferior to the version he had tasted back on that night.

Dipping baked poitan into it before eating made both taste even better, which made Shumiral wonder if curry would also taste good mixed with the shaska that was a common staple food in Sym. Shaska tended to be much better when it was part of a dish, rather than when it was eaten on its own.

Shumiral sighed in satisfaction, and then he turned toward Vina

Ruu. “It was, very delicious. The flavor, was wonderful.”

“Oh, I see. Well, I guess you should be grateful to Asuta for delivering the curry base. That isn’t something I can make on my own.” Vina Ruu had been looking at Shumiral out of the corner of her eye the whole time, but now she turned away in a huff. The faint redness on the side of her face was terribly charming.

“Can only a small number of people among the Ruu make curry base?” Uru Lea Ririn asked in a reserved tone.

“That’s right,” Vina Ruu replied, brushing up her bangs. “It’s very difficult to remember how much of each herb you need, so only people who are incredibly passionate about cooking can learn it. Morun Rutim and Yamiru Lea often stop by the Ruu settlement after they finish their work, though, so I believe they know how to prepare it.”

“I see. So there *are* chefs among the subordinate clans who can make it on their own?”

“Yes. Oh, and most of the women living near the Fa house have probably learned how to do it too. They make the curry base used for business almost on a daily basis.”

“Must be nice! I hope everyone from the Ririn can learn to make it too!” the boy remarked with a big smile, giba curry all around his mouth.

As she wiped his mouth clean, Uru Lea Ririn smiled as well and said, “Indeed. I wonder if we should visit the Ruu settlement more frequently for lessons.”

“I’m sure you’ll be able to pick it up right away. But I just can’t manage it myself,” Vina Ruu replied, lightly biting down on her lip regretfully.

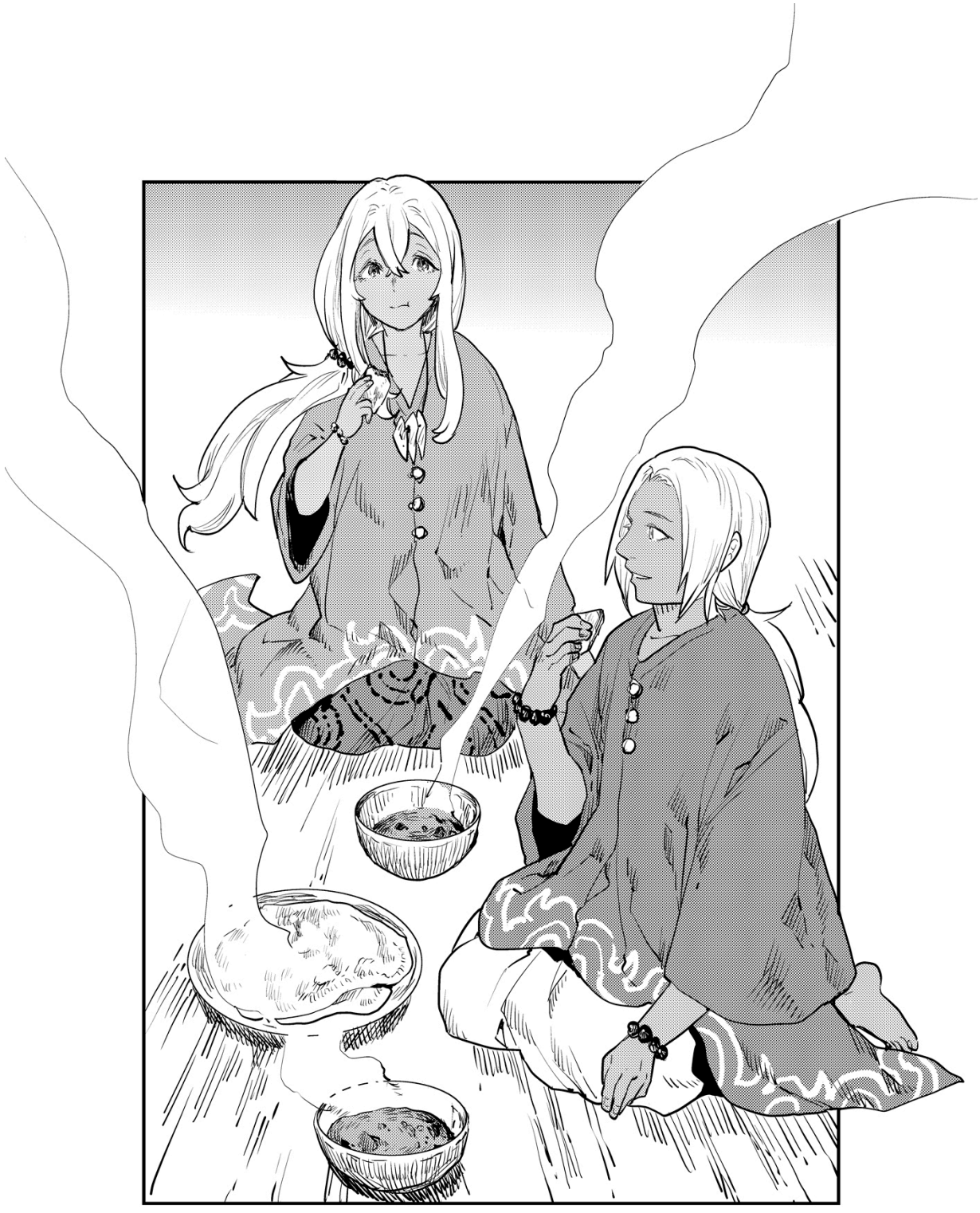
Uru Lea Ririn turned toward her with a small, ephemeral smile. “But you *were* able to use it to make this splendid giba curry, weren’t you, Vina Ruu? I believe that shows truly wonderful skill.”

“Not really. Anyone can make delicious giba curry as long as they have the base.”

“Is that so? But you taste tested it again and again to arrive at this flavor, didn’t you? You tried things like using karon milk or adding grated ramam... And through that process, you were able to

create something wonderful.”

Vina Ruu hung her head, hiding her facial expression. However, she looked even redder around her mouth than before. That adorable sight caused Shumiral to feel a tightness in his chest. He was sitting beside Vina Ruu, eating the giba curry that she had prepared, and his heart was overflowing with joy because of it.



"Vina Ruu, Shumiral, if the two of you were to get married, who exactly would marry into the other's clan?" Giran Ririn suddenly asked, causing Vina Ruu to look up with incredible speed.

"Wh-Wh-What are you saying? He still isn't even able to get married yet."

"That may not be an issue forever, so why not talk this over now?" Giran Ririn asked with a grin, not showing even the slightest hesitation about bringing the topic up. It was a very warm smile that made it feel as if he were wrapping everyone up in a hug. "Personally, I'd like to welcome Vina Ruu into the Ririn clan. It might be a bit arrogant to ask the oldest daughter of the main house of our parent clan to do so, but they have three fine men in that house already, so Vina Ruu's child would be really unlikely to end up as clan head, which is why I'd like to do things the other way around."

"L-Like I said..."

"Then Shumiral can become the head of a Ririn branch house, but we'll be able to eat dinner together like we're doing tonight for a while."

Vina Ruu leaned her back against the wall, looking exhausted.

Seeing that, Uru Lea Ririn spoke up, saying, "Clan head, I believe your words just now were a bit lacking in consideration. The two of them are still determining how they feel about one another, after all."

"Oh yeah? They look like a really good pairing to me, though."

"No matter how things look from the outside, what's important is their own feelings, isn't it?" With that, Uru Lea Ririn once again offered Vina Ruu an otherworldly smile. "Vina Ruu, you can take your time figuring out how you feel. There will surely be some time yet until Shumiral is granted the Ririn name."

Vina Ruu continued to lean against the wall, offering no response, with the young children staring at her curiously. And then, the young woman directed a reproachful look at Shumiral.

"I'm amazed you can make a face like that, like it's someone else's problem."

"My apologies. My skin, is dark enough, that it doesn't, change all that much, in color." Shumiral placed his plate of giba curry down

and bowed his head. “But my cheeks, feel quite hot. I am surely, just as embarrassed, as you are.”

Vina Ruu raised her hand and said “Ugh.” Her face was now bright red, but rather than hitting Shumiral, she instead clung to the wall once more.

Shumiral found that sight to be adorable as well. The evening was turning out to be a very enjoyable one for him.

3

The following day, the fifth of the brown month, was another wonderfully fulfilling one for Shumiral, despite how restricted he was. His body was steadily recovering. He still needed help to stand and walk around, but as long as he took it easy, he was no longer getting hit with bouts of intense pain. And as of last night, he had completely stopped taking the pain-numbing romu leaves. But still, all of his time was spent either sleeping or sitting around, and he wasn’t able to help out with work around the house. It was painful, having to rest all day with nothing to do while the men were out hunting giba. And since it was the rainy season, the lighting inside the house was dim and it was quite cold, making everything feel rather gloomy. And yet, Shumiral still felt fulfilled, thanks to the fact that Vina Ruu was there by his side.

Vina Ruu remained close to him at all times, even when Uru Lea Ririn stepped away. That was why she was at the Ririn house, after all. Of course, even if they were a subordinate clan, it was still far from normal for someone to stay at another family’s house for several days in a row here at the forest’s edge.

But Vina Ruu had volunteered to do so willingly, and Donda Ruu had accepted her request. Though the people of the forest’s edge followed strict laws and customs, they apparently found it important to consider what was reasonable and what compassion demanded at times like these. That was exactly why Shumiral had found himself so drawn to them. And above all else, Shumiral was overjoyed that Vina Ruu had gone out of her way to make such a request.

Shumiral had pushed for his acceptance into the forest's edge essentially by himself. He adored Vina Ruu from the bottom of his heart and had given up his god and homeland because of that, but he had just been following his own desires when he did, so his actions hadn't been particularly praiseworthy or anything. On top of that, since Shumiral had been born in Sym, letting his emotions show felt shameful to him. He had discarded that custom alongside his homeland and was trying his best to become more emotionally open, but he was still rather maladroit at it. That made it quite difficult to convey how he felt to Vina Ruu.

In spite of all that, Vina Ruu was still staying here at the Ririn settlement for his sake. The fact that she was willing to take such a step was enough to fill Shumiral's heart with boundless joy. For the past month he had wanted to see her so badly he could hardly stand it, and now she was by his side from when he woke up in the morning to when he went to sleep at night. So yes, of course he was happy.

But that happiness was blown away shortly after the sun hit its peak. That was when the Ruu clan delivered the news that Asuta was suffering from Amusehorn's Breath.

"Asuta has caught Amusehorn's Breath? But isn't that illness only supposed to affect young children?" Uru Lea Ririn asked Lala Ruu, who had rushed over to Ririn settlement to deliver the news. The clan head's wife, Vina Ruu, and Shumiral had been together in the main Ririn house as usual when Lala Ruu had arrived.

"Yeah, but Asuta wasn't born on this continent, remember? So Granny Jiba said yesterday that he might still catch it even though he isn't a kid." Lala Ruu was standing in the entranceway, her rain gear dripping wet and an angry look on her face. It was probably taking everything she had for her to contain her fears and worries. "We had medicine prepared for him and were able to provide aid after he collapsed. Ai Fa is looking after him at the Fa house now. Things have been hectic this morning, though, so we haven't been able to send anyone to spread the news to our subordinate clans until now." After brushing off a raindrop running down her face that

seemed to be annoying her, Lala Ruu added, "I'm heading around to the Muufa and Maam in a wagon after this. If anybody wants to go to the Fa house, be ready to go by the time I make it back, okay?"

"Can we be of help to the Fa clan as well?"

"Well, the clans that live near them are assisting in any way they can right now, so we probably won't have anything to do. But I know a lot of people won't be able to stop worrying until they at least check in on him, yeah?" In all likelihood, she was one such person herself. But even so, Lala Ruu had a resolute light in her eyes, as strong as any man's would've been, despite how she was trembling with anxiety. "Anyway, that's what's going on! See you later, Vina!"

As Lala Ruu rushed out the front door, Uru Lea Ririn gave a deep sigh. "To think that Asuta would catch Amusehorn's Breath. I never imagined such a thing would be possible. Our elder certainly is wise."

The other two remained silent.

"You two have a close bond with Asuta, so you must be terribly concerned, right? I'm sure he will overcome this trial, but even so, I can't help but worry."

Naturally, the news had hit Shumiral hard enough to leave him feeling a little dizzy. Amusehorn's Breath was a trial that every person on the continent needed to overcome. Only those who did so were able to live as citizens of this land. Children who weren't strong enough had their souls returned to the gods then and there. It was a merciless form of selection from the gods that no one could escape, no matter which country they were born into. Shumiral himself had overcome it at the age of three.

I can't believe this is happening. So even one not born of this continent, a starless one, must still face Amusehorn's judgment? Shumiral bit his lip to stop himself from letting out an anguished wail. He was trying to show more emotion, but expressing that much pain and worry in front of others still felt wrong to him.

"Shumiral is still in no state to ride in a wagon, but what do you want to do, Vina Ruu?"

The Ruu girl slowly turned toward Uru Lea Ririn in response to the older woman's question. However, she didn't say anything.

"Only one of us needs to remain with Shumiral. You *can* leave his care to me so you can go see Asuta."

Vina Ruu still did not speak.

"It won't take all that long to check on him. So please, don't feel like you need to—"

"No," Vina Ruu finally replied, cutting Uru Lea Ririn off. "I'll remain here. You can go if you'd like."

"Huh? But... I certainly respect Asuta. However, I've only spoken with him a handful of times. Wouldn't it make a lot more sense for you to go?"

"You are the wife of the Ririn clan head, so I believe it is better for you to go. Giran Ririn is fairly close to Asuta as well, so I'm sure he will want to know how he is doing."

"Still..."

"Of course, it's up to you whether you go or not. But I will remain here either way." Vina Ruu was hanging her head, so it was impossible to see the expression on her face.

"I see," Uru Lea Ririn said, her brow furrowed with worry. "In that case, I will be the one to head to the Fa house. But are you certain that you're okay with this?"

"Yes. I'm sure there will be more than a few members of the Ruu clan going there, so I won't be needed."

A quarter hour later, Lala Ruu returned to the Ririn house. When she heard that Uru Lea Ririn would be coming along rather than Vina Ruu, a doubtful look crossed her face, but she didn't question her older sister about it.

"Got it. In that case, hop into the wagon. We'll be going to the Rutim settlement next before we head over to the Fa house," Lala Ruu said.

"Understood. Vina Ruu, please take care of Shumiral in the meantime."

And so, Shumiral and Vina Ruu were left alone together in the main hall. Vina Ruu was childishly cradling her knees and seemed to be trying not to look at him. After a few moments of weighty silence, though, Shumiral felt the need to say something.

"Vina Ruu, why didn't, you go to, the Fa house?"

He didn’t get a response from her.

“You don’t need, to worry, about me. There is no reason, for you, to remain here.”

“Just stop... I’m free to do what I please, aren’t I?” Vina Ruu muttered in an emotionless tone. This was the first time he had ever heard her talk like that.

“But I am worried, about Asuta. And I’m sure, you must be, even more worried, than I am. It is very possible, to lose one’s life, to Amusehorn’s Breath.”

“I said to stop. Is it really such a hassle having me here?”

“No. That is not what—”

“Then I’ll just leave. Do whatever you want all on your own.” Vina Ruu rose to her feet, swaying a bit as she did, and headed toward the entrance.

It was raining outside, and she didn’t have any rain gear on. Despite the pain he felt in his chest, Shumiral got up too, but Vina Ruu exited the house before he could stop her.

“Vina Ruu, please wait.”

Shumiral didn’t hesitate in the least. He also stepped outside and glanced all around. Vina Ruu was under a tree a short distance away, her back leaning up against it. Though he was barefoot, Shumiral approached her. The rain was fairly light, but it was still enough to soak his long-sleeved overcoat in no time at all.

“Vina Ruu, are you, all right?” Shumiral asked, causing her to turn toward him with a look of surprise.

“You dummy. Why did you come outside too? You’re injured, you know.”

“But I couldn’t, simply leave you be.”

Vina Ruu was also soaked. Her pale hair had lost its volume and was now clinging to her face and shoulders. The expression on her face was like that of a young child trying and failing to keep herself from sobbing.

“I apologize, for angering you, Vina Ruu. Please return, to the house.”

“You don’t have anything to apologize for.”

Perhaps Vina Ruu was crying already. Because of the rain falling

on her face, it was difficult to tell. Before long, though, she seemed to lose the will to hold herself back from clinging to Shumiral. Her trembling fingers grasped his shoulder, and she gently pressed her cheek against his injured chest.

"I really am terrible... No matter what I try to do, I keep upsetting the people around me."

"I do not, believe that."

"It's true... I never have any clue what the proper path forward is. And even when I think I'm doing what's right, it still causes issues. I'm sure I must have angered the mother forest."

"I do not, agree," Shumiral said, working up his resolve and placing his hands on Vina Ruu's shoulders.

Since it was the rainy season, she was also wearing a long-sleeved overcoat, but he could still feel her warmth through it.

"The forest of Morga, will never abandon, her children, as long as, they try to live, proper lives. If it were otherwise, I never would have, wished to become, one myself. If you are suffering, Vina Ruu, then I am sure, you are properly atoning."

"If I can overcome this heartache, will my sins be forgiven?"

"I do not know. But the forest, of Morga, will never abandon you."

Vina Ruu's fingers on Shumiral's shoulder clenched tighter. However, the sensation of her cheek on his chest remained quite gentle, showing that she was still being mindful of his wounds.

"I'm sorry. It isn't fair of me to unload all of my regrets on you like this."

"No. It makes me, feel happy."

Shumiral could feel her shoulders trembling weakly as he grasped them, but she didn't collapse, and didn't start weeping. Instead, she simply stepped back from him. Their hands remained on one another's shoulders, and they stared at each other up close.

"Even so, this isn't right. I have to overcome my sins on my own."

"Do you?"

"Yes... Otherwise, I... I'm sure I'll be abandoned by the forest too. And also...I won't be able to forgive myself either."

Though her eyes were wet with tears, Vina Ruu broke out in a smile. It was the most beautiful expression Shumiral had ever seen.

“I’m sorry. Let’s head back to the house. It would be awful if you got sick. We need to hurry and warm you up.”

“Right,” Shumiral nodded, releasing Vina Ruu’s shoulders. She did the same a moment later, lowering her hand to grasp Shumiral’s arm instead.

“Let’s go. Take care not to trip, okay?”

“I will.”

And so, the two of them returned to the house as the rain continued to fall around them.

4

It was now night. Shumiral’s condition hadn’t worsened from being out in the rain, so the entire family ate dinner together like they had the previous evening.

“I never would’ve thought that Asuta could catch Amusehorn’s Breath. I can’t even begin to guess what’s going to happen now.” Even the always boisterous Giran Ririn had a serious expression on his face. “Still, I’m sure Asuta will be able to overcome this trial. For now, though, all we can do is pray to the forest.”

“Yes. Since the neighboring clans are doing everything they can to support the Fa, I’m sure there’s nothing to worry about,” Uru Lea Ririn added.

The two young children were just enjoying their food. They didn’t seem to understand what was going on. The family’s dinner consisted of seasoned grilled giba meat, a vegetable stew containing tau oil, and a soup that used karon milk.

“Hey, is that giba curry stuff gone already?” Uru Lea Ririn’s young son asked.

“We still have enough ingredients left for several days, but it would be a waste to eat it all right away, wouldn’t it? That’s why I’m only going to make it every other day,” his mother replied with a gentle expression, stroking the little boy’s hair. His two-year-old little sister wasn’t able to eat most kinds of food yet, so she was chewing on baked poitan dipped in soup.

"I'll go check in on Asuta myself tomorrow morning. Are both wagons currently at the Ruu settlement?" Giran Ririn asked.

"Yes, though from what I've heard, the Rutim and Lea have bought new wagons for themselves recently, since they've had their own totos for a while."

"I see. I'd like us to have a wagon of our own someday. Ah, but we should get more hunting dogs first." The Ririn clan had caught a good number of giba earlier that day once again. Even though the rainy season made it harder to hunt, they were still having a lot of success thanks to the hunting dogs. "It'll probably be a few more days before you're good to ride in a wagon, Shumiral. And Asuta may be feeling better by then, since the fever you get from Amusehorn's Breath only lasts for around three days."

"Yes. I hope that, is the case."

"Well then, do you want to come along tomorrow too, Vina Ruu? You didn't go to the Fa house today, right?" Giran Ririn asked.

"No," Vina Ruu replied with a shake of her head. "I will refrain. I intend to visit the Fa house after Shumiral's wounds have healed and I've returned to the Ruu settlement."

"I see," the Ririn clan head said with a wide smile. "Well, it's not like paying him a visit will make him get better any faster. There's no need to force yourself to go. Just praying to the forest is plenty. No doubt almost all of our people will be doing the same, so I'm sure the mother forest will take notice."

According to Uru Lea Ririn, the news about Asuta's health had already spread throughout the forest's edge, so Giran Ririn's remark was probably correct. Surely even the clans who were opposed to the Fa's actions wouldn't wish for Asuta's death.

"Hey, what sort of person is Asuta of the Fa clan?" the young son of the Ririn asked no one in particular.

Shumiral had been eating soup, but the question left him feeling rather surprised. "You don't know, Asuta of the Fa clan?"

"No, not really. I've only seen him from really far away."

"Children under the age of five need to remain inside even during banquets, so he hasn't had many opportunities to interact with Asuta," Uru Lea Ririn explained. "We did sneak him some banquet

food, though."

"Yeah! I love giba curry!"

"I see... Asuta is, a wonderful person. Even before, I became one of your people, I believed that, to be true."

"I only really got to know him recently myself. But he's definitely an amusing, charming guy," Giran Ririn said with a fond smile before turning toward Vina Ruu. "You're closer to Asuta than any of us, though. You were helping out with his business in the post town from the very first day, weren't you?"

"Yes, but I've been taking turns with my younger sisters lately," Vina Ruu replied, staring off into the distance. "Asuta is a strange man. He's incredibly strong, but weak as well. And there've been times when I've thought he was cute, and others when I've found him obnoxious. It's difficult to describe him briefly."

"Well, I'd say that goes for everyone, not just Asuta."

"True. I've come to understand that quite well lately," Vina Ruu said with a composed expression.

Had the rain managed to wash away at least a little of her pain and hesitation? This was the most relaxed Shumiral had seen the girl since he had returned to Genos.

I have no doubt that Vina Ruu's life also changed after she met Asuta, Shumiral thought to himself.

The fates of the people who got involved with Asuta always shifted. Some by a little, some by a lot. And the Ruu clan had a deeper connection with him than almost any other group in the forest's edge, so his impact on them must have been considerable.

Vina Ruu had a desire to see the outside world. Meeting Asuta, who came from outside of this continent before becoming one of her people, must have shaken her to her core.

Shumiral's first encounter with them at their stall had happened some time after that. Since the two of them had been running the place by themselves, he had initially mistaken them for a married couple.

But Asuta had a clan member by the name of Ai Fa.

It hadn't been all that long before he met her as well, and when he did, he'd been absolutely convinced that the two of them were

married. That assumption had also turned out to be wrong, but they did seem to have more trust in one another than many actual married couples did, and he still believed that they would be wed someday. After all, Ai Fa was clearly Asuta's fated partner.

I suppose that is why Vina Ruu cast aside her feelings despite being drawn toward Asuta. That was simply an assumption on Shumiral's part. He had no way of knowing what her feelings toward the chef had been. Actually, even Vina Ruu herself might not have understood them very clearly. Whenever she had looked at Asuta, her eyes had always wavered and she had seemed to be a little uneasy.

Still, there was one thing that he did know: When Vina Ruu looked at Asuta now, there was no wavering at all. When Shumiral had returned to Genos after half a year and reunited with Vina Ruu at the Ruu settlement, he had noticed that right away. Now, that wavering, uneasy gaze was pointed at Shumiral himself.

Back then, Asuta caused Vina Ruu's heart to waver. And now, I am the one doing that to her. Is that how I should interpret this? He didn't have enough information to reach a conclusion. That was just the impression he got. The only thing he could know with absolute certainty was how he felt about her. He loved Vina Ruu. That was the one and only truth for Shumiral. And so, he had to follow his feelings and walk the path he felt was right.

"What are you staring at now?" Vina Ruu grumbled. It seemed that Shumiral had once again gotten lost in his thoughts and ended up staring rudely at Vina Ruu.

"My apologies. I was, simply thinking."

"It's dinnertime, you know. You should put your wicked thoughts aside, give your thanks to the forest, and eat."

"I am eating. This dish, boiled in tau oil, is very delicious."

"That one was made by Uru Lea Ririn," Vina Ruu said, pouting and turning away. Though Shumiral grew flustered at that, he couldn't help but find her adorable even now.

"Looking at you now, it's like you two are already married," Giran Ririn chimed in, causing Vina Ruu's face to turn red.

That was another joyful night for Shumiral. If Asuta could just

overcome Amusehorn’s trial, everything would be fine. And so, Shumiral prayed to the forest with all his heart and soul for his precious friend to return to him.

Afterword

Thank you so much for picking up this book, the twenty-eighth volume of *Cooking with Wild Game*.

This was referenced in the story itself, but it will soon be a year since our protagonist Asuta first came to the forest's edge. I can't say if it's short or long to use this many volumes to cover a year of a person's life, but at any rate, I've managed to keep writing this long. Asuta's busy days will continue after he celebrates that one-year anniversary in the next volume, and I sincerely hope that you will continue reading along.

Darmu and Sheera Ruu's feelings for one another have come to fruition as well, also after nearly a year of waiting. Of course, Sheera Ruu felt that way about him even before Asuta came to the forest's edge, whereas it took a while after the start of the story for Darmu Ruu to start paying attention to her, so there's a bit of a time difference between them. At any rate, considering how long it took them to get here, I hope that they're happy now.

On top of that, characters like Ai Fa and Rimee Ruu have had their birthdays in the story before Asuta, and I find it quite moving to see these characters I've created all growing a year older. That's definitely part of the thrill of a long series. I loved such long series back when I was just a reader, so I'm overjoyed to have been able to make such a long one myself. It's all because of you readers, and I cannot thank you enough.

This is a bit of a digression, but the Group Performance story for this volume, "Two People on a Rainy Day," was originally something I wrote after the upcoming twenty-ninth volume. I wrote a whole lot of Group Performance stories over the course of a year for the web version, and it turned out that my third year of writing happened to line up with the part in volume 29 where Asuta celebrated a year at the forest's edge. Thanks to the extra pages in this volume, though,

it ended up being inserted here instead.

By the way, I chose this one out of the eight Group Performance stories because it takes place at a strange point in time, three months back from the main story, so I felt it best to have it pop up sooner rather than later. Since it takes place within the time frame of volume 25 of the main story, your memories of those events might have become hazy. Still, I hope you'll enjoy seeing what Shumiral and Vina Ruu were thinking and feeling behind the scenes back then.

As for the remaining seven stories, they include ones that take place at the same time as the main story, and also ones that show the characters several years back. I plan to unveil them each at the appropriate time, and I hope that you'll enjoy them along with the main story.

Finally, I want to thank everyone involved with the production of this book, and of course, all of you who purchased it.

See you again in the next volume!

July 2022,
EDA

Bonus Short Story

The Sudra Clan's New Member

The day after her wedding, Ia Fou Sudra woke up beside her new husband, Cheem Sudra.

White morning light was gently streaming in through the latticed windows. They had celebrated until it was late yesterday, but she seemed to have still woken up with the break of dawn.

Still lying on her side, Ia Fou Sudra stared at her sleeping husband, Cheem Sudra, observing how his face looked so much more childlike than usual as he snored away.

The two of them were still only sixteen years old, but marriages were permitted at the age of fifteen at the forest's edge, so it most certainly wasn't as if they had married too early. Especially since people from poor clans tended to marry and have children as soon as possible.

But the Sudra were so poor that they lost all their drive to get married and have children... How painful must that have been? Ia Fou Sudra wondered. Though she had been born into the Fou clan, the thought still pained her. The Fou most certainly weren't well off, but it was still hard to imagine being so impoverished that you give up on marriage entirely.

However, thanks to Asuta, both of their clans were living prosperous lives nowadays, which had directly led to Ia Fou and Cheem Sudra getting married. As she looked at the sleeping face of the man who was her husband, Ia Fou Sudra couldn't help but be filled with bliss.

"Hmm...? You're already awake...?" Cheem Sudra mumbled, opening his eyes slightly. Hunters of the forest's edge were highly sensitive to what other people were doing around them, so her gaze must have been enough to wake him up. Though she felt terribly

sorry to have done that, Ia Fou Sudra still smiled happily.

"Good morning. Please, Cheem Sudra... Ah, I mean Cheem, go back to sleep."

"But you're already up, aren't you, Ia Fou?"

"Yes. We women have work to do in the morning, after all."

"Everyone should at least be allowed to take a break after a wedding...but I suppose you'd find lazing about all day pretty unsatisfying, huh?" Cheem Sudra remarked with a happy smile of his own. "I'll go ahead and get up too, in that case. If there's firewood that needs chopping; I can help out with that."

"No, you really should rest, Cheem. You'll have to head out to hunt once the sun hits its peak."

"But I don't feel like spending time apart from you, Ia Fou." Cheem Sudra seemed more than a little embarrassed, but that hadn't stopped him from saying the words.

Ia Fou Sudra felt so much bliss that it felt like it would light her whole body ablaze. Even though the two of them had only spent a single night together, she couldn't help but feel their hearts were already fully bound together.

And so, the two of them got dressed and stepped out of the house, where they were met with a surprise: All eight members of the main Sudra house were already awake and standing around together outside.

"What are you all doing up so early?" Ia Fou Sudra asked, caught off guard.

The clan head Raielfam Sudra greeted them with a solemn nod and said, "It seems we were all so excited that we awoke with the rising of the sun. And it seems to be the same for the two of you."

"Yeah. But we were the ones who actually got married, so what has all of you so worked up?" Cheem Sudra asked back in a polite tone.

Raielfam Sudra shrugged. "Well, this is the first marriage in a long time for the Sudra clan, so it shouldn't be that surprising. I figured we could handle the haircutting ritual before you started your morning work, but what do you think?" he asked Ia Fou Sudra.

"The haircutting ritual? Yes, I suppose that would be fine," she

said.

At the forest's edge, it was traditional for women to grow their hair out starting at the age of ten and to give them a haircut after they got married. But that only needed to be done sometime on the day after the wedding, so doing so this early felt a bit rushed to her.

"It's also been some time since we Sudra have performed this particular ritual, so I'd like all of us to observe it. That may sound strange to you as a new member of our clan, Ia Fou, but, well, this is the Sudra way of doing things."

Because of all the hardship he had endured for so long, Raielfam Sudra always seemed to have a sour expression on his face, but he had a very kind look in his eyes. And so, Ia Fou Sudra earnestly replied, "All right. But normally, wouldn't Cheem's family be the ones to perform the haircutting ritual? Who will do so now?"

"Before you two were married, Cheem was a member of our household, so we would all like to help cut your hair."

There had only been nine members in the Sudra clan prior to her joining them through marriage, so they had all lived together in the main house. Now that he had a wife, though, Cheem Sudra had become the head of a new Sudra branch house, which their clan hadn't had any of for several years.

All of the members of the clan were now clustered together. The oldest and yet smallest of them all was the clan head Raielfam Sudra, and beside him was his pregnant wife Li Sudra. There was also another man who was a bit younger than the clan head, and he had his wife and son with him. Next was an older woman who had lost her children and husband both, along with two young women without any parents or siblings. And finally, there were Cheem and Ia Fou Sudra, bringing the total number up to ten.

"Well then, let's go ahead and get ready. Yun, bring two sheets here."

One of the younger women, Yun Sudra, replied with a cheerful "On it!" and disappeared into the house. All of the other clan members were looking at Ia Fou Sudra with kind, gentle gazes.

"I've heard that the Sudra haven't had a wedding in quite a while, but how long has it been, exactly?" Ia Fou Sudra asked.

With a solemn expression, Raielfam Sudra pondered the question and answered, "Let's see... The last wedding would have been six years back. A Sudra man took a wife from our subordinate clan, the Reema. But less than a year later, the two of them died of illness. The Reema abandoned their clan name and merged with the Sudra two years after that."

"I see. I'm sorry for dredging up such painful memories."

"No, now that you have joined our clan, you should know the history that brought us to this point. Still, such tales aren't exactly enjoyable...so it would be best to just bask in the joy of the wedding for a while longer, I think," Raielfam Sudra said, breaking out in a small grin.

Then Yun Sudra returned holding some large sheets. Rather than having been made from giba pelts, they had been purchased in the post town. A couple people laid one of them out on the ground, while the other was draped over Ia Fou Sudra's shoulders to keep her outfit and legs from getting hair all over them. With the warmth of the Sudra clan members washing over her, Ia Fou Sudra knelt down on top of the first sheet.

"We're up first. Li, give me your hand."

With her husband's assistance, the rather tall Li Sudra rose to her feet. Her child wouldn't be born for some time yet, but her pregnant stomach was already bigger than any Ia Fou Sudra had seen in her previous clan.

Li Sudra was the tallest person present, as most of the members of the Sudra clan were rather small. Ia Fou Sudra herself was about three fingers taller than her husband Cheem Sudra, but Li Sudra was a whole half a head taller than she was. And apparently, Li and Raielfam Sudra were far enough apart in age to be father and daughter.

As Ia Fou Sudra watched the clan head help his young wife, she felt her hair being let down and fingers—Yun Sudra's—combing through it. Then the young woman moistened her hair with water from a dish.

"Now then, let us begin the haircutting ritual. Though Ia Fou is young now, may she gain the strength of a mother and support the

Sudra clan alongside her husband Cheem."

After that solemn statement, Raielfam Sudra grabbed ahold of some of Ia Fou Sudra's hair and slowly ran a dagger through it. And with that, a chunk of dark brown hair fell down onto the sheet.

"I'm so glad that you joined our clan. May we both have strong children." After accepting the dagger from her husband, Li Sudra cut through Ia Fou Sudra's hair in the same way.

In the meantime, the other clan members all gathered closer.

"I'll be praying that you have a fine future together, Ia Fou and Cheem."

"I'm very happy to welcome a fine woman like you as a clan member."

"Eventually, I'll marry a woman from the Ran. When that happens, I want you to welcome my wife to the Sudra clan too, Ia Fou."

With that, the father, mother, and son all cut Ia Fou Sudra's hair one after another. The son was around the same age as Cheem Sudra, and he had already agreed to marry a Ran woman.

"It truly is a joyful thing. I feel as if the wedding banquet still hasn't ended. And I look forward to working to build up our clan alongside you, Ia Fou," the one older woman said with a gentle smile, cutting off a small bit of hair. Ia Fou Sudra had no way of knowing what she looked like by now, but her head certainly felt a good deal lighter.

"I'm so glad that Cheem married a fine woman like you. I hope that you'll be able to take care of him from here on out," the young woman around Ia Fou Sudra's age said, running the blade along her now short hair. There were talks of her marrying a Fou man, but nothing official just yet.

And then lastly came Yun Sudra, the youngest. Still, even she was only a year or so younger than Ia Fou Sudra was.

"I'm really happy to have you join our clan too, Ia Fou. I'm out of the house a lot, but I'd still like to get to know you better, just like everyone else," Yun Sudra said with a smile that felt both dazzling like that of a child and yet also calm and mature. She had been helping out with the Fa clan's stalls for quite a while now, and she

had proved at the banquet last night and the festival of the hunt how skilled of a chef she truly was. “Anyway, your hair’s cut pretty short now, so I’ll go ahead and even it out.”

“Thank you. You’re such a skilled chef that I’m sure you must be good with your hands.”

“Ah, no, I still have a lot to learn,” Yun Sudra remarked with a giggle as she set about working on Ia Fou Sudra’s hair.

The other clan members and Cheem Sudra formed a circle around them and watched. Though it felt kind of embarrassing, the warmth and joy of it all was even greater still.

“I imagine it wouldn’t even be possible for other clans to have all their members participate in the haircutting ritual. I hope you weren’t too surprised by the request, Ia Fou,” Raielfam Sudra said.

Ia Fou Sudra smiled back and said, “Not at all. But there is one thing I’d like to ask. Cheem and I are now members of a branch house, aren’t we? But you’re still referring to us without clan names?”

“Indeed. That may go against the customs of the forest’s edge, but it just wouldn’t feel right to use Cheem’s full name. And so, it wouldn’t make sense to refer to you that way either, as you’re his wife. It would be as if we weren’t accepting you as family.”

“I see. I’m glad to have gained not only Cheem, but eight other family members as well. Would you allow me to refer to you all without clan names too?”

“Of course. It would be rather strange if you didn’t, so I would appreciate it if you did just that.”

“Thank you. In the fairly near future, the Sudra will have weddings with the Fou and Ran as well, but...I’m both proud and overjoyed to have become your first new member,” Ia Fou Sudra said earnestly, getting a full and unmistakable smile from Raielfam Sudra in return.

The other clan members all began smiling too, and the older woman even started tearing up. When she saw that, Ia Fou Sudra teared up a bit too.

After the Fa, the Sudra had been the smallest and poorest clan at the forest’s edge. But now, they had grown strong enough to have

two victors in a combined contest of strength between six clans. It brought Ia Fou Sudra great joy to be able to marry into such a fine clan.

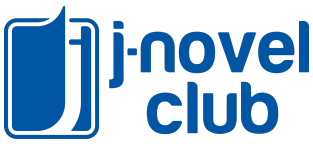
On top of that, her husband Cheem Sudra had been one of those victors. Despite the time he had spent suffering from poverty, he had a very likeable personality. And yet, before his clan's fortunes had changed, he surely would not have been permitted to form blood ties with the Fou. And so, Ia Fou Sudra was extremely grateful for the fact that she had been able to meet him under such happy circumstances.

"Ia Fou, there's no need for tears on such a happy day. We should share the joy of the day together," Yun Sudra said, staring at Ia Fou Sudra's face. However, her bright eyes were tearing up as well.

Now there are ten members of the Sudra clan, and next month a new child will be born as well. With the new blood ties between the Sudra and the Fou and Ran, there shouldn't be any more fear of them dying out. Mother forest, please continue to watch over us as we live proper lives. Awash in the affection of her new family, Ia Fou Sudra offered up that fervent prayer.

And looking just as magnificently grand as always, the mother forest seemed to accept it.





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by EDA

Translated by Gwendolyn Warner
Edited by Adam Fogle

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