COOKING WITH WILD GAME

Author: EDA

Illust: Kochimo

VOLUME 29

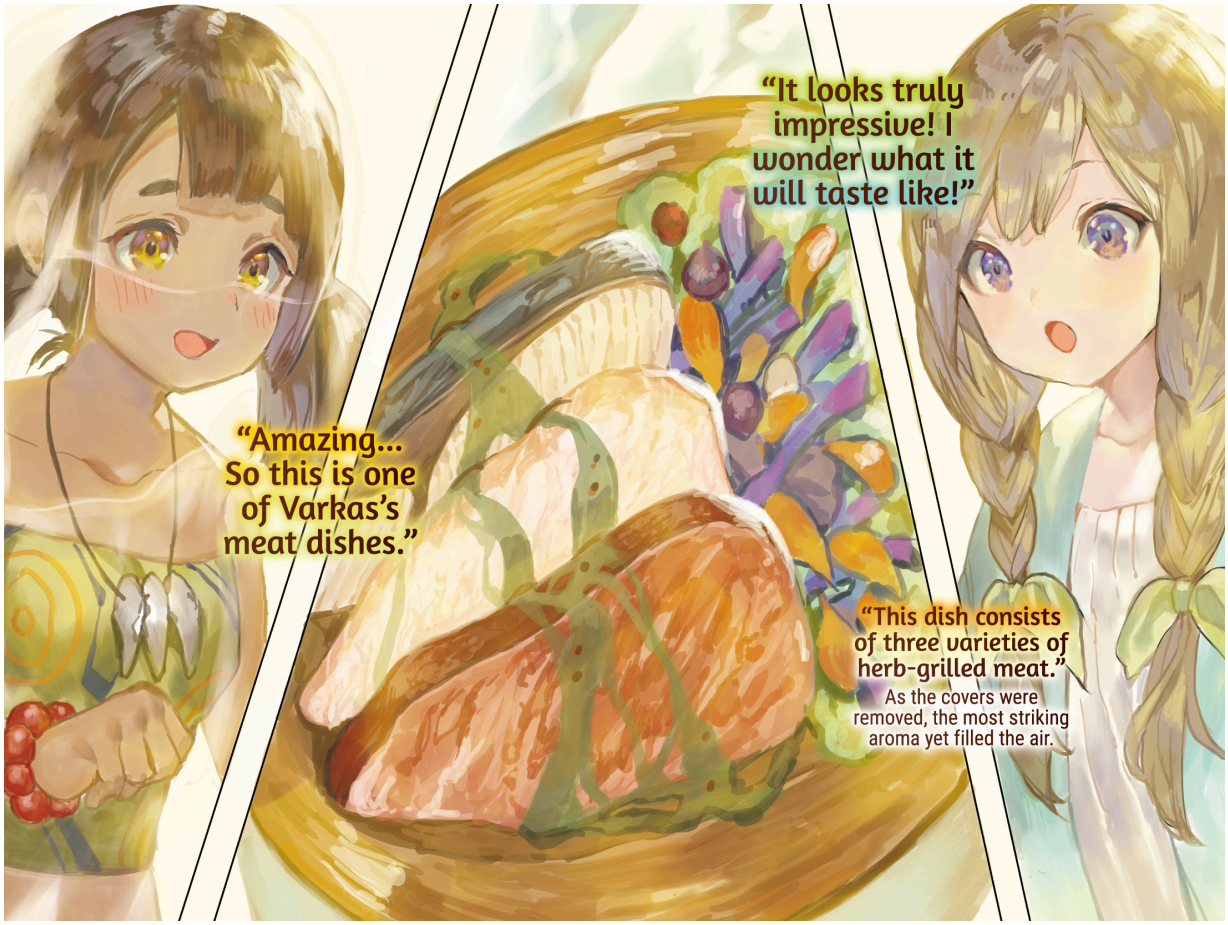



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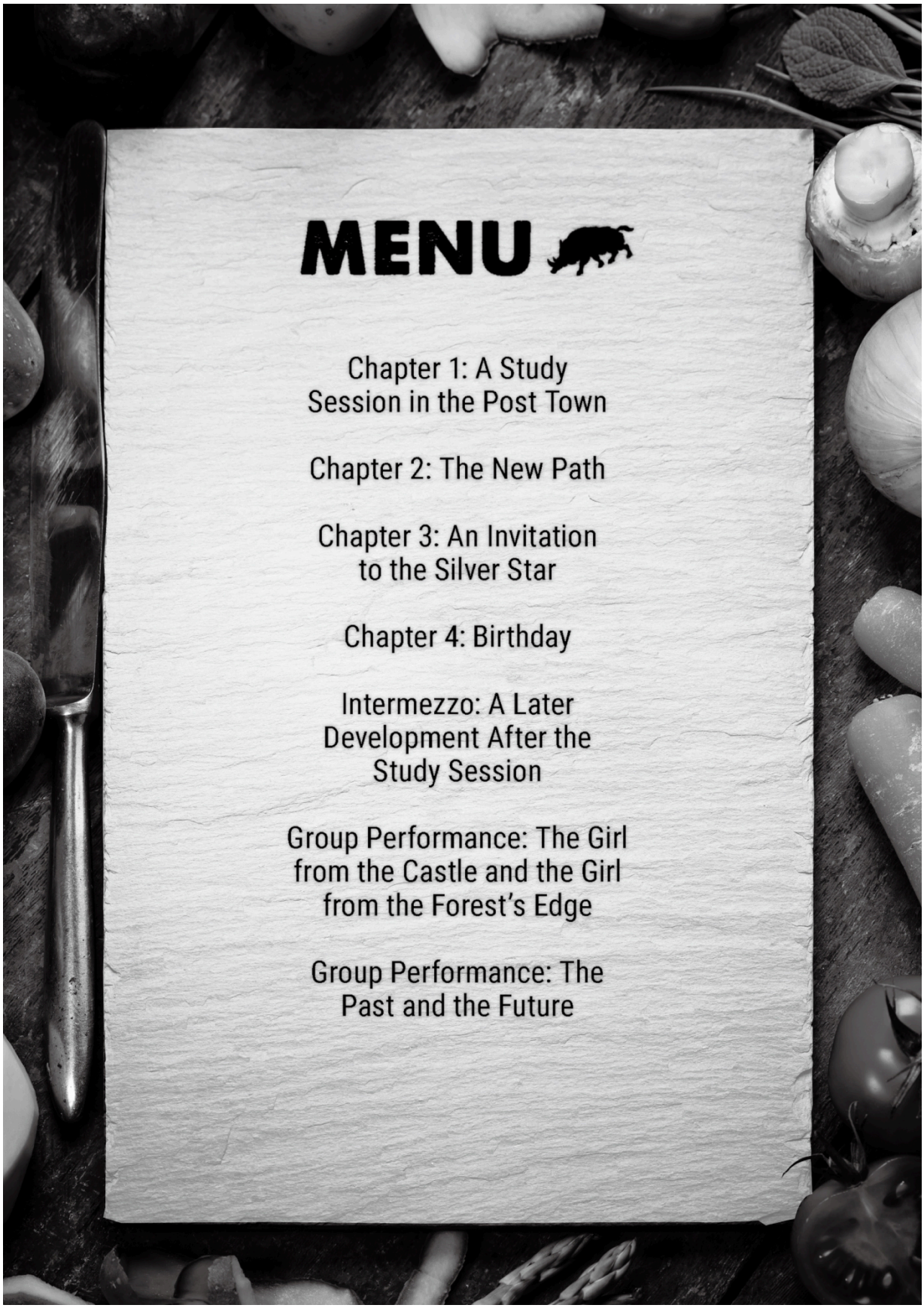

"There's an even more interesting way to use kimyuus eggs, which I'd like to tell you about."
Fluffy pancakes made with meringue!
COOKING WITH WILD GAME
VOLUME 29




"Amazing... So this is one of Varkas's meat dishes."
"It looks truly impressive! I wonder what it will taste like!"
"This dish consists of three varieties of herb-grilled meat."
As the covers were removed, the most striking aroma yet filled the air.


"Ai Fa, my home country has a custom of doing this when you make promises. Could you hold out your pinky too?"
"Hmm?" she questioned with a light tilt of her head, but she did as I asked, and I wrapped my pinky around hers.





MENU

Chapter 1: A Study Session in the Post Town

Chapter 2: The New Path

Chapter 3: An Invitation to the Silver Star

Chapter 4: Birthday

Intermezzo: A Later Development After the Study Session

Group Performance: The Girl from the Castle and the Girl from the Forest's Edge

Group Performance: The Past and the Future



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 she hides strong emotions inside. She has made the decision to welcome Asuta into the Fa clan.



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. He also keeps a strict eye on the actions of the Fa 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.



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, is an excellent chef, and is Darmu Ruu's wife.



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.



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.



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 cares greatly about her family and is very skilled when it comes to calculations.



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.



~ Townsfolk ~



Yumi

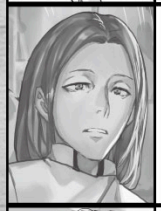
The daughter of the owners of an inn called the Westerly Wind. Friendly, cheerful, and seventeen years old. She acts as a bridge between Asuta and her father, who dislikes the people of the forest's edge.

Yang

The head chef of the house of Daleim. He is currently working hard to promote the flow of new ingredients into the post town.

Kukuluel Gi Adumuftan

The leader of the Black Flight Feathers, a merchant group from Sym. A middle-aged man with a gentle nature but sharp eyes. He is the one who proposed carving a new path through the forest's edge.



Varkas

The owner of the restaurant known as The Silver Star. He possesses a very sharp sense of taste, and he has intense emotions when it comes to his pursuit of delicious cooking.

Lema Geit

The owner of the inn known as The Arow Bud. She's a haughty, bulky middle-aged woman, and she's strongly antagonistic toward the people of the forest's edge.

Jizeh

The owner of the inn known as The Ramuria Coil. She is an older woman with mixed blood from the east and a very gentle personality. She is very interested in both the people of the forest's edge and giba cooking.



Shilly Rou

An apprentice of the master chef Varkas. A strong-willed girl with a powerful sense of rivalry toward Asuta and Toor Deen.



Roy

A young chef from the castle town. After being shocked by the quality of Reina Ruu's and Myme's cooking, he asked to become Varkas's apprentice.



Myme

Mikel's daughter. Following in her father's footsteps, she has put a great deal of effort into improving her cooking skills. Having been deeply moved by Asuta's cooking, she is experimenting with giba meat on her own.



Arishuna Zi Mafraluda

A fortune teller of eastern heritage. A composed woman who does things her own way. She is currently staying in the castle town as a guest of Duke Genos.



Melfried

The eldest son of Duke Genos. He is the arbitrator for all matters involving the people of the forest's edge. A coolheaded man who values law and order above all else.



Odifia

Eulifia's young daughter. Like an expressionless doll, she doesn't allow her emotions to show, but she is exceedingly fond of Toor Deen's sweets.

Eulifia

Melfried's wife. A noblewoman who gives off an impression of elegance, though she is actually quite exuberant and unrestrained.

Torst

Lefreya's guardian. An honest man who is working to revive the house of Turan.

Polarth

The second son of Count Daleim. He collaborates closely with the people of the forest's edge and has been trying to popularize delicious food throughout Genos.

Merrim

Polarth's wife and a noblewoman with a youthful appearance. She has a gentle nature and a relaxed personality.

~ Group Performance ~

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.

Li Sudra

Raielfam Sudra's wife. She used to help out with Asuta's stalls, but Yun Sudra took over that work due to Li's pregnancy.

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. He took a Fou woman as his bride.



Table of Contents

1. Cover
2. Color Illustrations
3. Characters
4. Jnovels
5. Chapter 1: A Study Session in the Post Town
6. Chapter 2: The New Path
7. Chapter 3: An Invitation to The Silver Star
8. Chapter 4: Birthday
9. Intermezzo: A Later Development After the Study Session
10. Group Performance: The Girl from the Castle and the Girl from the Forest's Edge
11. Group Performance: The Past and the Future
12. Afterword
13. Bonus Textless Illustration
14. About J-Novel Club
15. Copyright



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Chapter 1: A Study Session in the Post Town

1

On the sixteenth of the yellow month, the leading clan heads of the forest's edge and the nobles had a special meeting in the castle town.

Back when the Suun had still been the leading clan, such meetings had been held on a regular schedule. But really, they hadn't been much more than Count Cyclaeus Turan and Zattsu Suun getting together to scheme in private and put into motion the plans that had caused harm to so many people over the years.

Nowadays, Melfried and Polarth served as the negotiators from the noble side, and they were attempting to form a more proper relationship with the people of the forest's edge. They had decided that one regular meeting every three months wasn't enough, so they had changed it to every other month instead. Furthermore, they would arrange for additional special meetings when urgent situations arose. Since this was one such case, the leading clan heads were having to make a sudden trip to the castle town.

There were going to be two main topics of discussion at the meeting: the fast approaching return of the Black Flight Feathers and the sale of giba meat in the post town.

The Black Flight Feathers were a merchant group from the Eastern Kingdom of Sym. With thirty-two members, they were the largest group from Sym that visited Genos. After entering into an agreement with Cyclaeus seven years ago, they had started bringing live gyama and all sorts of other goods to Genos. They were the ones who had gone to Duke Marstein Genos and proposed cutting a new path through the forest's edge. It was a bold plan meant to

make trade easier, as it normally required around two months to go between Genos and Sym in each direction. But though that path had been completed back in the rainy season, it had still never been used, except to test it for safety. There were also people in Genos planning to build a new post town on the other side of the forest of Morga where the path ended.

Of course, there was no getting around the fact that the path ran through the dangerous forest of Morga. And after you made it to the other end, you still had to go through the barren, uninhabited wastelands beyond. According to the head of the Black Flight Feathers, Kukuluel, you could reach the highway that led north to the town of Aboof after a few days of travel, but that still needed to be confirmed by someone actually following the route.

Who could tell what sort of harm might result from an ill-prepared traveler attempting the journey? If people used it without proper planning and the worst happened, then that could result in everyone choosing to avoid it and the whole thing becoming useless. In order to avoid that kind of screwup, Marstein had tasked the Black Flight Feathers, who had suggested the idea, with being the first to test the path.

Long journeys across the continent were considered incredibly dangerous in general. There were all sorts of risks, from bandits to wild beasts to even natural disasters. If you wanted to travel the roads between towns, common practice was to have a skilled bodyguard or guide accompany you. However, easterners would travel about the continent without any guards. That was because they were famous for their skills with both totos and dangerous poisons. They themselves were a bigger threat than any bandits or wild beasts they might come across.

And yet, the easterners who worked as merchants came from the grasslands and were pacifists. It was readily apparent how much Shumiral and Radajid from the Silver Vase, Kukuluel from the Black Flight Feathers, and even the star reader Arishuna—who was no merchant but who came from a related lineage—despised conflict and were gentle-natured. Though they possessed dangerous skills that could easily put any outlaw or beast to sleep, they would never

use violence for any reason other than self defense.

This was something I had just heard from Shumiral recently, but apparently, Sym was roughly divided up into four regions: the mountains to the north, the grasslands in the center, the coast to the east, and the commercial cities to the south that included the capital, Rao.

The people were split into seven tribes that ruled over the land. The only ones who traveled the world as merchants came from the Zi and Gi tribes that lived in the grasslands. Though the cities to the south were places of trade, it was the people of the grasslands who left their home country in order to do business.

People from the grasslands weren't fond of conflict. Since they were born and raised in the peaceful center of the nation, they didn't get involved in the war with Jagar, and they lived more or less nomadic lives. And some portion of them traveled to Selva and Mahyudra as merchants.

As one would expect, the Black Flight Feathers also came from the grasslands, and if I remembered correctly, their leader Kukuluel's full name contained Gi. Currently, they were on a trip that had them traveling to the capital of Selva, Algrad, and when they returned to Genos, they intended to use the new path through the forest's edge to prove its safety. They were a fair bit behind schedule, but they would be coming back soon. Since the path would start seeing use in less than a month after they returned, the special meeting today was intended to clear up a variety of issues beforehand.

And then there was the second topic of discussion: the sale of giba meat. Naturally, the Fa clan was far more involved in that than the other matter. There had been plenty of problems there too, but ultimately, we were granted permission to take part in the meat market.

We were also given a new condition, however: to sell the same amount of giba meat to the castle town as we did to the post town. That command was handed down in order to preempt a situation where the nobles would try to buy up all of the giba meat. At present, we were permitted to sell sausages and smoked meat in Genos, and going forward, we would be selling fresh meat too. But

there was a concern that the nobles would try to take it all for themselves, leaving none for the post town.

Since the people's trust in him had already been damaged because of Cyclaeus's actions, Marstein feared that outcome and had come up with a simple solution. He seemed to be approaching things even more cautiously than we were out of fear that a noble like Cyclaeus might appear again and start hoarding ingredients, ruining all of his efforts up to this point. That was why he was imposing his new rule on us. If we sold the same amount of giba meat in both the post town and the castle town, neither side would be able to reasonably complain about it.

Of course, there was no particular reason for *us* to complain either way. The only concern we had was how much we should be selling. Any other problems past that point were all internal ones, the biggest of which was securing a stable supply. That was something we had discussed a great deal at the forest's edge, with the Fa and Ruu at the center of it all. We had been getting ready for this throughout the first third of the yellow month, and had finished settling all the issues that we could at almost the exact same time that we got permission from the castle town to proceed. The final conclusion was that the Fou and Dai would be the ones in charge, while the Fa and Ruu would offer support.

The Fou and Dai had been the ones chosen because they were located close to the Fa and Ruu clans. The Gaaz and Ratsu were larger, but we prioritized the convenience offered by their proximity in this case.

Additionally, it wasn't simply a matter of selling meat at the market in the post town. Securing the meat to be sold in advance was also a crucial task in order to keep doing business. On top of that, given how much demand there would likely be for giba meat, it would be very difficult for the Fou and Dai to provide it all on their own. They would need to make arrangements to purchase giba meat from other clans. Then they would have to store it, and transport it as well before it could be sold. That was pretty much all that their job amounted to, but the only business they had done prior to this had been selling giba pelts, horns, and tusks, so managing all that

would be somewhat difficult for them.

One particularly important issue was the processing of the meat. At the settlement at the forest's edge, clans would sell dressed carcasses of giba—either whole ones or half ones—to one another, but smaller portions would need to be prepared for the townsfolk.

Presently, the Fa and Ruu were selling fresh meat to four inns. We used known portion sizes used in town to estimate the amount we needed to provide in those cases. The Fou and Dai would need to figure out something similar.

Of course, quantities of meat weren't measured very precisely in either the forest or the town. You only got vague guidelines like "How much for a single meal's worth?" But if the amount you sold for a price changed too much, it would be difficult to build up trust. It was necessary to carefully measure the weight of each block you cut before loading a specified amount into a box. That was the first step toward selling meat at the market.

The payment for all that work was no small issue either. At present, it wasn't clear to us how much profit there would be after the costs were subtracted from the sale price. After all, the price of giba meat sold between clans was simply divided into three vague levels based solely on the size of the animal.

Naturally, our rough calculations showed that we wouldn't be suffering losses. The Fa and Ruu had been careful to adjust things so that we wouldn't go into the red selling meat to the inns, which meant that the price for purchasing giba from other clans had to be set fairly low. But since the scale we were working at was so much larger this time around, there were all sorts of uncertainties to keep an eye on. And so, the Fou and the Dai were a little concerned, as it was unclear just how much profit they would be earning.

Thus, a fixed sum had been set for their payment. If the profits exceeded that amount, they would go into a sort of insurance account, and if there happened to be losses, the Fa and Ruu would cover them. The amount was set at twenty-four red coins per day. If that seemed too small for the amount of effort they were putting in, then it would be raised at once, but we had decided to start with a modest sum. Twenty-four red coins happened to be what you would

typically earn for a single giba's horns, tusks, and pelt. We hadn't really had anything to go on when deciding the amount, so the Ruu had eventually proposed that.

Of course, they wouldn't only be paid that amount on the day that they actually sold the meat. No, they were going to be paid for every day they spent working on the task. For the first ten days, they were going to be given 240 red coins, and if that didn't prove to be enough, the amount would be raised. If the clans couldn't handle the work any longer, a different clan would be placed in charge instead. Those were the arrangements we had made leading up to our first experiment with selling meat on the market.

We also felt it would be risky to max out our capacity right from the start, so we would only be participating in the meat market once in the first ten days. The market was held every three or four days, so we would adjust as needed once they got used to the work.

The amount of meat we decided to prepare was roughly 450 kilos —about a dozen giba's worth. You could pack about fifteen kilos into the boxes used in the post town, so we were preparing thirty of them. Half of those would go to the castle town, while the other half would go to the post town. Over the next ten days, they were going to need to procure the meat, weigh it out, and preserve it. That was their initial task.

"I'm sure there will be all sorts of difficulties at first, but we'll just have to overcome them," the Fou clan head Baadu Fou's wife had said with a smile. Naturally, their subordinate clans, the Ran and Sudra, would also be helping out with the work. At least for the time being, it seemed like they weren't going to be able to assist the Fa clan with our prep work anymore, so we ended up having to rely on the Gaaz and Ratsu in their place.

"Things sure are getting interesting! I'm looking forward to seeing how the clan head meeting is gonna go!" the Liddo clan head Radd Liddo had said. His parent clan, the Zaza, were opposed to the Fa clan's actions, but the Liddo and the Deen were hoping to get them to reverse their position at the clan head meeting.

At any rate, the forest's edge was undergoing yet another quiet yet significant change again today. We would be taking part in the

meat market ten days from now, in the last third of the yellow month. Until then, we were all going to be working hard to get everything done.

Of course, we had all sorts of tasks other than that to handle. The first of those was set for the day after the meeting in the castle town, on the seventeenth of the yellow month. On that day, we would be participating in the confection-making study session being held at Tanto's Blessing.

"Heh heh, I've really been looking forward to today!" Rimee Ruu said with a big smile as we walked down the street in the post town. Having finished up our work with the stalls, we were now heading over to the inn for the study session.

At the inn meeting we had taken part in the other day, we had unveiled a number of giba dishes and desserts. Based on the conversation there, it had been decided that we chefs from the forest's edge and Yang, a chef from the castle town, would instruct some folks from the inns on how to make delicious treats.

"You say that, but we're going to be on the teaching side of things, you know? Even if we make samples, the folks from the inns will be the ones eating them."

My statement could have put a damper on things, but Rimee Ruu's smile didn't shift in the least. "But we'll be able to learn all sorts of stuff from that Yang guy, won't we? He made really yummy sweets, so I'm still really excited!"

"That's true. You and Toor Deen are sure to gain a lot from today."

There were only four of us taking part in today's study session. The size of the kitchen was limited, so we were asked to keep our numbers to a minimum. And so, it was just me, Toor Deen, Rimee Ruu, and Sheera Ruu.

The last member of our group had gotten married to Darmu Ruu the day before yesterday, and she was now calmly walking beside her fellow Ruu chef. As always, she looked quite neat, trim, and reserved. However, her blackish-brown hair had been cut short and to an even length all the way across behind her neck, and she was

wearing a dress that came from her chest down to her knees. That attire for married women really suited her, so much so that it felt as if she had always worn it.

"When it comes to cooking sweets, I'm sure Rimee Ruu is all the Ruu clan needed to send, so I'm sorry for forcing my way in," she said.

"Ah, no, we'll need enough hands to prepare sample dishes. Really, it's nothing to worry about."

"Yeah!" Rimee Ruu energetically chimed in, turning Sheera Ruu's way. "Darmu's pretty fond of sweets, so I'm sure you'll have to work hard at making them from now on!"

"Indeed," Sheera Ruu replied with a smile of her own. In the past, that would have been enough to cause her to go beet red, but now she just looked ever so slightly embarrassed. Ever since her wedding, she had seemed more calm and composed than ever before.



After arriving at Tanto's Blessing, we entrusted Gilulu and his wagon to be stored away in the rear, and then we were led to the kitchen. This place was the post town's largest inn, and so the kitchen was also appropriately big. For today, though, the place was packed to the absolute limit. Roughly eyeballing it, I would say there were around twenty people present. We had people from most of the inns participating in the study session, but somehow the number was still reasonably low.

"Ah, we've been waiting for you guys!" Yumi of The Westerly Wind called out, with her usual earnest grin on her face. She had shown up at the stalls as well, so it had only been a few hours since we had last seen her. She had also congratulated Sheera Ruu on her wedding during her visit.

Telia Mas was there too, standing next to Yumi, and Nail and Naudis had secured spots as well. We greeted them all while heading farther in, where we found the owner of Tanto's Blessing, Tapas, and his guest chef, Yang.

"Ah, dear guests from the forest's edge, thank you so much for coming. Please, come this way," Tapas, head of the inn firm said with a smile, beckoning us over to stand beside Yang. Yang smiled with his eyes alone, and we bowed politely to him. Meanwhile, his cooking assistants Sheila and Nicola stood quietly behind him, waiting.

"I'm looking forward to working with you today, Yang. Oh, and we also brought along Arishuna's food. We'll hand that over to you after the study session is over."

"Of course."

"I'm really sorry for pushing a chore like this onto you all the time."

"Think nothing of it. She is a precious guest of Duke Genos, so you needn't worry yourself."

I was still using my connection to Yang to deliver food to Arishuna on days when I served giba curry at the stalls. Yang and Polarth had both generously agreed to it, but Sheila was the one tasked with actually making the delivery, and so I bowed to her as well.

“It is no problem. As I have said before, it is along my route back to the Daleim manor, so it is nothing to worry about,” Sheila said, then she brought her face close to mine. “By the way...is Lady Ai Fa not with you today?”

“She isn’t. We’re expecting to get home while the sun’s still high in the sky, and we generally don’t bring along guards on days like that.”

“I see,” Sheila replied, her eyes drifting down in disappointment. She was quite attached to Ai Fa.

Nicola was standing beside her with a sullen look, which seemed to prompt the keen-eyed Rimee Ruu to greet her with a smile.

“Hey there! We met at the tea party, didn’t we? Do you remember me?”

“Hmm? Ah, yes... I do...” Nicola ended up mumbling a bit, appearing to be uncertain as to how politely she should speak to a young girl like Rimee Ruu. She really was the complete opposite of the gentle Sheila, and was always wearing a sour look on her face.

The tea party she had participated in was the time before last, so it had already been several months since then. She had shown up fairly often in the post town after that as a maid working for the house of Daleim, but she wasn’t as friendly as Sheila, so it had been a good while since we had properly talked.

“You’re helping out today too, huh?! I’m gonna give it my all, and I’m really looking forward to working with you!” Rimee Ruu said.

“L-Likewise... You know that there is no need to greet a maid such as myself, though, don’t you?”

“But I haven’t seen you in a long time!” Rimee Ruu said, her smile growing even wider, causing Nicola to turn away with a rather uncomfortable look. But the direction she turned toward was where Toor Deen was standing, and the other young chef bowed to Nicola as well.

“We met at the tea party as well. Your name is Nicola, isn’t it? I’m sorry for not noticing right away, but I’m also looking forward to working with you.”

“No, but... Seriously, what is with you lot?!”

“Is something the matter?” Yang asked, looking over at them.

"Not really," Nicola replied with a frown, holding her tongue.

It was around then that there was a great commotion from the entrance. I could hear things like "What are you doing?!" and "Don't push!" right before a figure appeared, coming toward us through the crowd. She was a middle-aged noticeably muscular woman with a rugged face—the owner of The Arow Bud, Lema Geit. Tapas had been smiling since our arrival, but when he saw her, his expression turned rather weary.

"Lema Geit, I can't say I'm overly fond of you shoving your way to the front like that."

"Hmph! With this many filthy men packed in here, I couldn't see anything. If you've got a complaint about that, then you should've prepared something for me to stand on!"

She was clearly the same as always.

And then, there was a faint chuckle from the crowd.

"So you're that interested in sweets as well? I can certainly understand how you feel, Lema Geit."

That voice belonged to a tall and lean older woman with darker skin and gray-brown hair—the owner of The Ramuria Coil, Jizeh. She was taller than your average man from the west, so I could easily pick out her smiling face among the other innkeepers. After shooting a piercing glare her way for a moment, Lema Geit gave a loud snort of, "Hmph!"

It seemed that everyone had arrived now. And so, as the one in charge, Tapas called out, "Let us begin this lesson on how to prepare desserts."

2

"My name is Yang, and I have been invited to take charge of the kitchen here at Tanto's Blessing once every few days. Today, I will be providing some basic lessons on making desserts," Yang calmly stated. As he had been giving lessons on how to handle new ingredients fairly frequently over the last several months, he was clearly accustomed to the process. "We do not have all that much

time, so I shall focus on the key points. Firstly, I recommend using both poitan and fuwano when preparing desserts. It goes without saying that your costs will be lower if you solely employ poitan, but the dough you make will lack stickiness, and will be quite difficult to handle. Do you agree, Sir Asuta?"

"Yes. I think if you were making those pancakes I showed off before, you could get them to work with just poitan, but to make the cooking process easier, it would still be ideal to mix fuwano in too."

"Pancakes are that dish you made by mixing poitan, sugar, karon milk, and kimyuus egg, and then cooking them with milk fat, correct?"

"That's right."

"I see. You cook them by pouring the batter onto a metal tray or the like, and that would be why they can be prepared with poitan alone, despite it lacking stickiness. In fact, it seems as if they would be more difficult to prepare in any other manner," Yang said with a nod, and then he turned back toward the innkeepers. "Now, many desserts prepared in the castle town use metal or stone ovens, but I have not seen any such equipment in the post town, so I believe the methods of preparation available to you will be somewhat limited. That is all the more reason to use a combination of both poitan and fuwano."

"How exactly should we go about cooking them, then?" a familiar voice called out from the crowd. That was most likely Naudis, the owner of The Great Southern Tree. As the country of origin for sugar, sweet foods were common in Jagar, so he seemed to be quite interested in the lesson.

"It will be quicker to show you rather than to try to explain with words alone. Sheila, Nicola, please light the stoves."

The two cooking assistants did as they were told, then Yang walked over to the workstation in front of him, where a bunch of ingredients for making desserts were lined up.

"We shall begin with dumplings, which are often eaten in the post town. Let us try making them with just fuwano, poitan, karon milk, and sugar." As he spoke, Yang began swiftly sorting out ingredients. The folks in the back seemed to be leaning in as much as they could

so they could see what was happening better. “The ratio should be seventy percent poitan and thirty percent fuwano. If you use any less fuwano than that, it will become difficult to knead by hand. As for the amount of sugar, it should be half of the combined amount of poitan and fuwano.”

“You’re adding that much sugar to it? Sounds like it’ll cost an awful lot,” Lema Geit grumbled.

Yang didn’t seem to mind at all, however, and continued working. “As you say, sugar is most certainly not cheap, as it must be brought in from Jagar. But ever since permission to purchase it in the post town was granted, it has become possible to purchase in larger quantities than before, which allows room for negotiation to buy it cheaper.” Polarth or Torst must have been the ones in charge of those negotiations. Though the profits the house of Turan earned from fuwano had plummeted, because some of the other ingredients they controlled were seeing more circulation, they had apparently stabilized their finances fairly well. “The next step is to knead karon milk into the dough. If you then add kimyuus egg and fruits, your final result will be even better, but our aim today is to show you how to make a basic example of what a sweet dough should be, so we shall omit them for now.”

Yang then took some of the dough and made a small dumpling the size of a ping-pong ball. Then he stabbed a metal skewer through it and turned toward the stove Nicola was in charge of.

“This should be cooked over the heat of a stove. If you let a flame directly touch it, it will burn quickly, so you’ll have to be patient as you wait for it to finish.”

This cooking method wasn’t all that common in the post town, even back when fuwano was the main type of flour they used. In fact, eating fuwano and poitan bread on their own hadn’t really been a thing people did in the past, so most folks would just use a metal tray to cook whatever they were making quickly. When preparing dumplings, they would generally either wrap the ingredients in lightly cooked dough, or otherwise would simply heat up the round dumplings in a soup.

“As I recall, you sell giba meat manju at your stalls, do you not,

Sir Asuta?" Yang asked, his gaze still fixed on the stove. "I believe you steam them, but do you use both fuwano and poitan in the dough?"

"No, I just use fuwano. I came up with that dish before I thought of mixing the two."

"I see. Well, steaming baskets are not overly expensive, and if people start selling them in the post town as well, that will allow for a wider variety of sweets to be made," Yang said, lifting up the skewer as he did so. The fuwano and poitan dumpling had grown a bit larger and appeared to have cooked up nicely. It seemed slightly burnt on the surface, but it looked very delicious. "Cooking it until it looks like this should be plenty. I have prepared a number of others using the same method, so please, give them a try."

Nicola then lifted a cloth off of a large plate, revealing a pile of dumplings underneath. The way she presented them reminded me of a cooking show, which I couldn't help but find rather amusing.

At any rate, everyone went ahead and tried the fuwano and poitan dumplings, and once again, the first person to voice their opinion was Lema Geit.

"You added all that sugar, but it's still not especially sweet, eh?"

"Correct. In order to make this dough as sweet as you would probably want, you would need to use an amount of sugar equal to the combined amount of fuwano and poitan. It's much cheaper to use fruits and the like to give it that kind of taste instead."

Part of what made Yang so amazing was how he could understand the mindset of the common folk despite being a chef from the castle town. He had always held the opinion that you could make food delicious even without rare and precious ingredients, going back to when Cyclaeus had been monopolizing such things. In those days, even chefs in the castle town couldn't easily get ahold of sugar unless they had ties to Count Turan, so it made a lot of sense that he would have come to think that way.

"Personally, I would either knead fruit into the dough itself, dip it in a sauce made from boiled-down fruit, or add sweet-smelling herbs. Ideally, I would recommend using all of those methods together, while being very careful not to ruin the overall flavor."

“Hmm. We tried to make baked poitan mixed with sugar on a metal tray at our place, but it turned out really different from this,” one of the innkeepers said.

“That is why I would suggest going with dumplings for your desserts instead,” Yang explained. “If you wrap thin bread around fruits and the like, that would also be a fine treat. But by making it into a ball shape like this, you create quite a different texture. Adding kimyuus egg or gigo to them can make them softer and fluffier as well. There are many different things you can try as you experiment on your own.”

I heard a number of voices go, “Hmm...” all throughout the crowd. It sounded like they were excited about all the possibilities this plain dough presented all on its own. Just flavoring it like Yang had suggested could lead to lots of different viable products they could sell.

“Moving on, I would like to talk about fried treats a bit. Sheila, are your preparations complete?”

“Yes. The pot should be hot enough now.”

The stove she was manning had a pot partially filled with heated reten oil on it. Yang gave her a single nod before reaching out toward the ingredients once again.

“Now I will make some more dough using the same ratio as before, but this time I will make it flat and fry it. It hasn’t been long since reten oil first started seeing use in the post town, so this seems like a good opportunity to learn about frying.”

“Asuta, you’ve sold fried dishes at your stalls too, haven’t you?!” I heard Yumi call out from the back.

I looked in her direction and replied, “Correct. I’ve sold fried giba meat before. Making that dish involved dipping all of the ingredients in heated oil and letting them cook.”

“That sure was delicious! And wait, why are you talking all formally like that to me too?”

“Because everyone is listening to us speak.”

A few of the innkeepers chuckled in amusement at that. Even Yang gave a slight smile as he lifted the formed dough up above his head. It was oval in shape, and looked to only be around five

millimeters thick.

"You should prepare the dough so that it's about this thin. You can still cook it through to the middle if it's a little thicker, but this thickness will allow the true appeal of fried dishes to shine through." Yang then placed the dough into the oil, and a pleasant crackling sound filled the air.

As she listened to it, Rimee Ruu's eyes started sparkling with anticipation. "You made a fried sweet before too, didn't you, Asuta?! What'll it taste like when it's that thin?"

"I'm not sure, but it will probably have a really interesting texture."

Since it was so thin, the sweet was finished in no time, with the thin oval of dough taking on a nice golden brown color.

"Now we just need to wait a bit for the excess oil to drip off, and it will be ready. Please give this a try as well."

Unsurprisingly, he had yet more finished goods on another large plate, ready to be eaten. When she tried one, Rimee Ruu made a satisfied noise and said, "Delicious! Oh, and this is like the sweet you made for the last tea party, isn't it?"

"That is correct. I used a metal oven for that, but since these are also very thin, they probably have a similar texture."

I bit into one myself with anticipation, and found that sure enough, it had a pleasant texture to it that reminded me of pie crust. It was crispy and flaky, and not too oily. I also thought that the texture was very appropriate for a dish that was faintly sweet thanks to its sugar content, and also featured the rich flavor of karon milk.

Sure enough, it seemed to surprise the innkeepers a lot more than the dumplings from before had, causing a real commotion among them. Even Lema Geit was carefully chewing rather than complaining.

"This was quite a while ago, but there used to be a popular sweet in the castle town that used fuwano and milk fat. If you added too much milk fat, however, the taste became overly heavy, and it was also more expensive than using reten oil," Yang lectured in a flat tone. Since he was dealing with people who had no experience with

making desserts, he had chosen simple and practical topics to be the focus of his lessons. The things he was explaining were pretty basic, but he was imparting the information so logically and precisely that I couldn't help but think he was quite well suited to being a teacher. Honestly, it would be difficult to find someone more fitting for this role than Yang, especially considering his masterful skills at making desserts. "At any rate, frying is a rare technique here in the post town, so it should be easy to attract attention this way. Also, if you add fruit, it will come out nice and soft in the end. I believe you should be able to try a variety of different flavors with this dish as well."

Yang then proceeded to offer a detailed explanation on how to utilize fruit in this kind of dish. With sour arow or sheel, you could steep or boil them in sugar water in order to make them more suitable for adding to desserts. Ramam, meanwhile, was sweet to begin with, so it could simply be used as is or boiled down. He calmly expounded on topics like how much of each ingredient was needed, how strong of a flame should be used, and how long to boil for.

"I have also steeped kimyuus meat in sugar and honey in order to prepare sweets."

"Oh? You can use meat in sweets as well?" Jizeh asked, sounding impressed.

"Yes," Yang replied with a nod. "Karon leg meat has too strong of a flavor and is not suited to such dishes, but kimyuus meat should not present any issue. However, I believe it works best when you slice it into fine strings and prepare it such that you cannot tell it is meat."

"I see. I certainly wouldn't ever think of such an idea on my own. This has proven quite informative."

"I am glad to hear you say that. Now then, I would like to ask the chefs from the forest's edge to take over at this point."

"Of course. We'll be preparing the samples for everyone to try as we go, so it may take a bit of time, but I hope that you'll stick with us all the way through," I said.

It was finally our time to shine. Yang, Sheila, and Nicola all

stepped back, and the four of us from the forest's edge stepped forward.

"To start with, we'll discuss how to use kimyuus eggs. It can be very effective to simply mix them into your dough, but there's an even more interesting way to use kimyuus eggs which I'd like to tell you about."

I was referring to the method of using the whites to make meringue that I had developed recently. The leftover yolks could just be mixed into the dough down the line. By combining whipped whites with the batter, you could create a unique, incredibly soft texture.

"I'll be proceeding with the same ratio of fuwano, poitan, and sugar that Yang used before. Then we'll cook this on a metal tray."

As the four of us were busy beating the eggs, Yang and company prepared the other ingredients. Then we lit the other four stoves and started cooking, somehow managing to make enough for all twenty innkeepers to have a small sample.

When they gave it a bite, they reacted with the same sort of surprise they showed when eating Yang's fried dish. I even managed to spot Lema Geit's eyes shooting open wide in pleasure.

"If you compare this to the pancakes I made at the previous meeting, the difference should be quite clear, even though we used basically the same ingredients."

Next up was the topic of flavoring. Yang was more skilled when it came to working with fruit, so I was going to focus on sugar instead.

"There's an ingredient known as panam honey that comes from Jagar. It's very handy when making sweets, but it definitely costs more than sugar. Because of that, I often process sugar in a way that makes it usable as a substitute for honey."

Naturally, I was talking about caramel sauce. It really wasn't too tricky to make. It just involved dissolving sugar in water and boiling it until it turned nice and brown. Then you added more boiling water, and it was done.

"This is what the honey-like substance I poured on top of the pancakes really was. By adjusting the amount of boiling water you add at the end, you can make it more viscous than the example I

made before, and it can even work well as a small snack you can eat with your hands."

I went ahead and smeared some of the caramel atop the baked goods, then waited for it to congeal, showing everyone a new way it could be used.

"If you eat them like this, the sweetness of the sugar comes at you more directly, so I believe this should let you cut back on the amount you use in the dough. And it should also pair quite well with desserts like the fried one Yang demonstrated a little while ago."

I also showed them how to prepare fresh cream. Most inns already knew how to make milk fat, so that made the explanation quite simple. After all, whipping the fresh cream further and separating out the fat was how milk fat was made.

"If you whip it with a wooden skewer like we did with the eggs before, it ends up nice and fluffy like this. You can also add more sugar to it, and it should pair quite well with sweet fruits. It also has a rather intriguing appearance, so I'm sure your customers will enjoy it."

I went ahead and showed off each of the things I had mentioned and had everyone give them a taste test, which ended up taking quite a bit of time. But after this, I only had one topic left to cover.

"I'd also like to show you how to make something that only uses kimyuus eggs, no fuwano or poitan."

"Only kimyuus eggs? Who'd order something that stinks that badly of poverty?" Lema Geit protested for the first time in a while.

I kept my hands moving properly as I shot her a smile. "Kimyuus eggs have a bad reputation because poor people tend to eat them in place of meat, right? But they can be an amazing ingredient when you use them in other ways. And you can buy as many eggs as you please here in Genos, so it would be a real waste not to use them."

To start with, I simply used sugar to make sweet rolled eggs. When Tapas took a bite, his eyes immediately opened wide. "Oh my. It's been quite some time since I last ate kimyuus eggs, but it goes quite well with this sweet flavoring."

"Right. Back in my home country, people would do things like add sugar to make them sweeter or salt to make them saltier."

As people were trying those samples, I had Toor Deen and the others get our steaming baskets ready. Though it would definitely take a fair bit of effort, I intended to demonstrate how to make steamed pudding as well. “With the chatchi mochi we served you before, you have to extract the starch from the chatchi first, which takes a lot of effort. We don’t have enough time today for that, so instead, I was thinking I’d show you how to prepare a different unusual sweet.”

It took a fair bit of doing to make enough for this many people, but the process itself was really simple. You just combined whipped eggs with karon milk and sugar, then steamed them in a container with a lid. Rimee Ruu took charge of measuring out the proportions for the ingredients, so it was probably going to taste even better than it did when I first unveiled it in the castle town.

“Since we’re so short on time, we’re going to have to pass it around and have each of you take a single bite. Is that all right?”

With that we used a large spoon to scoop the pudding out onto a plate, which we then passed around to all of the innkeepers. Even the folks who were leery of it at first had expressions of admiration and satisfaction on their faces after they tasted it.

“What a surprise. To think that you could make such a strange dish with kimyuus eggs. It feels like magic,” Jizeh remarked. Lema Geit also looked astonished. In a way, the pudding might have been the most surprising dish we had prepared all day.

“That’s all we have to tell you. If you combine this with the dough and fruit Yang taught you how to prepare, you should be able to produce a huge variety of different treats,” I concluded.

“But it’s such a wide variety that I don’t even know where to start. I’m seriously at a loss,” one of the closer innkeepers said, scratching his head as he spoke.

Then the guy next to him called out to me, “Hey, those things are called steaming baskets, right? How do we get ahold of those?”

“I had Yang help me purchase these.”

When my gaze turned toward him, Yang gave a slow nod. “They are sold in the castle town, and I am willing to act as an intermediary for anyone who wishes to purchase one. As I

mentioned before, they are not overly expensive."

Several of the innkeepers asked to do so on the spot. I figured that was proof of just how much they liked the steamed pudding. Or maybe they had tried the giba manju we served at our stalls before. Steaming baskets had a lot of uses outside of making sweets.

"Well then, that will wrap things up for today. When we have time, I would like to hold another study session like this one, which I will contact you about as soon as I can," Tapas said.

With the lesson over, around half of the innkeepers promptly exited the kitchen. However, the other half stayed, and they were all looking at me.

"Hey, these sweets are all well and good, but what about giba meat? You still haven't sold any at the meat market."

"Ah. We got official permission from the castle town to go ahead with that just yesterday. We should be able to start selling meat there around the end of the yellow month."

"What do you mean by 'around the end'?" one of the innkeepers inquired, crowding around me.

"Er, for the moment, all I know is that we should be ready around ten days from now. But from what I'm told, the official dates for the meat market aren't announced until the day before."

"How much meat are you going to sell? Will we not be able to get any unless we show up first thing in the morning?"

"We're planning to bring around fifteen boxes. The amount of each cut will vary, though."

"Fifteen boxes? Then only five inns will be able to buy any!"

I assumed they were getting that number from the fact that you had to buy at least three boxes in order to be allowed to pay the wholesale price.

"Well, we're not really sure yet how much demand there's going to be."

"Maybe none of us will jump right to buying five or ten boxes, but I'm sure nobody's gonna buy it at the higher price if they don't have to. That means only five inns will be able to buy any, right?"

"I suppose that's true. But we'll be happy as long as we don't have any leftover stock."

“Do you really think there’s any chance that you won’t sell everything you bring when you’ve got this many people still standing here asking about it?”

Sure enough, there were still more than ten of them in the room. They each belonged to a different inn, and if they were all after giba meat, it was inevitable that we would sell out.

“Even if you’re trying not to be greedy, you have to strike a balance, and fifteen boxes is way too few. The folks from the castle town didn’t buy it all up, did they?”

“No, they didn’t. Nobles are barred from monopolizing the supply. The decision was made that we should sell the same amount in the post town and the castle town. Though if there’s any left unsold in the castle town, they did say we could sell that portion in the post town instead.”

“They’ve got way more money to spare than us, so there’s no way those nobles would pass up the chance to buy giba meat. They’re sure to snatch it up even faster than we will.”

That side of things was going to be managed by Polarth and his people, so I didn’t have much to say about it.

Just then, Yumi stealthily approached and tugged on my sleeve. “Hey, Asuta, we’re still going to be able to buy giba meat separately, aren’t we?”

“Ah, yeah. We’ve arranged things so that the four inns we’ve had deals with prior to this won’t need to worry about it.”

“And you’re sure that includes us? We’re the only one that doesn’t buy complete meals, after all.”

“Don’t worry. I’ve made sure that everything will work out.”

“Thank goodness!” Yumi said with a sigh of relief.

As we talked, several of the other innkeepers started sulking childishly.

“Tch! So you lot can buy giba meat as often as you need without even having to go to the meat market, eh? You sure are sitting pretty.”

“Hee hee! I became Asuta’s friend right after he started doing business with his stalls, you know! It’s only natural to get some perks from that!” Yumi didn’t let anything intimidate her, even a

much older innkeeper.

And with that, the others just shrugged, sighed, and got ready to leave.

"Well, when you learn what day it's gonna be, let us know, okay? I'll be stopping by your stalls again soon."

"Oh, and thanks for helping out with the lesson. I'm definitely going to get right to trying some things out back at my inn."

"Yeah. Thank you all for coming out here."

The innkeepers then exited the kitchen. Tapas had been talking with Yang off to the side, but with them gone, he walked over to us with a smile.

"Thank you so much for your help today, dear guests from the forest's edge. This is the reward money for you from Lord Polarth."

"Ah, thank you very much."

This had been an official job from the castle town, so they were paying us for it. As the one who had provided the location, Tapas must have been paid a similar amount.

"Good work today, Sir Asuta. You certainly did demonstrate a great many different techniques today. This has proven quite fruitful for me as well," Yang said.

"Your advice should be helpful for us too. Now these girls will be able to make even more delicious treats."

Rimee Ruu, Toor Deen, and Sheera Ruu all bowed to Yang as well, and he gave them a satisfied smile in return.

"I have heard that you will be participating in Lady Odifia's tea parties once every few months going forward. I shall pray to be invited on those same days," Yang said to Toor Deen.

"Yeah, I'd love to eat your sweets again too! Thanks so much for everything today!" Rimee Ruu cheerfully chimed in.

After that, we left Tanto's Blessing after having spent a full two hours in the kitchen. I was feeling pretty exhausted, but my sense of fulfillment easily overcame that.

"Ah, there you are, our friends from the forest's edge. You did splendidly today," a voice called out once more as we stepped onto the street. When I turned to look, I saw Jizeh smiling at us. "This works out perfectly. It seems this group here was waiting for you."

“Huh? For us?”

There were a number of tall figures standing there beside Jizeh, all clearly from Sym. One of them bowed and pulled back his hood.

“It has been some time. Asuta of the Fa clan, isn’t it? Do you remember me?”

He was a middle-aged man with features that clearly marked him as an easterner. His nose was high-bridged, his lips were thin, and his face was narrow. His long black hair was tied up in the back, and his skin was noticeably darker than that of the people of the forest’s edge. The strong light shining in his eyes was definitely familiar.

“Ah, are you Kukuluel of the Black Flight Feathers?”

“Yes. I am Kukuluel Gi Adumuftan, and I am glad to see you looking well,” Kukuluel replied, speaking incredibly smoothly for an easterner. “I’m truly grateful to have run into you today. I apologize for asking, but could I trouble you for a bit of your time?”

“Huh? You’ve got business with me?”

“Any person of the forest’s edge would do, but I have only truly gotten to know you and Ludo Ruu. There are a number of matters I would like to confirm regarding the new path through the forest’s edge,” Kukuluel stated in an incredibly calm tone.

I had no idea what was going on, but I also couldn’t see any reason to turn his request down.

3

A few minutes later, we found ourselves having a seat in The Ramuria Coil. We could have just stood around and talked, but since Jizeh had happened to be with us, she had extended an invitation.

The inn was located off a side path from the main road, and looked to be a large old building about the same size as The Kimyuus’s Tail.

As Jizeh led us into the dining hall, an aroma started tickling my nose. Rather than being an intentional bit of ambience, though, it seemed to be the scent of herbs from the kitchen, which was clinging to everything. A number of different smells were mingling

together in a way I wasn't exactly familiar with, but it wasn't at all unpleasant.

Furthermore, there were tapestries with beautiful patterns on them hanging from the walls, strangely shaped jars, and even the bones of what was likely a gyama decorating the place. A small plate had been placed on the wooden table we were sitting at, upon which sat a number of dried flower petals, creating a rather unusual atmosphere.

"This is a wonderful inn. I had no idea there was a place such as this in the post town," Kukuluel remarked while taking a seat, earning a joyful smile from Jizeh.

"It makes me happier than anything to hear an easterner like you say something like that. I'll bring out some tea in celebration of making your acquaintance, so hold on for just a moment."

"I thank both Sym and Selva for bringing us together."

As Jizeh headed off into the kitchen, Kukuluel turned to face us once more. He had separated from his companions in front of the inn, which meant that it was only him and the four of us at the table.

"I heard that the people of the forest's edge who ran stalls were on good terms with an inn known as The Kimyuus's Tail, which is where I learned about that meeting you were just at. And as we were waiting for you, that woman came out and started talking to us."

"Oh, is that how it went? So, what business do you have with us, exactly?"

I had a favorable impression of Kukuluel, certainly. He was calm but had a sharp gaze, which reminded me of Ryada Ruu, and that boosted my opinion of him a bit. But since I had previously been betrayed by Sanjura, who had reminded me of Shumiral when he'd been away, I was still remaining a bit cautious.

"As I said before, I would like to talk to you about the path cleared through the forest's edge. Before talking to the nobles in the castle town, I wanted to hear from all of you, as you are the ones who know how things truly are."

"Oh, then you still haven't gone to the castle town yet?"

“Correct. We only just made it back to Genos.” That meant he had started looking for people of the forest’s edge before even dealing with his exhaustion from the long trip. What could he possibly need to discuss with us that urgently?

“The first thing I wish to ask is this... I heard that the work of clearing the path was carried out solely by people from Mahyudra. Is that true?”

“Yes. They handled the work during the rainy season.”

“It was only people of Mahyudra? No westerners?”

“That’s right. Of course, there were people from Genos giving orders, but the northerners did all the manual labor.”

Kukuluel gave a small sigh, though his expression remained unchanged. “Working in the forest of Morga where giba live must have been quite dangerous. Did they suffer any sort of harm?”

“A starving giba appeared at the worksite once and caused a serious incident. A large number of people were injured, but fortunately no one lost their life.”

Kukuluel fell silent.

“Oh, but the people who were seriously injured were all guards keeping watch. The folks from Mahyudra only got light injuries. And it was a man from Mahyudra who ultimately took the giba down,” I added, sensing that he was worried about the well-being of the northerners.

“I see. As the one who proposed clearing the path, I feel quite bad about that.”

“Well, that’s just how dangerous the forest of Morga is.”

“But it would have been better for people who were hired for a fair price to take on that risk. To hear that northerners who will never be rewarded for their efforts suffered so pains me greatly.” Since he was an easterner, Kukuluel’s expression didn’t budge in the least, but I could see the regret in his black eyes. “There is no need for you westerners to worry about such things. I simply ask that you allow me to speak of my feelings as an easterner.”

“To someone from the east, both the west and the north are friendly nations, aren’t they? It’s like how we’re friendly with easterners and southerners, so I think we can understand where

you're coming from."

Also, I had formed bonds with northerners like Chiffon and Eleo Chel, but I decided not to bring anything up that would only make our conversation more complicated.

"I had heard that people from Mahyudra would be assigned this task, certainly. But I'm more than a little surprised to hear that the nobles had them complete the entire job without hiring any westerners to assist with the work."

"Yeah. They happened to be free during the rainy season, so apparently it was just convenient to have them do it all. And they ultimately did finish the job all on their own."

"I don't think it was all bad for them, though. The people from Mahyudra are able to eat tasty food now," Rimee Ruu chimed in.

Kukuluel turned toward her questioningly. "Tasty food? What do you mean, exactly? Did the people of the forest's edge give them giba meat?"

"No. We worked to improve the dishes they eat using the ingredients that they're given," I explained. "The nobles of Genos gave their approval because we explained that eating good food would allow them to work harder. This isn't something we're supposed to discuss publicly, though, so could you please keep it a secret?"

"I see," Kukuluel replied with another sigh. "So you don't hate northerners, then? I'm grateful to hear that."

"I'd say that pretty much nobody here in Genos hates northerners. After all, this place is pretty far from the border with Mahyudra."

"Ah, like how we people of the grasslands do not hate the citizens of Jagar. But even if you do not hate them, you still must treat them as people from an enemy nation. I can relate to that feeling," Kukuluel said with an intense look in his eyes. "The people of Jagar whom I have seen in Selva have all been impulsive and blunt. Those are not traits possessed by the people of Sym...but our allies from Mahyudra are similar in nature, so I personally find it charming."

"Folks from Mahyudra and Jagar are similar?"

"Yes. They may be closely related to each other. Their heights

differ greatly, but their pale skin and robust builds are quite similar. Perhaps they were a single people before the four great kingdoms were established," Kukuluel replied, narrowing his eyes as if staring off at something in the distance. "There is a legend that the present territory of Jagar originally belonged to Sym. It may simply be a lie invented to justify Sym stealing land from Jagar, and yet...from what I am told, the people of Jagar rub panam sap on their skin in order to protect it from the strong sunlight. Taking that into consideration, one could easily imagine that they were originally from the north, where the sunlight is weaker."

"Oh, so easterners have a legend like that? I've never heard anything about it before."

"At any rate, the four great kingdoms were established hundreds of years ago, so there is no way of knowing the truth of the matter. And after so much time has passed, the territory of Jagar has become the beloved homeland of the people who live there now regardless." Kukuluel shook his head, then turned to face directly toward me. "I have gotten off topic. The new path through the forest's edge was safely completed, correct?"

"Yes. Though travelers and merchant groups haven't been given permission to use it yet."

"Because we were tasked with being the first. They told us that before we departed from Genos." Kukuluel didn't seem to have any objections to that. Perhaps, as such an experienced traveler, there was no reason for him to be concerned.

Jizeh then returned holding a tray. "Sorry for the wait. I'd feel like a bad host if I only brought you tea, so you can snack on these as well if you would like."

"O-Oh, thank you. We really appreciate it," I told her.

"Think nothing of it. Consider it thanks for everything you people of the forest's edge taught me today," Jizeh said with a gentle smile, and then she started placing the food and drinks down on the table. Sheera Ruu and Toor Deen then leaned forward after staying silent since we had arrived.

"What a mysterious aroma. Is this Sym cooking?" Sheera Ruu asked.

“Cooking is probably giving it too much credit. It’s just a bit of a snack to go with the tea,” Jizeh replied.

The large plate left in the center of the table held a stir-fry made with herbs and beans, while the smaller plate had what looked to be a dish boiled in sweetened tau oil.

“Go right ahead. This is gigi tea, and this is nafua tea. Please, drink whichever you’d like.”

I had tried making gigi tea myself. It was a strange beverage, with an aroma similar to that of coffee. As for nafua, I’d definitely heard that name before too. If I remembered correctly, it was a very bitter, grassy herb from Sym.

“Are you going to have some too, Rimee Ruu? You can just give it a single sip.”

Rimee Ruu was still under the age of ten, so people from other houses were allowed to share beverages with her. She ended up taking a tiny taste of my nafua tea.

“This is fine! It’s not too bitter!”

I gave it a try too and found that it tasted like a strong green tea. Compared to chatchi and zozo tea, it wasn’t all that difficult to drink.

“You serve gigi and nafua tea here at this inn? That seems unusual for the post town,” Kukuluel chimed in.

“That may be so,” Jizeh replied with a smile. “Even though you can purchase all sorts of herbs here in the post town now, most other inns don’t know how to use them. But I learned a lot from my mother and my customers from the east often share their knowledge with me as well, which is a big help.”

“I see,” Kukuluel said, taking a sip of gigi tea. For him, these were all tastes from his homeland.

Meanwhile, Sheera Ruu and Toor Deen were focused solely on the snacks. The stir-fry made with dark red herbs and what looked like soybeans was giving off a seriously spicy smell.

“Are these tau beans, perhaps?”

“Yes. I felt they would pair best with these herbs, so I went ahead and gave it a try,” Jizeh said.

Tau beans were an ingredient similar to soybeans, and I didn’t think I ever would have considered stir-frying them with herbs. I

grabbed a little for my personal plate and took a bite of it. Right away, a powerful spiciness filled my mouth, and went all the way up through my nose as well. However, it didn't seem to be the sort of spiciness that lingered on the tongue. It hit you suddenly and then disappeared just as quickly, making for a rather intriguing flavor. As for the tau beans, they didn't seem to have been boiled in water, so they were still nice and crisp. Honestly, it felt like a dish that would pair better with booze than tea.

"This is really good. Did you use ira leaves in this?"

"Ira leaves and all sorts of other things. I stir-fried the tau beans along with some herb scraps that I had been using to marinate meat."

Now that she mentioned it, I *was* able to pick up on a bit of a meaty taste. The flavor really had a lot of depth to it.

"This one's sort of salty, but it's good too! What sort of meat is this?" Rimee Ruu asked while taking a bite of the other dish.

"That is maru," was the reply. Maru were a type of crustacean similar to krill. There weren't any edible fish here in Genos, so maru were the only kind of seafood that was locally available.

"I removed the salt from some salted maru, then steeped them in herbs, sugar, and tau oil. Sugar and tau oil are both ingredients from Jagar, but my customers from the east seem to enjoy them."

"Yes. It's very good. It wouldn't be unexpected at all to encounter such a flavor in Sym," Kukuluel commented while trying the same dish. "In Sym, we use honey in place of sugar and different kinds of beans than tau beans, some of which we ferment before eating. Those would be difficult to obtain in Genos, but you have done an admirable job of recreating dishes from the east using ingredients from Jagar."

"I wouldn't go so far as to say I recreated anything. I just wanted to make my eastern customers happy." Jizeh clearly possessed an unusual amount of skill for someone from the post town.

Sheera Ruu and Toor Deen seemed to have something on their minds as they tried the second dish.

"You're wonderfully skilled," Kukuluel continued. "I never would have expected that I would be reminded of the flavors of my

homeland like this here in the post town."

"I'm glad to hear you like it. Please, take your time." And with that, Jizeh disappeared back into the kitchen.

Sheera Ruu then brought her face close to mine. "Asuta, I can't help but be reminded of Varkas. It's not like these dishes are similar to the ones he makes, but still..."

"That must be because Varkas is also good at using herbs. There aren't many people who can use herbs from Sym so skillfully."

Now that she brought him up, I realized I hadn't seen Varkas for several months now. Was he doing okay over in the castle town?

As that thought passed through my mind, Kukuluel spoke up once again. "If we take too long the sun will set, so let us continue our conversation. Regarding the path cleared through the forest's edge..."

As it turned out, he didn't have any particularly unusual questions. He asked how the path had been made, how long and wide it was, and how wary they would need to be of giba. It was all basic stuff.

"So, you're saying that giba generally won't attack if we are riding in wagons?"

"Right. Giba hate loud noises, so unless they're really hungry or irritated, they won't go near people. I've traveled along the paths through the forest's edge plenty of times, and I haven't come across a giba even once. But since it's a new route, it may take a little while before the giba start to recognize it as human territory."

"I see."

"Giba also aren't capable of jumping higher than their own heads. The workers lined up some of the excess lumber they produced along either side of the path, so that should help guard against giba a bit." That said, a starving giba could still force its way through, so I needed to make sure to warn him about that possibility. "Oh, and there's one more important thing I need to tell you. Giba sleep until the sun hits its peak. On rare occasions, you might see one that woke up earlier than that prowling around, but heading out before the sun is at its peak would be the safest way to make the trip."

"Is it dangerous at night, then?"

"It is. Starving giba will often head toward human settlements at night and pillage fields. They probably wait until the humans are asleep before they approach the Daleim lands." That all seemed readily apparent from my point of view.

Kukuluel brought his fingers together in a strange manner and bowed his head. "Thank you. This has been quite helpful. Now I can feel free to head to the castle town."

"Oh yeah? But they probably could have told you everything I just said."

"And yet, there is no guarantee that the nobles would convey it to us properly."

"Sorry to ask, but do you not trust the folks from the castle town?"

"That's not it," Kukuluel replied with a shake of his head. "I cannot see any reason for the nobles to deceive us about this. But I believe it is quite dangerous to trust the words of nobles wholeheartedly."

"Oh, right. Now that I think about it, you dealt with Cyclaeus for quite a while, didn't you?"

"Yes. That man lied to us a great many times, causing us to suffer significant losses." In that case, it was no real surprise that he'd become skeptical of nobles. "But Duke Genos cast judgment on that man, and he seems to act quite fairly. Torst and Polarth, who took charge of our business dealings, also seem trustworthy. Of course, I will need a little longer before I can truly trust them completely."

"Yeah. That's the sort of thing you have to confirm with your own two eyes," I said with a smile, finally understanding Kukuluel's reason for approaching us. "I'm looking forward to you all returning to Sym and proving that the route is safe. I'd love to see more customers from Sym myself."

"Of course. If things go well, the number of people visiting Genos from Sym may as much as double. There are not many towns as prosperous as this one, so securing a safer route that leads here will be a great boon for many of my people."

That seemed to bring the question and answer session to a close,

just in time for us to finish off the tea and snacks.

"Well then, it's about time for us to be heading back. We still have to prepare dinner, after all," I said.

"Thank you so much for giving me your precious time. Take this as my thanks."

"Oh, no, you don't need to do that."

"There is no need to be so proper. It's just a small token of gratitude."

The item in question was a strangely shaped stone. It didn't look like a natural shape, though, so the stone must have been carved. The little round figure was about three centimeters in diameter, and it had some small protuberances that looked like a head and legs.

"Oh, that's, um...a gyuroreekeh muuwa, isn't it?!" Rimee Ruu suddenly exclaimed, leaving me to wonder what those crazy words were. But when she said it, Kukuluel's eyes opened just a touch wider in surprise.

"You know of the gyuroreekeh muuwa? But they are animals that are only supposed to live in Sym."

"Yeah! The traveling performers who came during the festival showed us one!"

That finally jogged my memory. The little handcrafted item had been made in the shape of one of the animals we had seen in the Gamley Troupe's tent, which had looked a lot like an alligator snapping turtle.

"The large gyuroreekeh muuwa turtle is an animal that presides over longevity and health. This stone contains wishes for such things within it, so please, take it with you."

He even had enough of them on him to give one to all of us, causing Rimee Ruu to let out an excited, "Yay!" Sheera Ruu's eyes also narrowed nostalgically as she stroked the shiny black shell. She was probably remembering the time when she had gone through the Gamleys' tent paired up with Darmu Ruu.



"Normally, we would give you a gift of some of the ingredients we brought here, but there is now a rule that requires us to bring them to the castle town first."

"Oh, yeah, we've heard about that too. Were you able to get ahold of some unusual stuff in the capital, then?"

"We purchased what we normally do in the capital. Aside from that, we stopped by a region known as Barud along the way to purchase some goods that are not often seen elsewhere. Our stop there was what delayed our return to Genos."

"Barud, huh? I haven't heard that name before."

"It is a region in the center of the western kingdom next to a massive inland sea. The town there is very prosperous, similar to Genos and the capital city, Algrad." Kukuluel then narrowed his eyes more gently than any other time I had seen him do so today. "Do you remember when we talked in front of your stall before my company left? We spoke of a merchant group known as the Silver Vase."

"Oh yeah, we did. What about them?"

"I couldn't forget the tale of them traveling all around the continent to places like Genos, Aboof, Mahyudra, and Algrad with a small group of only ten people, and it made me wish to travel farther than usual. That is why we stopped in the town of Barud."

"Really? I'll be looking forward to seeing what sort of ingredients you brought, then."

"Good. I shall pray for some of our inventory to make it to you. By the way, did the Silver Vase manage to return to Genos safely? Unfortunately, we did not encounter each other on the road."

"They did. It was half a month later than scheduled, but they made it here just fine. Oh, and the man who used to lead the group stayed behind at the forest's edge."

"At the forest's edge?" Kukuluel repeated with a questioning gaze. It wasn't really a secret or anything, so I went ahead and told him.

"Yeah. He changed gods from Sym to Selva and became a person of the forest's edge. He's a really good friend of mine."

Kukuluel bent ever so slightly backward when he heard that. Though his face remained expressionless, he must have been

seriously surprised. “An easterner became a person of the forest’s edge...? What do you mean? Why would he do such a thing?”

“He wants to marry into the forest’s edge. But he’s still planning to work with his merchant group like he used to.”

The look in Kukuluel’s eyes grew serious. I was getting a little worried that he might not like the fact that Shumiral had cast aside his homeland of Sym, but then he slowly leaned toward me and said, “How interesting. Would it be possible to speak with that man?”

“Huh? But why?”

“Pure curiosity. I cannot help but be interested in one with such a free spirit.”

“I-I see. You aren’t upset about him changing gods, are you?”

“I am not. Easterners are my brethren, but westerners are my allies. If he were a part of my family, I’m sure I would have attempted to convince him to reconsider, but I cannot think of any reason a stranger changing gods should bother me,” Kukuluel said, a hint of enthusiasm shining through his calm tone. “In all likelihood, we will be visiting the forest’s edge in order to perform a preliminary inspection of the new path. Could you introduce me to him then?”

“Well, he’s got work to do as a hunter, but if you would be able to meet with him before the sun hits its peak, it might be possible.”

“That man also works as a hunter? Then I’m all the more interested to meet him.”

Was this intense curiosity what led the people of the eastern grasslands to travel about the continent in spite of the dangers? I was really starting to want to see Shumiral and Kukuluel talk to one another.

“In that case, I’ll go ahead and ask the leading clan heads about your request today. If you’re planning to carry out the inspection tomorrow, that happens to be a day off from work for me, so I’ll be able to accompany you.”

“I would be glad to have you with us.”

I nodded, accepting Kukuluel’s proposal.

And so, our long discussion finally came to an end.

Chapter 2: The New Path

1

It was now the day after the study session in the post town and my reunion with Kukuluel—the eighteenth of the yellow month. Just as he had declared yesterday, Kukuluel and his group would be coming to inspect the new path. A message officially informing us about their visit had arrived at the forest's edge around sunset yesterday, and thanks to the leading clan head Dari Sauti going out of his way to pass the news along to the Fa house, Ai Fa and I were able to head over there to observe.

"We sure are starting early today. You know there's no real need for you to be there when Shumiral and that other man meet each other, don't you?" Ai Fa said while handling Gilulu's reins.

"Yeah, but I'm interested in Kukuluel myself. And honestly, I'd sort of like to hear what he has to say to Shumiral too."

"You get interested in the oddest things sometimes. Since you finally have a day off, shouldn't you use it to rest?"

"I'll be fine. These last five days have been busy, but I really enjoyed them."

I would generally take a day off after five days of working the stalls. But during this cycle, on my second day of work we'd had the Ruu clan wedding, then yesterday had been the dessert study session, so things had definitely been rather hectic. On top of that, the Ruu clan had taken the day off for both the wedding and the day that followed it, so we had been even busier than usual because of all the additional food we had needed to prepare for the stalls.

Even so, I wasn't just acting tough. My energy levels were still perfectly fine. Sheera and Darmu Ruu's wedding had been an incredibly happy occasion for me, and had wiped away any tiredness

I might have been feeling. Even now, four days later, the joy of the occasion was still lingering within me.

"Are you doing okay yourself, Ai Fa? Lately you've been hunting two or three giba a day like it's nothing."

"That is thanks to Brave's contributions, so I would say I've actually had an easier time than usual. Especially since I have been spending less time in the forest than I was before."

In the past, Ai Fa had typically stayed out in the forest from when the sun hit its peak to when it set in the evening. But she had decided that doing that on a daily basis would wear Brave down, so every few days she took half a day off. On those half days, she would just check that everything looked all right with the traps she had set and then head back home. Then she and her hunting dog would rest and do some light training that wouldn't strain their bodies.

"Ever since we welcomed Brave into the clan, I haven't used giba summoning fruit even once, and yet our hunts have still been seeing some incredible results. He really has been a massive help."

"Yeah. Hunting dogs sure are amazing. I really can't thank Shumiral enough for bringing them here."

If she wasn't using giba summoning fruit anymore, that meant Ai Fa was in less danger out in the forest, which made me feel happy and grateful as I petted Brave's head. The two of us were sitting together in the back of the swaying wagon—naturally, leaving him home alone had never been an option for my clan head.

"Hey there, Asuta, Ai Fa. You sure got here early!" Ludo Ruu said with a yawn as we arrived at the Ruu settlement.

Rimee Ruu was there beside him, and she energetically smiled and called out, "Good morning!" The two siblings were super curious about what was going on, so they would be accompanying us today.

"There're gonna be six of us in total, so one wagon should be plenty. I'm going to go get Jiza, so just hold on a bit, okay?" Ludo Ruu continued.

"Sure. Who else is coming along?" I asked.

"Darmu! I'll go get him!" Rimee Ruu chimed in.

"Oh. I'll come too, then, so I can say hello."

Ai Fa didn’t seem especially interested, so it was just Rimee Ruu and I who went over to the house where the newlyweds were now living together. It was the dwelling built beside Shin Ruu’s house, where Mida Ruu had previously lived. Shortly after the young Ruu chef knocked on the door, we heard Sheera Ruu say, “Coming!” as if she had been awaiting us. When the door opened a moment later, she greeted us looking the same as she had yesterday.

Darmu Ruu was also coming toward us from farther within the house, already clad in his hunter’s cloak. “It’s time, huh? I’ll be off, then.”

“Of course. Take care, Darmu,” Sheera Ruu replied with a gentle smile.

“I will,” her husband replied succinctly. Though their exchange wasn’t really any different from how they had interacted in the past, it still made me feel all warm inside.

“Hee hee, I’m glad you’re coming along, Darmu,” Rimee Ruu said with a beaming grin, quickly hugging Darmu Ruu’s arm. Today was the fourth day since they had started living apart, and since she was quite fond of her older brother, this was a precious opportunity for her to spend time with him.

At any rate, we went ahead and boarded the wagon, and Ludo and Jiza Ruu soon joined us. With Jiza, Darmu, Ludo, and Rimee Ruu all present, we had quite a lineup. After waiting for us to all sit down, Ai Fa used her whip to signal Gilulu to start moving.

“This sure is quite a crowd. I didn’t expect you to come along too, Darmu Ruu,” I remarked, earning me a glare out of the corner of the hunter’s eye.

“I see you’re as easygoing as always. Whose fault do you think it is that I had to get up this early?”

“Huh? Wait, are you saying it was my fault?”

“If you didn’t go and run your mouth about wanting to bring that suspicious easterner to the Ririn settlement, I wouldn’t need to be here.”

When he heard that, Ludo Ruu chimed in with a laugh. “Ha ha. It wasn’t like you were forced. You volunteered, didn’t you? There’s nothing to worry about with me and Jiza here.”

"What worry would there be? Are you concerned about Kukuluel?" I asked.

"We aren't, but Vina is. She spent all of last night worrying about whether that Kukuluel guy would try to do something to Shumiral for casting aside Sym."

Hearing that made me feel bad for her. And for Darmu Ruu too, since he'd had to get up this early for his sister's sake.

"I've met that Kukuluel guy myself, of course, and I never got the feeling that he'd do something like that, so I tried to tell her there was nothing to worry about, but she wouldn't listen," Ludo Ruu continued.

"That's because easterners use poison. We cannot let our guards down," Jiza Ruu calmly stated. He was observing today as a standin for his father, the leading clan head. "From what I am told, Shumiral also had a large amount of poisonous plant material hidden on his person when he joined us. The Ririn clan locked them all away, but Giran Ririn said that they could be used to take down ten enemies surrounding you all at once."

"Oh, that thing about travelers from Sym being able to take down ten outlaws single-handedly, right? Well, it's not like we can't do that too," Ludo Ruu noted.

"But looking at it another way, you could say that easterners are able to match the strength of hunters of the forest's edge when using poison. We need to be certain to keep that in mind."

Among our group, only Ludo Ruu, Rimee Ruu, and I had actually met Kukuluel, which had led to our conversation taking a strangely violent turn. Of course, it wasn't like we knew all of the man's thoughts just because we had met him, so it did make sense to be a little wary of him.

"Hey, it seems Shumiral has been waiting for us," Ai Fa called out as she brought the wagon to a stop.

A moment later, I saw Shumiral peering into the wagon through the space beside the driver's seat. "I have been, waiting for you, Jiza Ruu. May I, accompany you?"

"Why are you here? Isn't the plan to bring our visitors from Sym to the Ririn settlement after they complete the inspection?" Jiza Ruu

asked.

"Yes," Shumiral replied with a nod. "But I felt, I should go, to them instead. I was, a bit uneasy, about inviting someone unfamiliar, to the Ririn settlement."

"Hmm, but this wagon is already full."

"That is, no issue. I borrowed, a totos, from the Lea clan."

Over Shumiral's head, I spotted a totos with a piercing gaze staring into the wagon. It was the young totos that Rau Lea had personally purchased.

"So we really should be cautious of easterners?" Jiza Ruu questioned.

"No," Shumiral replied with a shake of his head. "The Black Flight Feathers, are a famous, merchant group. Though I am, unfamiliar with, their leader, I believe he, can be trusted. But if my judgment, happens to be mistaken, it would mean, disaster for the Ririn clan. So I wish, to observe him, personally first."

"I see. In that case, you may accompany us."

"Thank you."

And so, Shumiral ended up riding the totos alongside our wagon. Rimee Ruu, Ludo Ruu, and I lifted the flap in the back and stuck our heads out around the side to watch him with some difficulty. When he noticed what we were doing, the hunter slowed his pace briefly to make things easier for us, earning an excited giggle from Rimee Ruu.

"That looks fun! I wanna ride Ruuruu later!" she said.

"Hmm. Seems like folks from Sym really are skilled at handling totos," Ludo Ruu noted.

He was right, Shumiral really looked like he was in his element, riding on the totos's back. The way he leaned forward to grip the bird's reins looked totally natural, and the totos seemed to be running in a particularly animated way. The people of the forest's edge were definitely skilled when it came to riding totos, but Shumiral was on a whole other level, as if he and his mount were one.

After about an hour of traveling down the path, we finally arrived at the Sauti settlement. The plan was to meet up with Dari Sauti at

the new path, however, so we just passed straight on through and continued south. After the Sauti settlement, we also passed by the settlements of the Fei and Tamur—clans subordinate to the Sauti—along the way.

As we approached our destination, Ai Fa loosened up on the reins and said, "Hmm... I see. So they built this too, did they?"

My clan head slowed the wagon to a walking pace as we advanced, and I managed to see what Ai Fa had been referring to from out the back. A large gate had been constructed a short distance away from where the three-way intersection was, which must have been meant to restrict travel along the path toward our settlement. At present, though, the gate was open wide. The posts seemed finely made, and the doors looked rather sturdy too. It was over two meters tall, so it would be difficult to even see what was on the other side of it if it were closed.

However, there was forest off to either side of the path. If you went through it, you could easily get around the imposing gate. Still, the gate worked as a marker to indicate where travelers were not supposed to go. It was only meant to prevent them from carelessly wandering into the settlement at the forest's edge.

"It seems the nobles are already here," Ai Fa said, bringing the wagon to a stop soon after passing through the open gate. We all got out and circled around to the front, where we found the familiar sight of soldiers standing guard. They were members of the ducal guard, who fell directly under Melfried's command. Their official task was to guard the castle, but they would accompany their leader whenever he left the castle town.

"Hello there, members of the Ruu and Fa clans. Thank you so much for coming out. We arrived a touch early, but since Sir Dari Sauti was already present, we went ahead and got started," Polarth said, greeting us with a wave and a smile. He was also being guarded by the soldiers. If I recalled correctly, I hadn't seen him since Geol Zaza and Leiriss had competed at the forest's edge, which would have been over a month ago.

Beyond him, I spied Melfried clad in the elegant attire of an officer rather than in armor. Kukuluel was also there speaking with

him, and there were four other easterners around them.

"Melfried, it has been some time. We of the Ruu and Fa clan would also like to observe," Jiza Ruu said.

"Ah, Jiza Ruu. I am glad to see you are in good health. This is the leader of the Black Flight Feathers, Kukuluel."

Among the easterners, Kukuluel alone had his hood down. He gave a single bow, then looked toward me and Ludo Ruu.

"I am Kukuluel Gi Adumuftan. It has been some time since I last saw you, Ludo Ruu."

"Oh yeah, I remember you. You're looking well."

Rimee Ruu had seen him just yesterday, and she also gave a smile and a bow.

After waiting for us to finish with that, Melfried once again held out an arm toward us. "I have heard that you are already well acquainted with Ludo Ruu, Rimee Ruu, and Asuta. This is Jiza Ruu, who is acting on behalf of one the leading clan heads of the forest's edge, his younger brother Darmu Ruu, and the Fa clan head Ai Fa." At this point, Melfried knew all of our names, which I was very happy about. "Furthermore, that hunter is Shumiral of the Ririn clan, correct? I am aware that Kukuluel made a request to meet with you, but you went out of your way to travel here?"

Shumiral had also met both Melfried and Polarth while he had been pushing to be allowed to become a person of the forest's edge.

After tying his totos's reins to the wagon, Shumiral replied, "Yes," and stepped forward.

"So you are Shumiral? I am honored to meet you," Kukuluel said with a bow, which Shumiral returned.

"I am, also honored. I have heard many stories, about the prowess of, the Black Flight Feathers."

Though their ages and hair colors differed, you could definitely tell that they both came from Sym. In fact, seeing them face-to-face like this, they had a shockingly similar feel about them. The biggest difference I could pick out was that Kukuluel had a somewhat sharper look in his eyes—they were calm and yet vigorous, similar to Ryada Ruu's, so I didn't dislike them in the least.

Melfried was also watching the two of them carefully. When they

were done speaking, he said in a slightly raised voice, “Now then, we have already done what we need to here, so I believe it is about time for a detailed briefing about the new path.”

With that, Melfried proceeded to give us a rundown of the key points regarding the path, positioning himself so that everyone, including all of us, could hear. The first half essentially covered what I had discussed with Kukuluel yesterday. He wouldn’t ever try to deceive the merchant under the circumstances, and he didn’t have any reason to in the first place.

“Giba rarely ever approach humans, so there should be no serious danger. However, we have prepared a countermeasure against them, which I would like all of you from the forest’s edge to share your opinions on.”

Melfried signaled to one of the soldiers, who then presented a rather strange object to us. It was made of three long, thin metal rectangles, and was unlike any tool I had ever seen. Each rectangle had a hole at the top, and a leather strap passed through them to bundle them all together. But there was some slack to it, so when Melfried accepted it and gave a light shake of his hand, the pieces of metal bumped into one another and made a loud, piercing sound.

“I am told that giba dislike noise, so attaching a tool such as this to a wagon should be effective at keeping them away, correct?”

“Yes. This looks just like the tools we Sauti use to drive them away,” Dari Sauti commented.

“Indeed,” Melfried replied with a nod. “We used the information you provided us when we created it. So, you believe they should prove useful?”

“Yeah. If you add the sound this makes to the noise from the wagon rolling along, even a starving giba won’t come anywhere near you. Giba have a particular hatred of shrill, metallic noises.”

“In that case, we shall have travelers utilizing this path in the future equip their wagons with something similar. Fortunately, we have metalworkers from Jagar staying in the castle town at present.”

Was he talking about Diel’s group? I hadn’t expected her to pop up and have a role to play here.

“There is also something I wish to ask you, Kukuluel,” Melfried

continued. “How skilled are easterners at reading the characters of the west?”

“The characters? That varies from person to person, naturally. It is likely that most younger folks would hardly be able to read them at all.”

“I see. In that case, we shall need to use eastern characters as well to express the same meaning. Could you please step over this way?”

With that, Melfried guided us over to the gate we had passed through a short while ago. He then ordered the soldiers to close the gates, revealing writing that had been carved into them. And it seemed that black dye had been applied to those engraved characters as well. Since it was written in the western language, the text resembled hieroglyphs, and I couldn’t read it at all.

“The laws of Genos regarding the forest’s edge are written here. We intend to erect a sign with the same information at the end of the path.”

Melfried gave another signal, and one of the soldiers began slowly and carefully reciting what was written there.

First, the sign explained the laws regarding the forest of Morga. Gathering the fruits that grew within was a serious crime, and those who did so would be whipped, branded as criminals, and exiled from Genos. Then it was stated that the forest contained giba, mundt, giiz, and various poisonous insects, so it was not to be entered carelessly. There was also a declaration that it was strictly forbidden to use poisons brought from the outside on the creatures living there. Anyone who did so would suffer the same punishments mentioned above.

I couldn’t help but tilt my head when I heard that last part. *So using poison to hunt giba is against the laws of Genos, not just the laws of the forest’s edge? And the punishment is pretty hefty too, if it’s the same as what you’d get for harvesting the fruits of the forest.* Sure, it was a lighter punishment than the one the forest’s edge would administer, which was being scalped, but that still really caught my attention. Still, it wasn’t exactly a good time for me to speak up, so I held my tongue and simply kept listening attentively.

Following that was a part outlining the settlement at the forest's edge. Firstly, all the laws of Genos also applied there. Unauthorized entry into a home, violence toward a resident, or acts of theft were all forbidden, as you'd expect.

There were also two other points that were specifically noted. The first was that people were not permitted to enter the settlement without a specific purpose. And second, the people of the forest's edge were given autonomy when it came to protecting the peace in our settlement. If someone who wasn't one of us entered our territory, we had the right to question their reason for being there. And if our people didn't find their reason to be good enough, we could force them to leave.

Furthermore, anyone who committed crimes at the forest's edge would be judged according to our laws. The people of the forest's edge punished crimes more harshly than the laws of Genos, and we had the right to carry out those punishments.

"As an example, let us say a thief forced their way into a house at the forest's edge. According to the laws of Genos, that person would be whipped and branded as a criminal, but what would the punishment be according to the laws of the forest's edge?"

"If you enter the home of another without permission, you are to have a toe cut off," Jiza Ruu replied.

"I see," Melfried said with a nod.

Beside him, Polarth gave a strained laugh. "When that criminal is apprehended, the people of the forest's edge are permitted to exercise their own laws. Or they can decline to do so and hand the offender over to the guards. We would like you to determine which punishment would be more suitable on a case by case basis."

"Hmm... Personally, I believe townsfolk should be judged according to the laws of town. Still, I'm grateful to hear that we are given the choice to do as we deem proper," Jiza Ruu said.

"Indeed. I have full faith that the people of the forest's edge would not needlessly harm others without any proof."

Was Melfried saying that because we had worked so hard to take down Cyclaeus together? Back then, no matter how furious the people of the forest's edge became, they never took up arms until

they had solid proof. And Melfried had been able to observe that forbearance the whole time, up close and personal.

"The people of the forest's edge displayed great strength in the recent swordsmanship tournament. I cannot imagine outlaws deciding to enter your settlement now, especially if they are informed of the autonomy you have been granted," Melfried said.

"I very much hope that is the case. The women and children of the settlement must not be exposed to danger," Jiza Ruu stated.

"I was thinking that I would like to construct a guard station here in the future. That would serve to protect both the travelers and the settlement alike."

As Melfried and Jiza Ruu talked, Kukuluel and his people were silently watching and listening off to the side. Our hunters were keeping an eye on them in turn, making for a rather unusual state of affairs.

"There is one last point to discuss. This is an especially crucial matter, so we made certain to write it separately."

Melfried then directed the soldier to read the final line. In striking characters, it stated, "Setting foot on Mount Morga in the center of the forest is punishable by death."

"This is common knowledge to the people of the forest's edge and the citizens of Genos, but setting foot on Mount Morga is the greatest of taboos. Whether they are from Sym or Jagar, we wish for everyone to know that none who break that law shall be spared the death sentence, regardless of their reason for doing so."

Kukuluel's eyes narrowed ever so slightly as he looked at Melfried. "I can think of no reason for someone to want to traverse the forest where giba roam in order to approach the mountain in any case, but why is that act seen as such a serious crime?"

"The forest of Morga is ruled by three types of beasts: the varb wolves, the giant madarama snakes, and the red savages. If those beasts are angered, Genos will be led to ruin. To the independent settlers who once lived in this area, Mount Morga was their god."

"Ah, so Mount Morga is a holy land? I understand," Kukuluel readily stated, bringing his fingers together in a complex manner. "I shall make certain that my brethren back in our homeland are

informed as well. Easterners should understand even better than westerners how serious of a crime violating a sacred land is, so you have nothing to worry about."

"I certainly hope that is the case. I would also like you to inform them of the law regarding poison mentioned before."

"The law that states the beasts of Morga are not to be harmed using poison, correct? Is that also related to your reverence for Morga?"

"Indeed. If travelers are assaulted by giba along this path that has been forged by human hands, they can feel free to use poison. But there is a strong taboo against entering the forest of their own volition and poisoning the beasts within. That is why the hunters of the forest's edge have always hunted giba without using such methods."

"Oh, so that's part of the agreement with the lord of Genos? I thought it was taboo because using poison is cowardly," Ludo Ruu casually interjected.

Jiza Ruu's narrowed eyes turned toward his younger brother. "I believe our leading clan head Donda has informed you of the origin of all of our laws at least once, Ludo."

"As if I could remember the story behind every single one. It's not like I'd ever use poison in the first place anyway. Ah, hey, I get it, you don't have to get angry with me!"

Ludo Ruu seemed to have gotten better at knowing when to retreat before he earned a scolding lately. At any rate, after observing that interaction between the two brothers, Melfried turned toward Kukuluel once more.

"No one is to set foot on Mount Morga, and the animals of the land are not to be harmed using poison. Those were the conditions laid down for allowing people to live at the foot of the mountain. And that agreement was carried forward from the independent settlers to the house of Genos. It is imperative that none commit such taboo acts, in order to maintain the friendship between the west and east."

I couldn't help but feel a chill run down my spine as I looked toward Mount Morga to the east. The mountain was covered in the

same sort of lush greenery as the wider forest at its base, and it looked as grand and as divine as the terrifying legend about it suggested.

Two hundred years ago, when the house of Genos came to this land, that mountain was seen as a god... And the ones who revered it were the ancestors of folks like Milano Mas, Shilly Rou, and Lema Geit.

Nowadays, the people of the forest's edge treated the forest at its base as their mother. That mysterious sacred land stood there right in the center of our mother forest.

So even though Melfried and the other nobles don't see Morga as a god, they still treat it as a holy land that absolutely must not be entered, huh? That's a little strange to hear.

As that thought passed through my head, Melfried's explanation turned back toward the path itself.

All the while, Mount Morga just stood there imposingly, caring nothing for the thoughts and actions of us petty humans.

2

Half an hour later, Melfried and company had completed their explanation and quietly left. The members of the Black Flight Feathers followed after them, leaving only Kukuluel behind.

"The other members of my group have business to take care of and left ahead of me. I, however, wish to talk with you, Shumiral. Would that be acceptable?"

"Yes. If the leading, Ruu clan, permits it, then I would like, to do so."

After Shumiral glanced in his direction, Jiza Ruu nodded and said, "Of course. The leading clan head Donda Ruu has already given his permission. But we would like to be present as well. Do you have any objections?"

"Of course not. If it allows me to form a bond with all of you from the forest's edge, then I am incredibly grateful for the opportunity." Even when surrounded by hunters from the forest's edge, Kukuluel

remained perfectly calm.

From where he was standing off to one side, Dari Sauti called out to Jiza Ruu, "I would like to head back to our settlement. Would that be all right? I need to speak with the heads of our subordinate clans before we head out into the forest to hunt."

"Naturally. If there is an empty house nearby, though, we would appreciate being allowed to borrow it for a short while. I would be even more grateful if there were one without other houses around it."

"Ah, there is an old empty house at the edge of the Tamur settlement. I can guide you there if you would like."

And so, we ended up heading north up the path. Dari Sauti and Kukuluel each had their own separate wagons, so we had a total of three wagons and the totos Shumiral was riding on with us as we proceeded to the Tamur settlement.

The Tamur were a subordinate clan of the Sauti, and they were located at the southernmost extreme of the forest's edge. After greeting the clan head at the main house, he lent us the use of the vacant home, which looked rather rundown and must have been left to sit for quite a while. Once we parted ways with Dari Sauti, the four from the Ruu clan, Ai Fa and I, and Shumiral and Kukuluel stepped into the damp-smelling abode.

"First off, I would like to confirm something," Jiza Ruu said, sitting at the head of the group. "What exactly is it you wish to discuss with Shumiral, Kukuluel? And do you feel any anger toward Shumiral for casting aside Sym? I would like to once again hear what you have to say about that."

"Of course. All people are free to choose which god they serve. I cannot see any reason for me to feel anger or sadness at Shumiral changing gods when we are not even related."

"I see. Up until pretty recently, folks from Jagar called us traitors, though," Ludo Ruu remarked.

Kukuluel nodded lightly in return. "That is likely because the people of Jagar are so direct and impulsive by nature. But regardless of what others might think, I at least have no intention of criticizing Shumiral. Our connection is quite weak, since we come from

different domains to begin with."

"What's a domain?"

"Domains refer to the territories the tribes of Sym rule over. There are seven tribes, and seven domains in turn. I am from the Gi tribe, while I have heard that Shumiral once belonged to the Zi. Those tribes are allies who both live in the grasslands, so we will often join forces to do business."

"Well then, what do you have to discuss with Shumiral, considering he is no relative of yours? Asuta of the Fa clan said it was pure curiosity," Jiza Ruu inquired.

"Correct," Kukuluel replied with another nod. "I was already interested in Silver Vase, and when I heard that their former leader had changed gods and become a person of the forest's edge, that interest grew even stronger. In the history of the four great kingdoms, not many have changed from Sym to Selva, after all," Kukuluel said, narrowing his eyes rather than smiling. "Still, I believe I have some understanding of his reasons. I no longer find Shumiral's actions quite so strange."

"Oh? Why is that?"

"Because the people of the forest's edge are unlike other westerners. Though you are citizens of this kingdom, you live with a freedom that reminds me of independent settlers. To go further, you seem to be somewhat similar in nature to easterners."

"That's for sure. There are tons of guys at the forest's edge who feel a lot like you and Shumiral. Of course, they aren't so expressionless, though," Ludo Ruu said with a shrug. "There's a legend that the people of the forest's edge might have originally been a mix of folks from Sym and Jagar. I've got no clue if it's true or not, but here at the forest's edge, we've got both really silent guys like people from Sym and really noisy folks like southerners."

"So you do. But I feel that in spirit you are closer to us from the east than you are to southerners. Like you, we easterners see the grasslands, mountains, and seas as our mother," Kukuluel stated calmly. "For example, to our Gi tribe, the eastern god Sym is our father, while the grasslands are our mother. In Selva and Jagar, only independent settlers value the place they were born as greatly as

they do the four great gods, so wouldn't it make sense to say the people of the forest's edge are similar to those independent settlers, or even the citizens of Sym?"

"So did that clear up most of your curiosity about Shumiral, then?"

"No. That question might have been answered, but my curiosity remains. He has cast aside Sym and the grasslands in order to become a child of Selva and the forest. It must have taken unimaginable determination to do so. And I would like to ask what gave him such a strong resolve."

Shumiral had remained silent up until this point, but now he started squirming uncomfortably. "I understand, how you feel, Kukuluel. But it is, rather embarrassing, to discuss, that matter."

"Embarrassing?"

"Yes. I simply wished, to marry, Vina Ruu. Jiza, Darmu, Ludo, and Rimee Ruu, are all, her family...so it is embarrassing, to speak about, my feelings."

Rimee Ruu giggled at that, while Ludo Ruu outright laughed and said, "Yeah, you've been going on and on about all this high-minded stuff for a while now, but Shumiral just fell for Vina. There isn't much he can say now except to talk about what a great woman she is."

"Ludo Ruu, you are, embarrassing me."

"Then at least let it show on your face a bit. Shin Ruu may be pretty expressionless, but he still turns bright red when people tease him."

I had heard that Shumiral was trying to learn to let his emotions show as best he could, but that mostly seemed to apply to his feelings of joy. Aside from furrowing his brow ever so slightly, he really didn't look embarrassed in the least. Meanwhile, Kukuluel just kept on carefully observing my friend.

"I see. So your feelings for a woman were the source of your resolve, Shumiral?"

"Yes, that is correct."

"Personally, I think that's a wonderful thing."

That almost sent me reeling over. "U-Um, so is that enough to

satisfy you?”

“It is. Marrying the person you love is more important than anything. And it is no surprise that he would go so far as to change his very god and home after finding his partner in a foreign land.”

Ludo Ruu laughed in amusement again when he heard that and said, “You sure are a funny guy, Kukuluel! Your face still looks totally serious, even when you say something like that!”

“I was speaking seriously, though.”

“That’s what makes it so hilarious!”

“I see. To me, love is as weighty a topic as discussing the gods.”

Personally, I felt embarrassed rather than wanting to laugh. Jiza Ruu, Darmu Ruu, and Ai Fa, meanwhile, were just listening to Kukuluel speak without so much as twitching an eyebrow.

“Fortunately, I found my beloved wife within the Gi tribe. She and six of my children are back in Sym awaiting my return,” he continued.

“Wow, you have six kids? Well, I guess my parents had seven, so that’s not too crazy,” Ludo Ruu noted.

“No. My eldest and second eldest sons work alongside me, while my eldest daughter married into another house. If you include the child my wife was pregnant with when I left, I have ten children in total.”

“That’s amazing! It must be fun, having that many siblings!” Rimee Ruu said.

“Yes. I have been granted a very joyous life.”

I couldn’t help but feel that the conversation was drifting more and more off topic. Perhaps thinking the same thing, Jiza Ruu cut in to get things back on track. “Now then, is there anything else you wished to discuss with Shumiral?”

“All of my questions have been cleared up. And now, my curiosity about Shumiral feels the same as my curiosity about the people of the forest’s edge in general.”

“Meaning?”

“I’m terribly interested in the people of the forest’s edge, seeing as how you’ve captured Shumiral’s heart so completely. It isn’t just this Vina Ruu woman. All of you have a certain appeal that led him

to cast aside his god and his homeland. You truly are a wonderful people."

"You say that when we have hardly spoken at all so far?" Jiza Ruu asked.

"I do. I've sensed it ever since I saw how you spoke with the nobles. The respect they showed you despite their position proves how strong you are." Kukuluel's eyes then gently narrowed once again. "The people of the forest's edge moved from Jagar to Selva. If you had traveled to Sym instead, you surely would have been warmly welcomed as comrades."

"I have had, the same thought. But Jagar and Sym, are enemy nations, so it would not, have been possible, for them, to go east," Shumiral said, chiming in for the first time in a while. "Furthermore, the people of the forest's edge, resemble the people, of the grasslands, in nature. Not those of, the capital of Sym. If they had gone there, they would not, have been welcomed."

"Ah, that might be true... If the people of the forest's edge had shown up at Raorim, the capital of the eastern kingdom, rather than the Zigi grasslands, it could have ended in a battle rather than an opportunity to change gods."

"Really? The capital and the grasslands are that different, even though they're both part of Sym?" Ludo Ruu asked.

"Correct," Kukuluel replied. "The Rao tribe are the ones who unified Sym. The capital of Raorim was built by the Rao and the Rim using stone. The people who live there... I would say that they resemble westerners in nature. There seems to be a tendency for most people who live in cities of stone to be somewhat similar."

"Hmm. That sure sounds complicated. But now that you mention it, everyone who comes west is from those grasslands, right?" Ludo Ruu asked.

"Yes. The Rao and Rim tribes have planted their roots firmly in their own lands and do not move. They always instruct the people of the grasslands and the sea to come to them to make their grand business deals."

"There are easterners who live in the mountains too, aren't there?" I asked, digging up a piece of information from an old

memory.

This time, Kukuluel narrowed his eyes in a way that didn't look all that gentle. "Yes. The people of the mountains possess terrifying strength. And since they live in the mountains to the north, far removed from Jagar, they don't know what to do with that strength. They are very dangerous, and will at times point their weapons at their fellow easterners and our allies from Selva and Mahyudra."

If that legend Neeya of the Gamley Troupe had sung about was true, the ancestors of the people of the forest's edge, the Gaaze tribe, had left Sym due to a conflict between them and the people who lived in the mountains. And those same mountain folk had also repeatedly attacked the Rao who governed the country in the present day, to the point that the Rao had been driven from their homes. The one to save them from that predicament had been the White Sage, Misha.

That legend was from hundreds of years ago, but the people of the mountains are still seen just as vicious ever, huh? It was a relief to know they didn't live anywhere near us. A belligerent group who knew how to use poison sounded scarier than any other outlaws.

"I feel more affinity with the people of the forest's edge than I do with those from the mountains or the capital. That is why I can understand Shumiral's decision to live here," Kukuluel said, returning to our original topic of discussion. "Genos is also a very important land to me, so it brings me great joy to find people such as yourselves here. If you do not mind, I would like it if we could form a bond of friendship."

"You can't just say you want to be friends and have it happen. I mean, there's no point in being friends in name alone," Ludo Ruu remarked with a big grin. "But personally, I think I like you. If we get the chance to talk more, I could definitely see us ending up as friends."

"Yes. I would very much like to speak with you more."

"You're staying in the castle town though, aren't you? The Ruu clans resumed our work as hunters again yesterday, so we don't really have much time to go to town."

"I see," Kukuluel said, a look of disappointment in his eyes.

Seeing that, Jiza Ruu crossed his arms and said, “There’s no need to rush. You intend to visit Genos again many times in the future, don’t you?”

“Yes. At least once a year. Actually, our route takes us from Genos to Algrad and then back again, so it’s more like twice a year, I suppose.”

“Then we’ll get closer eventually, I’m sure. We know each other’s names now, so we’ve already taken the first step.”

Ludo Ruu blinked in amazement and turned to face his older brother.

“Whoa. Not that long ago, you wouldn’t have had any interest in easterners at all, Jiza!”

“We have already formed bonds with the townsfolk. If we are no longer going to disregard them, it makes sense to try to find the best way to interact with them, does it not?”

“That’s for sure. Still, it’s a real shock hearing you actually come out and say it,” Ludo Ruu said with a big grin, and Rimee Ruu smiled too. Ai Fa and Darmu Ruu remained impressively silent, simply watching what was going on. It felt like looking at a very well behaved wildcat and wolf.

Ai Fa and Darmu Ruu really are a lot alike. They can come across as unfriendly to outsiders, but they’re both really kind. Then there’s the fact that they’re usually very quiet, but they both have short tempers.

As that pointless thought passed through my head, Kukuluel spoke up again, “You hunters all seem quite busy. But do Asuta and the women have a bit more freedom?”

“Hmm? Why do you ask?” I said.

“If possible, I would like to eat dinner together. In the near future, Asuta should be receiving an invitation to a restaurant run by a chef who knows him.” There weren’t all that many chefs he could be referring to, but before I could figure out who he meant, Kukuluel went ahead and told us the answer. “I am speaking of Varkas of The Silver Star. He is the one who has been the most interested in the ingredients we brought with us. And so, that led to a special dinner invitation.”

“Varkas, huh? It’s true that we’ve interacted quite a few times, but where exactly did you hear about that?”

“That Polarth man told me. He seems to be quite fond of you as well.”

An invitation to Varkas’s restaurant was definitely something I would be thrilled to receive.

Rimee Ruu then turned toward Jiza Ruu with a smile. “Reina and Sheera Ruu will be so happy to get to eat more of Varkas’s cooking!”

“But we are unable to set foot in the castle town without permission from the nobles.”

“Huh? But why not? I wanna go!”

As he watched the young girl stomp her feet, Kukuluel tilted his head. “Polarth is the one who invited me to The Silver Star. If you are on friendly terms with him, could he not procure passes for you?”

“Hmm... Whether the nobles offer us passes is up to them. It is not something I can decide on my own,” Jiza Ruu said before turning my way. “Are you even interested in going to such a dinner, Asuta?”

“Of course! And I’m sure Reina and Sheera Ruu will feel the same way.”

“But—” two voices said simultaneously. They belonged to Ai Fa, and Darmu Ruu, who had finally broken their silence. My clan head was looking at the Ruu hunter probingly with one eyebrow raised.

“We both spoke at the same time. You can go first, Darmu Ruu.”

“No, I am in no rush to speak, so go ahead.”

“I see. In that case... When you head to the castle town as a chef, you require hunters to accompany you. It seems highly unlikely that the nobles would make any attempt to harm us at this point, but if you will be returning after the sun sets, you will need to bring guards.”

“Of course,” Jiza Ruu said with a nod, turning toward Darmu Ruu. “So, what is it that you wished to bring up?”

“I was going to say the same thing. Still, it’s not like the blessings of the forest have fully recovered just yet, so it shouldn’t be too difficult to have some Ruu hunters make time for it.”

Ludo Ruu couldn’t help but laugh. “Of course they’re going to

bring guards. There was no need to be in such a rush to bring that up. You two sure get worked up when it comes to Asuta and Sheera Ruu."

The two of them once again said, "Quiet, you," at the exact same time. And then they both shot heated glares at each other.

"At any rate, the leading clan heads and Polarth will ultimately be the ones to decide. I shall speak with the leading clan heads first, so if they give their permission, can we bring the matter up with Polarth then?" Jiza Ruu asked.

"Yes, that should be fine," Kukuluel replied with a bow. "If possible, could Shumiral attend as well? Varkas said that he wishes to hear the opinions of people born in Sym, so I am sure he would be pleased to have more of us attend."

"Understood. I'll convey that message."

"Ugh, then Vina's going to want to go too, isn't she? It's starting to feel like I'm gonna get left out this time," Ludo Ruu groaned.

The conversation had certainly taken an unexpected turn, but it was a happy surprise on my end. I really wanted to bring Toor Deen and Myme along too if I could.

"By the way, when will that dinner be held?" Ai Fa asked in an oddly urgent tone.

Kukuluel calmly replied, "Not too far in the future, I believe. Most likely, it will occur in three to four days."

"I see," Ai Fa said with a sigh of relief. I was probably the only one present who understood why. Since today was the sixteenth of the yellow month, my birthday was now only six days away.

We decided that we'd spend that day with just the two of us, I thought, shooting Ai Fa a stealthy smile. When I did, her cheeks went a bit red and she gave me a sneaky poke in the arm in return.

And with that, our conversation with Kukuluel came to a close.

3

Our invitation to the dinner at The Silver Star officially arrived two days after our meeting with Kukuluel, on the twentieth of the yellow

month, conveyed to us by Sheila, Yang's cooking assistant and a maid working for the house of Daleim.

"It will be held two days from now, on the twenty-second of the yellow month, at the lower fifth hour. We ask that you keep the number of diners you bring to ten or fewer."

"Huh? We can bring that many people?"

"Yes. There will be a similar number from the castle town as well, after including the guests from the east. The Silver Star only serves twenty guests a day, from what I am told," Sheila reported with an elegant smile, having come all the way to our stalls just to provide this information. "That being the case, the hunters may also join in if they would like. In fact, Sir Varkas asked that anyone who would not be attending as a guest should refrain from coming to the restaurant."

"Got it. If we can bring that many people along, we should have no issues at all."

For the previous tea party, we had only brought two guards with us, so if we went with Ai Fa and Darmu Ruu, that would probably satisfy everyone on our side.

"Sir Varkas was incredibly happy to hear that you would be coming, Sir Asuta. And if at all possible, he would like to invite Lady Myme as well."

"Got it. I'm sure she'd be glad to come along," I replied.

Then Sheila sighed, sounding a little sad. "Lady Ai Fa will be with you on that day, will she not?"

"Huh? Ah, yeah. I'm sure she will. Are you not going to be there, Sheila?"

"Maids and servants must wait with the carriages outside, so I would imagine that it will be quite difficult for me to find an opportunity to speak with Lady Ai Fa."

The precise reason she was so fixated on my clan head was something of a mystery to me. Ultimately, I figured it just came down to Ai Fa being really popular with women too.

"Well then, please pass this message along to the leading clan heads of the forest's edge as well. And my apologies for interrupting while you are working."

"No worries. And thanks for coming out all this way."

After saying goodbye to Sheila, I returned to the stalls, where I noticed that Toor Deen had been staring at me intensely.

"Polarth gave his approval. Apparently, we can bring ten people."

"T-Ten? Then in that case, well..."

"Yeah, you'll definitely be one of them, Toor Deen. But that has to include guards too, so it might end up pretty tight."

The young chef's face instantly lit up. She looked like she was just barely holding back tears of joy as she tended to a boiling pot of pasta for the carbonara.

"It's been a while since we've had Varkas's cooking, so I'm glad to have the opportunity too," I said.

"Yeah! What sort of dishes do you think he'll prepare?"

"No idea, but since he wants to hear the opinions of easterners, I figure it'll probably be Sym-style cooking. After all, the main purpose of this event is to entertain Kukuluel and his group."

I also recalled hearing that Varkas had been diligently experimenting with an ingredient from Sym known as shaska. I had been told that quite a while ago, so I thought he probably had it all figured out by now.

Still, I haven't seen that ingredient among the ones the castle town has been distributing in the post town. Did Varkas secure his own personal route for purchasing it?

At any rate, we were all seriously excited, especially since we hadn't seen Varkas since the silver month. We had visited the castle town for events like the tea party Eulifia had held and the Daleim dance party, but we had only met his apprentices Shilly Rou, Roy, and Bozl there.

"Honestly, I'd love to have him try our cooking too. But it'd probably be really tricky to invite Varkas to the forest's edge," I said.

"Yeah. Varkas seems to be really busy, doesn't he?"

"Mm-hmm. Plus, I can't even imagine him standing in the settlement at the forest's edge. Maybe he'd cover his mouth with a cloth like Shilly Rou did when..." I started to say, but I quickly stopped myself when I noticed someone nearby who stuck out like a sore thumb, wearing a hooded cloak and a scarf over their mouth.

And they were approaching us right that very moment.

As I looked on in confusion, someone followed that figure out of the crowd and then greeted me. “Hey. It’s been a while, hasn’t it? Since around the end of the rainy season, I think, so I guess it’s been about two months now.”

Though he had a hood on, he was not wearing a scarf like his companion, so I could see his oval-shaped, freckled face.

“R-Roy? Yeah, long time no see. So is that Shilly Rou there?”

The mysterious figure with the scarf glared at us with brown eyes. Considering the small, slender figure and the piercing gaze, it was undoubtedly her.

“I-It’s good to see you again, Shilly Rou...” Toor Deen said, bowing to her with an anxious expression, causing Shilly Rou’s gaze to fix on her.

Roy suddenly gave his companion a poke in the head from behind. “Why aren’t you saying anything? At least return the greeting.”

“D-Don’t go jabbing my head with your finger so casually! How rude!”

“Hmph. I’d say you’re the rude one for not greeting her back.”

Shilly Rou trembled and stared down at her feet. As for me, I shared a glance with Toor Deen.

At the tea party in the castle town where we had last seen her, Shilly Rou had ended up shedding tears of indignation following Toor Deen’s overwhelming victory in the taste testing competition held by the noblewomen. When we parted, the chef from the castle town had shouted out a childish “I absolutely won’t let you beat me!” And after that, we hadn’t seen her again until now.

“We’ve heard that Toor Deen sends sweets to the house of Genos every few days now. It certainly isn’t the norm for someone as high-profile as a member of the duke’s house to receive sweets from outside the stone walls,” Roy bluntly stated, showing no restraint and causing Shilly Rou to suddenly look back up. And when she did, she glared right at me and Toor Deen once more. Roy glanced at her and said, “Hey, you’re not going to get anywhere if you don’t talk to them. Or did you come all the way out here just to glare at them?”

Shilly Rou remained silent even in the face of that taunt.

"Sorry about her. I'm sure she's still so embarrassed about sobbing like a little kid last time that she can hardly stand it," he said, before looking at her again. "But it's been two whole months now, so you could easily just pretend it didn't happen."

"I-I-I did *not* sob like a child!"

"You did. You were still crying even after you returned to the antechamber, weren't you?"

The bits of Shilly Rou's face I could see through the gap between her hood and scarf were bright red as she started hitting Roy in the chest over and over.

"That hurts," Roy replied with a frown, grabbing both of her wrists. "Anyway, you lot were invited to The Silver Star, weren't you? She came here to apologize because it'd be awkward to meet again at our workplace after parting ways like that."

"Wh-What do I have to apologize for?!"

"Oh? Was I wrong? Then what did you come here for?"

Shilly Rou vigorously shook free of Roy, then shot us yet another glare.



“Last time, I allowed myself to get overly emotional... Even if I lost in a taste competition, it is not proper for a chef to become so angry at her opponent.”

“See? That’s totally an apology.”

“S-Silence! Asuta, Toor Deen, you have truly been invited to the event being held at The Silver Star?”

“Yeah,” I replied with a nod.

“I see,” Shilly Rou said with a piercing look in her eyes. “Allow me to say this: A sweet served as one part of a six-course meal and one eaten as a snack during the day are very different things. Even if Varkas serves a dessert that is not overly complex during the event, I won’t accept you underestimating his skills as a result.”

“Oh come on, what are you going on about right after apologizing? And here I was feeling a little proud of you,” Roy said with another poke to Shilly Rou’s head.

“Wh-What is the matter with you?!” she shouted in outrage.

“You were being so coarse that I couldn’t allow this to continue without doing something about it. You really are a pampered noblewoman to the core, aren’t you?”

“S-Stop speaking such nonsense! It is true that I am a member of the Rou house, but I see no reason for you to speak ill of me as such!”

“I’m telling you, you shouldn’t speak so loud and be so haughty like that. It’d be a real pain if any outlaws set their sights on you,” Roy said, scratching his head through his hood. Then looking at me. “Sorry for being so disruptive while you’re working. It looks like we’re all done here, so we’ll get something to eat and then head out.”

“I-Is this the only reason you came along?! Because you wanted to eat giba?!”

“I’m here to keep an eye on you, but it’d be ridiculous to just leave empty-handed after coming all this way. So, what are you serving today?”

“A-Ah, today we have pasta and meat buns, and deep-fried giba meat. The Ruu are selling herb-grilled giba and cream stew.”

After the topic had come up at the study session for desserts the

other day, I had decided to start selling a fried dish for the first time in a while. This version was meant for the post town, so it used olive-oil-like reten oil instead of giba lard.

"They all sound tasty. Is there anything you'd recommend?"

"You've had the meat buns several times, right? So in that case, why don't you two split the other four dishes? We can give you plates for that if you'd like."

"That sounds great. Are you fine with that too, Shilly Rou?"

Unsurprisingly, she offered no response.

"We've had that pasta dish before too, haven't we? It's similar to the shaska dish Varkas makes, but also totally different at the same time. I'm sure he'll serve it at the event, so that should be something to look forward to."

"Yeah."

I went ahead and plated up the fried meat alongside a shredded tino salad, while Toor Deen prepared the carbonara using the boiled pasta she'd been working on. In the meantime, Sheera and Lala Ruu got the herb-grilled giba and cream stew ready as well.

After paying, Roy headed off to the restaurant space. Shilly Rou started to silently follow after him, but before she could, Toor Deen called out, "Um, Shilly Rou, thank you for coming all the way here! I look forward to seeing you again in two days."

Shilly Rou, who was holding plates of food in both hands, turned her head to look at the young chef. After standing frozen like that for around three seconds, she awkwardly bowed her head before hurrying swiftly after Roy. She looked like a kid desperately trying not to get separated from her parents. It was pretty cute, honestly.

"Shilly Rou sure is graceful," I remarked.

"That's true. I was worried that she might hate me, so I feel kind of relieved," Toor Deen added with a gentle smile.

I felt the same way. We seemed to clash with her an awful lot, but I hoped that we could form a friendly rivalry where we all respected one another.

"If we end up inviting townsfolk for the forest's edge again, I'd definitely love to include them. It would probably be easier to invite them than Varkas too," I said.

With a brilliant smile on her face, Toor Deen replied, “I was thinking that too.”

After that, we wrapped up business for the day and headed back to the forest’s edge.

Today we were set to hold a study session at the Fa house, so we said farewell to Sheera Ruu and company at the Ruu settlement and continued on north. When we arrived at the Fa house, there seemed to be more people gathered there than usual. There were even folks from the Fou and Ran who hadn’t ever come before yesterday there.

“Huh? What’s going on here? Weren’t the Gaaz and Ratsu supposed to be helping out for a while instead?”

“Yes, but we finished our preparations for selling meat in town earlier today, which left us with time to spare. So we came here, figuring maybe we could help you out with your work somehow,” a young Fou woman replied with a smile.

“Oh, you’re already good to go? That’s quite a bit quicker than expected, isn’t it?”

“It is. We were able to acquire the meat itself right away, though, so it wasn’t really much of an issue. You carefully instructed us on how to weigh the meat, after all.” The Fou were in charge of half of the 450 kilograms of giba meat they would be selling in total. Three days had already passed since they had started working, so it probably was reasonable for them to have finished by now. “Of course, there were plenty of cases where we accidentally cut the meat too small, but that just meant we needed to eat those portions ourselves. And we were getting plenty of meat delivered, so it really wasn’t all that difficult.”

“We also kept the coins we received from the Fa clan separate from our clan’s stockpile so they wouldn’t get mixed together. There seems to be enough left to buy another round of meat too.”

The Fa had given money over to the Fou to cover the cost of purchasing the meat for this job. The Dai had received money from the Ruu instead.

“To be honest, I’m not sure we should be accepting a whole 240 coins for this amount of work. Should we speak with the Ruu again

about whether that amount is reasonable?" she asked.

"No, since we're still in a trial period. We may increase the number of days you participate in the market in town or the amount of meat you prepare, so things could get even busier. And I'd also like to steadily move toward having you all manage the finances yourselves."

"Manage the finances?"

"Yeah. It's essential to calculate how much profit you're earning by subtracting the purchase price of the meat from the number of coins you earn in town. If you can't keep track of that, it'll be tricky to make a proper report at the clan head meeting, won't it? Personally, I'd say that's every bit as important as preparing the meat itself." I had a plan for that, but I intended to explain it to them after they had actually participated in the meat market, so as not to cause any additional confusion. "At any rate, I'm glad that you were able to prepare the meat so quickly. Once the Dai are done with their work too, why don't we have you participate in the first meat market after that? The longer the meat's steeped in pico leaves, the more it will lose moisture and shrink."

"We're ready whenever. The meat market dates are announced the day before, aren't they?"

"That's right. The meat merchants from Dabagg show up once every two or three days, after all. On the day that they arrive, they sell their goods in the castle town, and then the day after that, the meat market opens."

I had been informed by folks from the post town that there had been a meat market held today, so that meant the next one would be in three or four days.

"If the next market is held four days from now, I'll be off from the stalls, so I'd like to come along too. I'm sure the Dai will be done with their part of the work by then too."

"Thank you. Ah, but...wouldn't that be the twenty-fourth of the yellow month?"

"Yeah. Is that an issue?"

"Isn't that your birthday?"

I was a little surprised that this Fou woman was aware of that.

"I heard about it from Saris Ran Fou. I'm sure she must have discussed the matter with Ai Fa."

"Ah, I see. Still, it being my birthday won't affect anything. Everyone always works like normal aside from celebrating at night on days like that, don't they?"

"True. But you were born abroad, so I thought you might have some of your own traditions for the occasion. And you're taking the day off from work too."

"It's just a coincidence that I'm off from the stalls then. I didn't have any special plans or anything."

Ai Fa had told me that she intended to head into the forest on that day too, so I was pretty confident that my understanding was correct. Still, I would have to confirm our plans with her today.

"Well then, I'll ask the Ruu about how the Dai are doing tomorrow. Could you let the clan heads know that the meat market will be three or four days from now?"

"Yes, of course."

With that, we finally set about handling the prep work. We had more assistants than the members of the Gaaz and Ratsu we had been expecting, so there was quite a crowd of people around when you included the five of us who had been working the stalls. But preparing curry base and dried pasta could be done as far in advance as we pleased, so everyone had something to do, and we were able to finish all of our tasks in no time.

"The Sudra sent Ia Fou Sudra and a couple others to help out too, and apparently cutting and weighing meat isn't all that tough. But of course, we've all taken lessons from you on how to cut meat at one point or another, Asuta," Yun Sudra called out to me as we worked. She helped consistently with both the stalls and our prep work, so she hadn't been involved much with the preparations to sell meat in town.

"That's really reassuring to hear. Now we'll just have to see how much meat sells in town."

Still, when I thought back to what had happened at the dessert study session, I couldn't imagine the market going poorly. The only thing left to worry about was what came next... Would the people

who actually bought the stuff choose to purchase it again?

At present, giba cooking was incredibly popular both at the stalls and the inns. That had led to a lot of people seeking it out, but it was a rather expensive good. How many people in the post town would want to keep on continuously buying giba meat when it cost a whole lot more than skinless kimyuus or karon legs? That was one thing we wouldn't know until we actually started doing business.

"But the innkeepers who are close to you have kept on buying giba meat for months now, right? In that case, wouldn't folks from other inns feel the same way?"

"I'm not sure. It's possible that it was valuable precisely because there were so few inns selling giba cooking. I'm a bit worried about the impact this might have, honestly."

"I see. Work really doesn't ever end for the folks in charge, huh? I seriously admire how you put even more effort into this job than we do, and then have all these additional responsibilities you deal with on top of that," Yun Sudra said with a smile. "As for me, I just have fun cooking and selling food, so I'm really grateful to you. I know it's a little late to be saying this, but seriously, thank you so much."

"Why're you thanking me now, in particular? You know, you've done a ton to support me too."

"I know. But what I'm about to say may sound a bit childish and selfish, so I wanted to make sure to thank you first." With that, Yun Sudra looked directly at me with upturned eyes. "Ten people can come along to that dinner in the castle town two days from now, right? I'm sure I won't make the cut...but the next time there's a chance, I'd like to ask you to include me, please."

"Huh? Really? I thought you'd just barely make it in with ten people coming."

"No, I'd say I'm likely to miss out with that number. You'll be taking yourself, Ai Fa, Reina Ruu, Sheera Ruu, Rimee Ruu, Toor Deen, Shumiral, and Myme... That's already eight people."

"Ah, yeah, that much sounds pretty definite. But that would leave two open spots, so..."

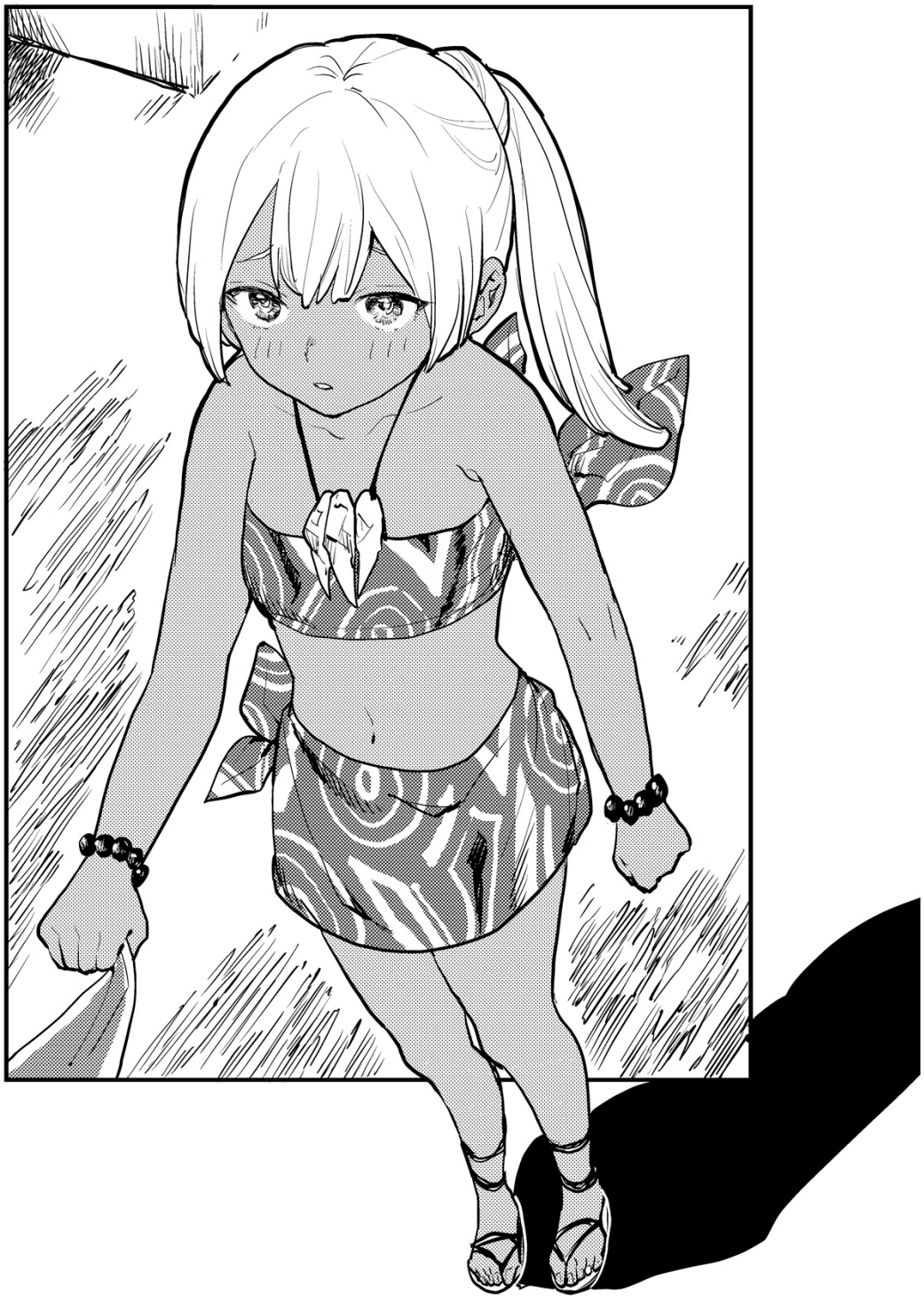
"The other two are going to be Darmu and Vina Ruu, aren't they?

Sheera Ruu and Shumiral will be there, after all."

It was true that we'd need one more guard in addition to Ai Fa. And with ten people, we would need two wagons, and the driving would be left up to the hunters as well.

"Well, I don't think Vina Ruu is guaranteed to be part of our group yet. If we talk it over with the Ruu clan..."

"At work today, I spoke with Sheera and Lala Ruu. Apparently, Vina Ruu has been worrying terribly about whether it's all right for her to ask to come along. Considering that, I wouldn't want to shove her aside just so I could be there," Yun Sudra said, giving the sleeve of my T-shirt a tug. "So I've already given up on this one. But do you think you could try to arrange things so that I can come along at the next opportunity?"



"G-Got it. I have no idea when the next opportunity will be or why we'll be heading there, but I'll be sure to give you priority."

"Thank you. I'm sorry, I know that really was childish," Yun Sudra remarked with a fresh smile. And sure, it might have been a little childish, but that expression was really charming on her.

At any rate, the yellow month was still going to be packed with events as it headed toward its conclusion, including the meat market, the invitation to the castle town, my birthday, and more. There were now only four days left until the twenty-fourth of the yellow month, the date when I had first met Ai Fa.

Chapter 3: An Invitation to The Silver Star

1

It was now the twenty-second of the yellow month. After we wrapped up our business in the post town, we hurried back to the settlement at the forest's edge, took care of the prep work for tomorrow, and then set out toward the castle town. Our destination was Varkas's restaurant, The Silver Star, where we had been invited to dinner.

It had been a little while since we had headed into town in the evening. There was still over an hour left until sunset, though, so it hadn't gotten dark yet. The sky had just taken on a faint purple tint, and the sunlight had weakened a fair bit. After passing through the post town, which was significantly less crowded at this time of day, we ran our totos a bit farther and reached the castle gates. In front of the massive drawbridge sat a carriage with the emblem of the house of Daleim on it. Two totos were hitched to its front.

"We have been waiting for you, dear guests from the forest's edge. We shall take charge of your totos and wagons, so please board this carriage," a middle-aged soldier with a calm-looking face said, politely guiding us.

Our group of ten from the forest's edge silently went ahead and moved over to the provided carriage. As it was a vehicle that needed two totos to pull it, it was fortunately able to accommodate all of us.

Our group had ended up exactly as Yun Sudra had predicted. It included Vina, Reina, Rimee, Darmu, and Sheera Ruu from the Ruu clan, Shumiral and Myme (a member of a subordinate clan and a guest respectively), and then me, Ai Fa, and Toor Deen.

The only one of us who had never set foot in the castle town

before was Vina Ruu, though this would also be Shumiral's first time coming here as a person of the forest's edge. After the guards confirmed the number of passengers inside and the carriage passed over the drawbridge, I noticed him tilted his head a bit.

"You were not, each handed, a pass?"

"Uh, no. The driver was given enough passes for all of us, so they always just check the number of passengers."

"I see," Shumiral said as he brought a hand to his nicely shaped chin. "So we are, ultimately only, being invited as guests, for this dinner. You are not, allowed to move freely, around the castle town?"

"Right. We're always taken directly to wherever we're going in a carriage, then taken back to the gate afterward." It seemed that the conditional passes that were issued to us weren't the way things were normally done. Still, it was even more unusual for people of our status to be invited to the castle town in the first place, so it wouldn't make sense to complain about it. "With the pass you have, you can come and leave whenever you please, but you can't stay the night, right?"

"Yes. You must show, your pass, at inns, so you cannot, deceive them. It would, be possible, to hide somewhere, in the shadows, to spend the night, but if you, are discovered, it would be considered, a serious crime."

Kukuluel, in contrast, had the highest level of pass, which allowed him to lodge in the castle town. Cyclaeus had previously been the one in charge of issuing both of those kinds of passes, and it seemed the kind of treatment merchant caravans got changed depending on their size.

"Still, it's amazing that you were given a pass in the first place! In the lands ruled by the counts, nobody ever gets one unless they're a merchant who does a lot of business," Myme chimed in with a smile.

The five from the Ruu clan had all sat on one side together, so we were across from them. Even though Rimee Ruu would normally always make sure to secure a spot beside Ai Fa, today she was hugging Darmu Ruu's arm tightly instead. But after noticeably thinking about it a lot, she had told Ai Fa, "We've got to sit together on the way back!"

"The people of, the forest's edge, do not interact, with anyone from, the castle town, aside from nobles, correct?" Shumiral spoke up again from where he was sitting on Ai Fa's other side.

"That's right. The only other people that we know are the servants and chefs we met through the nobles. The man who invited us today, Varkas, was originally the head chef at Cyclaeus's manor."

"I see. Fate can certainly, be strange."

"You've gone to Cyclaeus's manor for business meetings before, haven't you, Shumiral? But you never got a chance to meet Varkas back then?"

"Correct. I spoke with, an older man, with Sym blood. He was the one, who ordered the herbs, we brought to Genos."

"Oh, did his name happen to be Tatumai?"

"Yes. I do believe, that was his name."

So Shumiral had been acquainted with that quiet old man who had such a strange feel about him for some time now, huh? Fate really *could* be strange.

"Are you okay, Vina? You're the one who's going to have to greet the nobles, so keep it together, all right?" I heard a voice whisper. When I looked over, I saw Reina Ruu leaning in close to Vina Ruu.

And as she nervously swayed back and forth a bit, the older girl turned toward her younger sister with a really distracted look on her face. "Yeah, I'm fine... So, what's my role?"

"Like I said, you have to greet the nobles. Darmu is part of a branch house now, and you're the oldest woman from the main house here, so you'll be acting as the representative for all ten of us."

"Oh, right... It will be fine. I can handle that much," Vina Ruu replied, but she really did look on edge. Reina Ruu's eyebrows drooped, and she looked like she was holding back a sigh.

According to what I had heard, Vina Ruu was still wary of Kukuluel. She hadn't been able to rid herself of her concerns that he might think ill of Shumiral for abandoning Sym yet.

Well, she still hasn't even met Kukuluel, and Shumiral cast aside Sym for her sake, so I guess it may be natural to worry.

Honestly, Vina Ruu really did bounce wildly between seeming

tough and seeming weak. She was braver than pretty much any other woman I knew when things got rough, but at times like this, she'd be all out of sorts like a little kid. Apparently, Shumiral had also noticed their exchange, as he was now sending Vina Ruu a rather worried look.

When she noticed his gaze, Vina Ruu's cheeks went red and she turned away. Though she had made the decision to face her and Shumiral's feelings head-on, she couldn't help but get all flustered sometimes.

"Thank you for waiting. We have arrived at The Silver Star, so please watch your step as you exit the carriage."

The totos carriage soon came to a stop, and the door in the rear opened wide. The middle-aged soldier in the driver's seat was the one who had called out to us.

Darmu Ruu stood up first, then glanced toward Ai Fa before exiting. That was probably a signal telling her that he was leaving her in charge of taking up the rear. My clan head made no moves to stand, so the other eight of us filed out first.

When we made it out, we were greeted by a large number of soldiers standing in a row. They were standing in such an orderly fashion that they seemed to almost form a path stretching from the carriage all the way to the entrance to the building. I felt like it was a pretty over-the-top way of welcoming us, but it didn't take long to realize the reason they had done it. The building wasn't surrounded by stone walls. It was part of a line of shops along a street. There were even residents of the castle town coming and going on the other side of the soldiers.

I see. This is a restaurant, so I guess it wouldn't make sense for it to be surrounded by walls.

Since our visits to the castle town had only been to noble manors and the like so far, it was a rather novel experience.

"What are you doing? You're falling behind," Ai Fa urged, so I headed toward the building's entrance as well. The stone building was three stories tall, but it looked rather narrow. It seemed like it wasn't actually all that big. In terms of the amount of land it took up, it was probably no bigger than the wooden homes we saw

around the post town. There were also other buildings on either side of it without any gaps between them, so that was apparently the normal size for structures in the area.

"We have been expecting your arrival. There are ten of you, correct? I shall guide you," a voice called out as Ai Fa and I stepped into the entrance. It had come from an elegant old woman who was standing in the mostly empty room, wearing what looked to be an apron dress. "The other guests have already arrived, so please, come this way."

With that, the old woman guided us down a passage. Though, really, the large door she was taking us toward was pretty much right there. The building wasn't exactly big enough to have room for a whole entrance hall. As we advanced, the soldiers from out front filled the space we had just occupied. Since there would be nobles in attendance today, they must have been serving as bodyguards.

As I watched them filing into the room out of the corner of my eye, we took our seats, and found that the candlesticks were already lit, making it as bright as midday inside. It was a modest room, with very little to speak of in terms of decoration. There were just simple tapestries—primarily white—hanging from the brick walls, as well as a large double door opposite the entrance. That must have led to the kitchen. The only real furnishings were the huge rectangular tables and enough seating for twenty people.

There were ten chairs set up at each of the tables, one for each guest. A pair of pure white tablecloths were draped over the tables, and there were various utensils, small plates, and teapots laid out on them. The whole setup was neither overly extravagant nor plain, creating a practical yet refined atmosphere. It was possible this was just my own preconceptions, but it really did feel like a restaurant that fit Varkas perfectly.

"Why, hello there. We've been waiting for you. Would you mind also splitting into two groups and having a seat?" Polarth called out from the table to the right with a smile. The guests from the castle town had already arrived, and had divided themselves into groups of five at separate tables. "There's no need to worry about social standing here. But Sir Shumiral of the Ririn clan, could you sit here

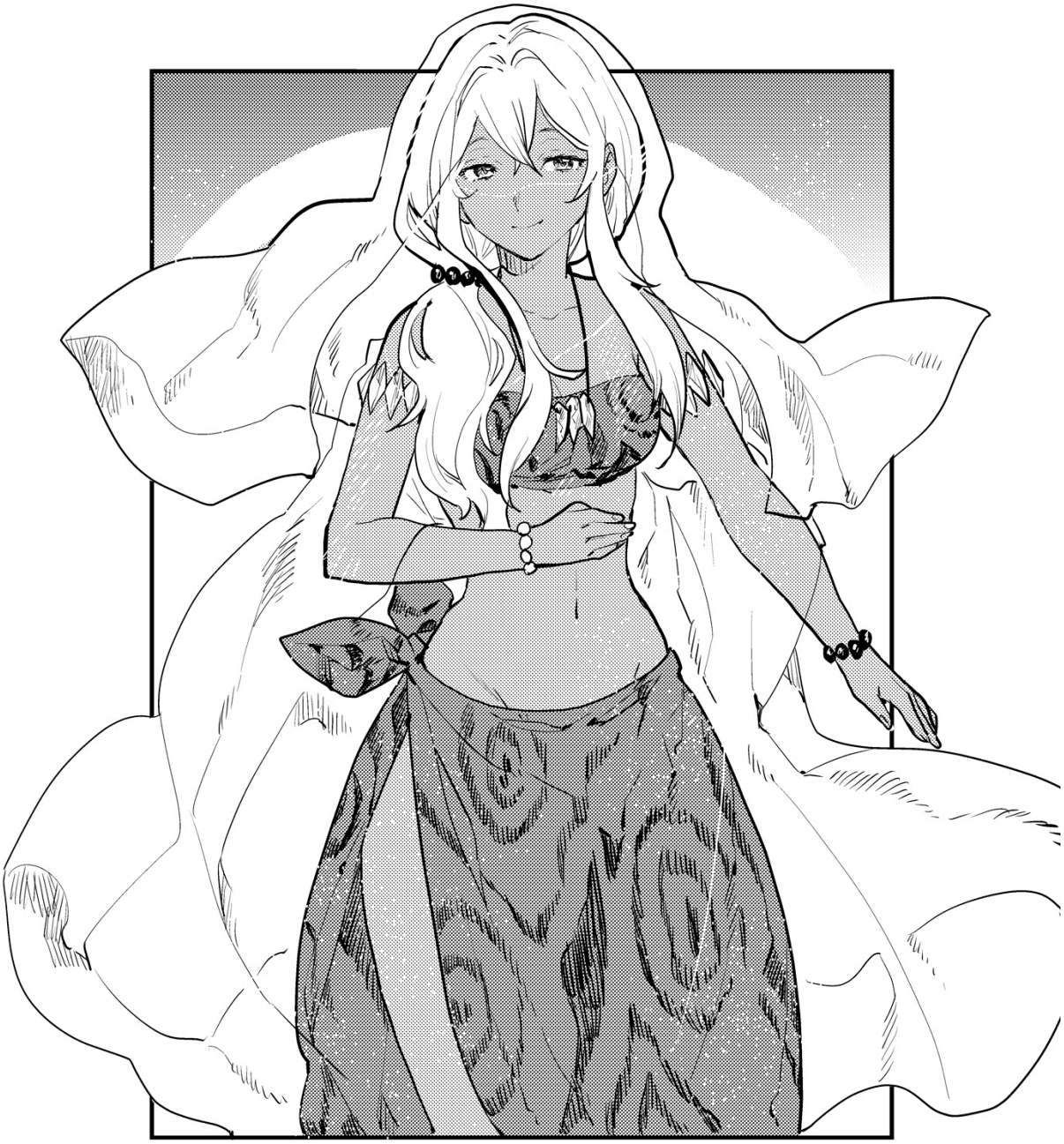
at this table?”

Kukuluel was seated close to Polarth, with one seat between them. He must have wanted to sit next to Shumiral.

Vina Ruu walked gracefully over to Polarth and gave an elegant bow. “This is the first time that we have been properly introduced, is it not? I am Vina Ruu, the eldest daughter of the main Ruu house. You said that we should not be concerned about social standings, but I am acting as our representative for everyone here today. Would it be acceptable for me to take this seat?”

“My, how polite. I am Polarth, the second son of the house of Daleim. I owe your father Sir Donda Ruu a great deal,” the noble responded, standing and offering her a calm bow of his own. I was very close with both of them, so I was interested to see how they would interact. “I believe your younger sister, Lady Lala Ruu, attended the banquet after the swordsmanship tournament. It seems I have now finally met all of Sir Donda Ruu’s children.”

“Yes. I have heard quite a bit about you from our clan head Donda as well. It is said that, like Melfried, you are very just and proud.” Vina Ruu was standing there with such composure that it was hard to believe she had been so out of sorts only a short while ago. And when she had her wits about her, she was every bit as elegant as a noblewoman from the castle town. Polarth also seemed quite impressed as he smiled at her.



"I am honored to hear it. Please, have a seat with us. Ah, this is my wife, Merrim."

"It's my pleasure to meet you as well, Merrim." Even though she couldn't have been at all accustomed to sitting in chairs, Vina Ruu gracefully took a seat. Shumiral's gaze wandered about like he was lost, so I whispered into his ear, "Would you like me to sit over there too? I'm interested in Kukuluel as well."

"Thank you. I would, appreciate that."

And so Ai Fa, Shumiral, and I all headed over to that table. Toor Deen tried to follow along as well, but a voice then called out from the opposite table, "My, are you going to sit over there as well, Toor Deen? But Odifia wished to speak with you."

Eulifia and Odifia were both seated at the other table. With a troubled look Toor Deen glanced back and forth between the tables, until Myme eventually grabbed her hand, smiling at her.

"How about the two of us eat at that table? I'd like to stick with you, Toor Deen."

Within our group, the two of them didn't have anyone particularly close to their age except each other. On top of that, they both admired each other's cooking skills.

"Then I'll go with Ai Fa! See you later, Darmu!" Rimee Ruu called out.

The seating arrangements were now completely finalized. Vina Ruu, Shumiral, Rimee Ruu, Ai Fa, and I headed to the table on the right, while Reina Ruu, Darmu Ruu, Sheera Ruu, Toor Deen, and Myme went to the left.

The other group was a mix of nobles from Genos and easterners. And there was one unexpected face among them.

"It has, been a while, Asuta," a voice called out diagonally across from me as I sat. It had come from none other than the star reader Arishuna, who was wearing a flowing Sym-style outfit and a bunch of accessories.

"It really has. So you were invited too, Arishuna?"

"Yes. Polarth invited me."

She was also close to Polarth. When Kukuluel had visited my stall a good while back, Arishuna had been the one to guide him there.

As they were both easterners in a foreign land, perhaps they shared a certain connection with one another.

Seated next to her was Torst, the man in charge of the house of Turan, making himself small. He was also someone I hadn't seen since the rainy season.

That meant that I was familiar with everyone at the table, since the guests from the castle town were Polarth, Merrim, Kukuluel, Arishuna, and Torst. At the left table, I didn't know anyone but Eulifia and Odifia. The two easterners sitting there must have been members of the Black Flight Feathers, and the westerner seated farthest away I thought was probably the guy in charge of foreign affairs in Genos.

It must have been either Polarth or Eulifia who had suggested splitting up the seats so the folks from the castle town, the easterners, and the people of the forest's edge wouldn't all end up sitting with their own groups. As someone who wanted to interact with all sorts of different people myself, I definitely appreciated that.

"It seems we still have some time left before the lower fifth hour arrives. Until then, why not have some tea and relax? There is no need to adhere to formalities today, so please, enjoy the skills of the foremost chef in Genos, Sir Varkas, to the fullest," Polarth declared with a wide smile as the old lady from the entrance poured tea for our group, since we had only just arrived. It seemed to be the same sort of nafua tea that Jizeh served at her inn.

"So, you are Kukuluel? I've heard about you from my brothers," Vina Ruu said in a relaxed tone.

"Yes," Kukuluel replied with an expressionless nod. "I owe your brothers a great deal. And I am honored to finally meet you, Vina Ruu."

If he brought up Shumiral's desire to marry her now, Vina Ruu would probably lose her composure in an instant, but Kukuluel didn't say anything further. Instead, he simply looked back and forth between Shumiral and Vina Ruu in silence. I wondered what he thought about the two of them.

"By the way, Sir Asuta, I hear that you have at last completed your preparations to sell giba meat in town?" Polarth inquired.

"Yes, that's right," I said.

"The merchants from Dabagg are expected to arrive either tomorrow or the day after, so I suppose that means you will be selling giba meat in two or three days. Could we pick up the portion meant for sale in the castle town shortly before the upper fourth hour?"

"Of course. Thank you so much for going through all the trouble."

"Ah, no need to worry about that. After all, if we picked it up where people from the post town could see, it might lead to unnecessary suspicions. We already have purchasers lined up for all fifteen boxes in the castle town, so we shall be counting on you."

Merrim, who had simply been politely smiling so far, now her gaze turned my way. "Unfortunately, we did not win the drawing this time around, but we shall be looking forward to the next opportunity."

"Ah, okay. I'm really happy to hear that there are so many people interested in giba meat that you needed to hold a drawing."

"Ah ha ha. It should be obvious that we would, given that you're only offering a mere fifteen boxes. Even if you were to send us twice that amount, there still wouldn't be any that went unsold, so I eagerly await the day when this business venture of yours truly hits its stride."

I was definitely glad to hear that too. And since the house of Daleim didn't win the drawing, the fairness of their system seemed like it would be readily apparent to all. They must have held a proper lottery, without allowing it to be influenced by things like social standing.

"I believe The Silver Star also participated in the drawing, but it seems they were not fortunate enough to get their hands on giba meat either. Sir Luidross of the house of Saturas had better luck, however, and I heard that he danced with joy when he learned of his success."

"The house of Saturas makes regular purchases of smoked meat and sausages too, which I'm really grateful for."

"Yes, I'm sure. Sir Luidross is quite the famed gourmet, after all. I believe he comes here to The Silver Star at least once a month."

"This restaurant only serves twenty customers a day, does it not?

That would seem to indicate a rather shocking lack of greed on the part of the owner, considering the sterling reputation this place has," Merrim chimed in.

"That's true," Polarth agreed with a nod. "Still, I suppose it is precisely because he is unwilling to sell his skills cheaply that he was able to earn such a reputation. In fact, from what I am told, he has spent more days experimenting with new dishes than serving customers since he opened this restaurant."

"He is almost like an artist devoting all his effort to a painting or a carving, is he not? This will be my first time trying Varkas's cooking, so I am very much looking forward to it," his wife said. The conversation between Polarth and Merrim felt so fitting for such a young and loving married couple.

It was then that we heard a knocking sound coming from the doors on the far side of the room, right before Varkas appeared through them.

"My apologies for the wait. It is now the lower fifth hour, and so we shall bring out the dishes."

This was the first time I had seen the man in several months. His light-brown hair was a bit long, and he was rather tall for a westerner. His green eyes and pale skin seemed like the traits of a southerner, while his towering and slender figure was more like that of an easterner. As he stood there clad in his pure white chef's attire, he really didn't look any different from the last time I had seen him.

There was no expression to speak of on his long face, and it was impossible to judge his age by looking at him. He just looked to be lost in thought at the moment. However, that was totally normal for Varkas. But then, his eyes, which had been wandering around the room somewhat aimlessly, abruptly turned my way, as if he had suddenly remembered something.

"Ah, Sir Asuta. I heard that you fell ill at some point, and I was very much concerned, but you appear to have fully recovered."

"Yeah. I'm sorry for worrying you. And I'm really happy to be here at your restaurant for the first time today, Varkas."

"I myself am overjoyed at the opportunity to serve you food. I ask that you please give your honest impressions." There was

nothing strange about what he was saying, but his voice was completely devoid of emotion. It was like he was stiffly reciting a script. And yet, that was also perfectly normal for the man. "Well then, we shall bring in the food now. First up will be the appetizer."

The meal was going to be presented to us in the formal style of the castle town, with each of the six dishes being presented one by one. It seemed like Varkas's last statement had been a preplanned signal, as Shilly Rou soon entered the room, pushing a serving cart through the door.

And so, the welcome dinner for the Black Flight Feathers got off to a very relaxed start.

2

"This is the appetizer. I call it a round bake."

For dinner parties in the castle town, the custom was for the chef to explain each dish as it was brought out. And as he listened to Varkas speak in a tone that was emotionless in a way that was completely different from how an easterner would speak, Polarth nodded along and remarked, "Hmm, a round bake, is it? It looks rather like a dessert."

"Yes. This cooking method was one initially devised for making sweets. The ingredients are kneaded into fuwano dough, which is used to coat a skewer, and then seared."

Shilly Rou and the old woman then proceeded to lay a small, flat dish in front of each of the twenty guests.

The appetizer sitting atop those dishes certainly was a strange one. It was a pair of blackish-brown cylindrical objects stacked up in a cross shape atop the white ceramic plate. They were around one and a half centimeters thick and ten centimeters long, and their crusts looked to be around three or four millimeters thick. The shape and texture reminded me of a cookie or the like.

"Using a spoon would cause them to break, so please pick them up by wrapping the provided cloth around them."

The cloth he mentioned was essentially a table napkin. Polarth

and Merrim wrapped it around the appetizer right away, with Ai Fa, Vina Ruu, and the rest of our group following their example shortly after.

From all around, I started hearing quiet utterances of "Hmm" and "My." As I listened to them, I went ahead and brought one of my round bakes to my mouth as well and found that its texture really did remind me of a cookie, just as I had thought from looking at it. And considering the color, he must have used the less-sticky black fuwano in the dough.

However, it was no dessert, so it wasn't sweet. The first thing I picked up on was a seafood flavor. Had he used that sweet shrimp-like crustacean? Though, actually, the seafood-like taste was prominent enough that I was confident that he must have kneaded seafood stock into the dough as well.

And since it was one of Varkas's recipes, he of course had incorporated herbs too. They provided a tingling aftertaste and served to both make the seafood flavor stand out all the more and wipe away any unpleasant aromas. And the flavor seemed to grow stronger with each bite I took. This was definitely a display of Varkas's skills, which at this point gave me a feeling of nostalgia.

In all likelihood, he had prepared them using a method similar to how baumkuchen is made. You would coat a metal spit or skewer in dough, then once it was cooked, you added a new layer on top. By repeating that process over and over, you could create numerous thin layers stacked on top of one another. Also, he had undoubtedly kneaded different ingredients and herbs into each later. Using this highly complex method was how he was able to create the subtle shift in flavor I had noticed.

Though it looked like a simple appetizer at a glance, it really showed Varkas's unlimited potential. This was undoubtedly his cooking. To put a bit of a dramatic spin on it, eating the round bake made me feel like I had truly reunited with the man.

"This is delicious. Perhaps it is only natural, as this was an appetizer, but I ate it all in a flash," Polarth remarked with a smile as he folded his napkin back up now that he was done with it. "And you truly are second to none when it comes to handling seafood

ingredients, Sir Varkas! What do you think of the taste, Sir Kukuluel?”

“It is very good, and quite a curious dish as well. We have had plenty of seafood back in our home country, but I have never before had it in such a mysterious form.”

“Hmm?” Polarth turned his gaze toward the chef who had prepared the appetizer. “I had thought for certain that you would be serving Sym dishes, but is that not the case?”

“It is not,” Varkas replied. “Though I said I wished to hear the opinions of people from the east, I have not tried my hand at authentic Sym cooking tonight. If I caused any confusion, then allow me to apologize.”

“Oh no, there’s nothing to apologize for. But why did you wish to hear the opinions of easterners, then?”

“Naturally, because I wished to know whether or not they would consider these dishes to be good. I have been training in order to create food that people can enjoy regardless of their birthplace, after all,” Varkas said, remaining fully expressionless all the while. “Additionally, my cooking uses a large number of ingredients from Sym, and so I could not help but want to see if they would find it delicious even when prepared with different methods than those of their homeland.”

“It is wonderful,” two voices called out from the other table, coming from the members of the Black Flight Feathers seated there.

“I enjoyed it, as well. And even though, I believe I am, well acquainted, with the tastes, of herbs, I cannot tell, which ones, you used. It is, very curious indeed,” Shumiral chimed in.

“I see,” Varkas replied with a nod. “That is likely due to the large number of different herbs I employed. But if you find it delicious, then I am glad.”

“Yes. It is, very good.”

Now the only person left with ties to Sym who hadn’t offered her opinion was Arishuna. When Polarth looked her way, she gave a calm nod.

“It was delicious. But I am not, overly familiar, with Sym cooking, so I believe, my impressions, will be the same, as the people here,

from the west."

Shumiral turned Arishuna's way with a questioning gaze when he heard that, and her mysterious eyes that reminded me of a moonlit lake somberly stared back at him.

"I am, a child of Sym, but I have never, set foot, in our homeland. My clan was exiled, during my grandfather's generation, so I was born, here in Selva," she explained.

"Exiled from Sym? Do you belong, to the, Mafraluda clan?"

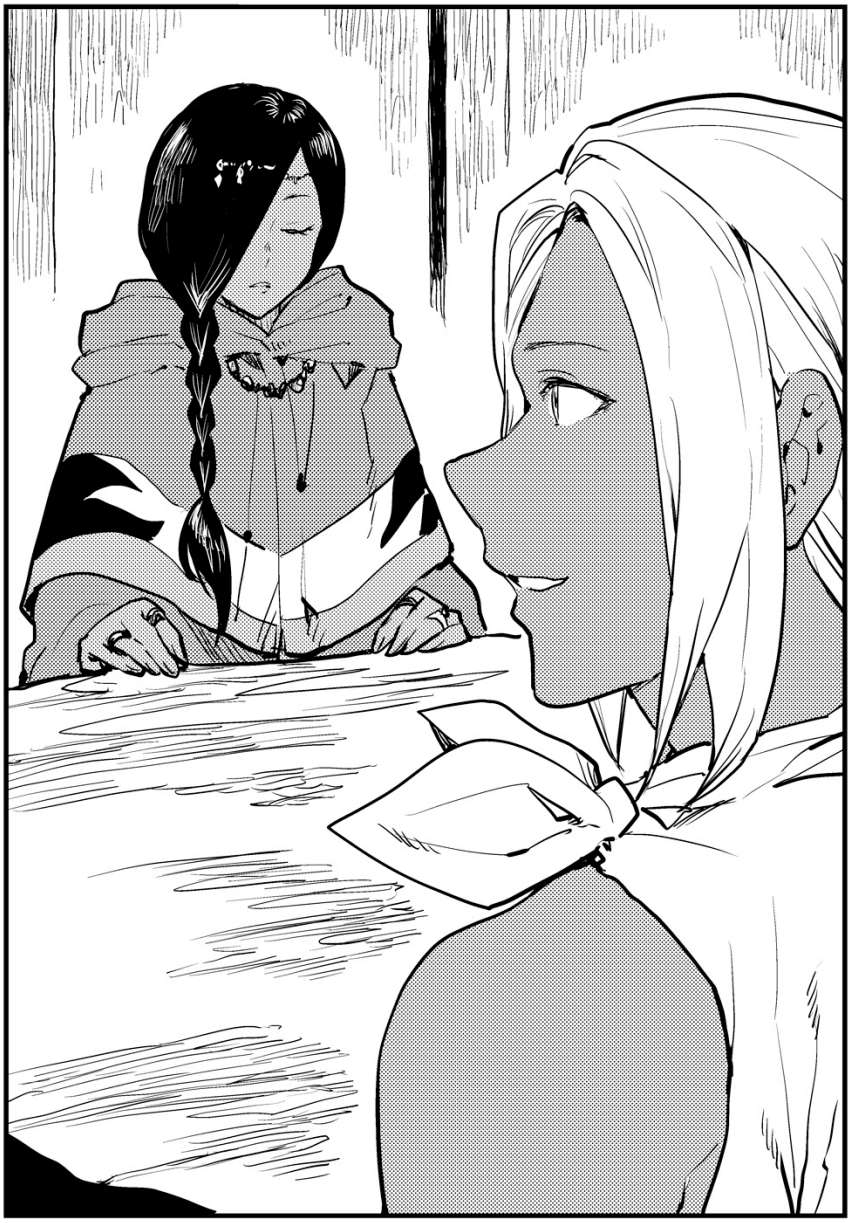
"Yes. I am, Arishuna Zi Mafraluda."

Shumiral nodded in understanding. "I see. I once, belonged to, the Zi Sadumtino clan. But I have, become a person, of the forest's edge, so I have, discarded that name."

"I have heard, about that, from Polarth. I have been, in the care, of Genos, for several years now."

"I see. Is your family, doing well?"

Arishuna's expression remained unchanged, but she shook her head and answered, "No. I am the, final member of, the Mafraluda. The sovereign of, the Zi, has wiped out, the Mafraluda bloodline, just as he wished."



"I see. The Mafraluda, ended up suffering, a tragic fate, because their, star reading abilities, were too strong. It is, very unfortunate."

"No. This was also, as the eastern god, wished it, to be."

The two looked at one another, countless thoughts hidden behind their black eyes. Next to Shumiral, Vina Ruu was glancing back and forth between them uneasily.

"Well then, let us move on to the next dish," Varkas declared, not sounding overly moved. And with that, Shilly Rou brought in another cart. It really was just like her to keep a straight face the whole time, even though our gazes had met repeatedly. "The second dish is a soup. I call it 'chilled totos egg soup.'"

A number of the guests reacted with open surprise to that. The next dish certainly had a rather unusual appearance as well. It had been poured into a deep dish, and was translucent with a jellylike jiggle to it.

"This is soup? It's quite novel just to see a soup that isn't warm!" Polarth noted.

"True. I have heard that cold soup dishes are relatively common in Jagar, where the heat is much more intense than in Selva."

Varkas had an apprentice by the name of Bozl who was from the south, so he must have put that man's knowledge to full use for this. Still, it really was a strange dish. That jellylike jiggling apparently came from a totos egg white.

Totos egg whites actually didn't turn all that white when heated, instead remaining translucent. I was aware of that fact, but this was my first time actually seeing them used as the core of a dish. From what I could tell, he seemed to have added the totos egg white on top of the soup like a lid, and based on the high degree of transparency it had and the way it jiggled, I deduced that the egg had most likely been soft-boiled.

Furthermore, though I could see through it to what lay beneath, I didn't spy anything in the way of solid ingredients in there. It was just a cold dish with translucent egg whites and clear soup. I really had no idea what in the world it was going to taste like.

"There is one matter I would like to ask those of you with Sym heritage about," Ai Fa suddenly stated. I really hadn't expected her

to say anything while we were here, so I turned to look at her in surprise. “I have heard that easterners are very skilled at handling totos, as a great many of those beasts live in the Sym grasslands. Is that true?”

“Yes, it is. We treat the totos we ride as members of our own family,” Kukuluel replied.

“I see,” Ai Fa said, furrowing her brow. “I live alongside a totos as well and consider him a precious family member, so I feel some resistance to the idea of eating totos egg. Do the people of Sym eat totos the same way that we eat giba?”

“The same way you eat giba? Ah, your people see giba as fellow children of the forest of Morga, correct?” Kukuluel said, his eyes narrowing gently as he seemed to realize something. “I believe the nuance may be slightly different. We would not eat the meat of a totos we consider family. When they grow old and their souls return to the gods, we return them to the earth, the same as we do for humans.”

“But you eat totos eggs, which are their children?”

“Yes. Most eggs are unable to develop into totos, after all.”

Ai Fa’s eyes opened wide with surprise when she heard that. “What do you mean when you say they cannot develop? Birds and snakes are born from eggs, are they not?”

“They are indeed. But totos lay eggs even if they do not mate. If I recall correctly, the same is also true of kimyuus.”

Kukuluel glanced over at Varkas, and the chef answered with, “Correct. If it were otherwise, kimyuus would not lay eggs on a nearly daily basis. In fact, when they mate, their cycle for laying eggs becomes irregular, so most kimyuus are raised with males and females separated. Is it not the same with totos?”

“It is indeed. In the Sym grasslands, until the totos is to find a partner, the males and females are kept separate. The eggs that are laid during that period cannot become totos, and those are the ones that we eat.”

“I can’t say that I understand. Why would they lay eggs that cannot become children?”

“In the grasslands, it is believed to be a blessing granted to their

human companions, so that we will not starve. Or perhaps it is practice for when they eventually have a child." Kukuluel once again gently narrowed his eyes, their intense shine softening and his gaze turning into a much kinder-looking one. "Regardless, eggs are a blessing from our totos. Is it not proper to convert them into our own strength rather than letting them go bad?"

"I see... My apologies for interrupting this meal with such an unnecessary question."

Polarth, who had been listening to the exchange with great interest, waved his hand and said, "Think nothing of it. I am just glad that it is not taboo for easterners or people of the forest's edge to eat totos eggs. Now we can fully appreciate Sir Varkas's skills without any reservations."

"Yes. Totos meat is bland, so it is not well liked in the west, but I believe that their eggs are a wonderful ingredient that stands apart from those of kimyuus," Varkas said.

The previous exchange had gotten Ai Fa to calm down, but when she heard him say that, she glared at him out of the corner of her eye. Unfortunately, it would probably be impossible to get the chef to properly consider the feelings of Ai Fa and the easterners.

At any rate, we all went ahead and picked up our spoons. The deep dish was only about the size of a small teacup, so the amount of soup we were given was slight. When I thrust my spoon into the jellylike surface, it cut through the totos egg without much resistance at all, and then the soup seeped out from underneath. I scooped up a bit of totos egg and clear soup, and popped it into my mouth.

He had said it was chilled, but there weren't any refrigerators here in Genos, so really, it was just a touch cooler than skin temperature. The totos egg slid into my mouth, and at the same time the soup gave off an indescribable flavor.

It seemed to employ a seafood stock as well, but it wasn't the flavor of seaweed or smoked fish that I was familiar with. It was probably some sort of fish, but it had a rich flavor, and was very sweet. And it seemed to be of a much higher quality and more refreshing than the smoked fish stock I had tasted. The stock also

incorporated numerous herbs as well.

I still couldn't see any solid ingredients, so in all likelihood the herbs had been boiled with the soup. He might have even just given it a quick parboil. A fragrance I had smelled somewhere before wafted my way for a brief moment, but then it seemed to fade away.

Then I finally bit into the soft-boiled egg white, which seemed to melt in my mouth. I was reluctant to let that mysterious flavor slip away, so I hurriedly had a second bite. And just like that, the small amount of soup in the dish in front of me vanished in a flash. But somehow, it seemed to ignite a relentless hunger in me.

Perhaps thinking similarly, Torst timidly stated, "Hmm... This is also a rather mysterious dish. You didn't add any filling aside from the egg, yet it makes me wish for a bigger portion." There was an almost sad look on the man's face, which reminded me of an old pug.

Meanwhile, Polarth laughed and said, "That's certainly true. Whenever I have eaten Sir Varkas's cooking in the past, I can recall feeling similarly upon trying the appetizer. It was as if I became hungrier than I was before I had eaten it."

"Yes. I have at times served this chilled soup as an appetizer, in fact. The dishes that will be served next tonight will be a bit heavy, so I chose this dish to slot into the soup portion of the meal," Varkas explained, right before Tatumai made his first appearance.

The older chef had blood from Sym, so he was tall and had somewhat dark skin. The cart he was pushing was rather large, and the next course of our meal sitting on top of it was hidden by a silver cover. It would probably have been difficult for only one person to bring in enough of the dish for twenty people, so Shilly Rou and the old lady soon brought in more carts of the same size.

"For the third course, we have the fuwano dish. However, this was instead prepared with an ingredient known as shaska from Sym."

I would finally be seeing the noodles from Sym that I had been hearing about for quite a while. The folks from the castle town and Rimee Ruu were all gazing upon the carts intently, their eyes sparkling bright with anticipation, and I was sure most of the people

at the other table were doing the same thing.

The three servers lined up their trays of food, then removed the covers at the same time. And with that, we finally got to see the shaska.

I see. That is definitely a noodle dish.

Atop the black-tinged plates sat a pile of shaska along with some additional ingredients. Those ingredients included minced meat and finely diced vegetables, so at first it looked like tan tan ramen without the Szechuan-style sauce. The shaska noodles were a glossy white color and only about a millimeter thick, giving it an appearance similar to somen. And then, some sort of reddish-brown ingredient had been spread on top of them. It was giving off an incredibly spicy aroma, which further strengthened the impression I had of the dish being similar to tan tan ramen.

Next, Tatumai and the others placed an adorable little bowl in front of each of their guests. It seemed to contain the same sort of reddish-brown spice powder that had already been added to the dish.

"I am not fond of spices being added after the fact. However, with this shaska dish, I believe eastern and western preferences may vary too greatly, which is why we are providing these bowls for you. If you feel that your noodles are lacking in spice or flavor, then please go ahead and add more," Varkas explained.

"Then, is this a genuine Sym dish?" Eulifia asked from the neighboring table.

"No," Varkas replied with a shake of his head. "I attempted to flavor it such that even people from the west would find it delicious. That said, it may seem overly weak in terms of spice and flavor to easterners."

"I see. At any rate, this aroma certainly is stirring up my appetite," Polarth remarked with a smile, picking up a three-pronged fork. "And thanks to the pasta and soba dishes Sir Asuta has made, I don't believe I should have any trouble eating it. Can we wrap it around our forks in the same way?"

"Yes. That is apparently the primary method for eating shaska in Sym as well. Though from what I am told, it is also eaten by hand

depending on the region."

In spite of Varkas's words, Kukuluel and the others all picked up their forks as well. I, of course, did the same, intent on giving the shaska a try.

I tried pushing down on the ends of a couple of the noodles a bit, and discovered them to be more resistant to pressure than I had expected. They were thin, only around a millimeter or so thick, but they seemed to have some real springiness to them. I wrapped some of them around my fork, making sure to pick up a few pieces of the other ingredients as well, and took a little bite. When I did, I found that thinking this dish was like tan tan ramen was both on the mark in some ways and completely off in others.

It had the spiciness of chili-pepper-like chitt seeds and ira leaves, as well as sourness and bitterness from a different herb. The minced meat formed the core of the flavor, which certainly felt close to Szechuan-style tan tan ramen. However, beyond those intense tastes, I was able to detect a mellow sweetness as well. It wasn't coming from sugar or honey, but rather from fruit. In all likelihood, he had used both the apple-like ramam and peach-like minmi.

Then there was the shaska itself, which defied my expectations even more. Though they had the appearance of somen, those thin noodles had an impressively springy texture. When I chewed them, they reminded me of something like glutinous rice, and they paired really well with the complex, deep flavors of the other ingredients. Plus, they felt quite satisfying to bite into. On top of that, Varkas seemed to have seasoned the shaska itself as well. It was difficult to make everything out with all of the intertwining flavors, but at the very least he had probably used a fair amount of peanut-like ramanpa and sesame-seed-like hoboi.

"This certainly does taste quite different from the shaska I am familiar with," Kukuluel calmly remarked. "But it is delicious. It is quite a surprise to find someone here in the western kingdom so skilled at using such a variety of herbs."

"I have relied heavily on Tatumai's advice in that regard," Varkas said, and Tatumai gave a slight nod. "I was also able to entrust him with the work of boiling the shaska. That is why I did not need to

return to the kitchen."

"If I recall correctly, you are a westerner as well, aren't you, Tatumai?" Polarth asked.

"Yes. I have blood from Sym and moved about the eastern territories when I was young, but I am a westerner born in Selva," Tatumai replied with a bow, and then he exited, taking his cart with him. Like an easterner, he didn't let his emotions show on his face, and he was also rather untalkative as well.

"I also felt, it was delicious. And it has been, some time since, I last had shaska, so that made me, glad as well," Shumiral chimed in.

Vina Ruu glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. "You ate this sort of food back in your home country, Shumiral?"

"I did. The flavor, is different, but shaska, is a dish, from Sym. It is, very nostalgic, to me."

"Hmm," Vina Ruu hummed, casting her gaze downward.

Shumiral frowned worriedly, but it turned out that it wasn't any negative feeling that had made her do that.

"You were born in a place called the grasslands, right?" she asked. "I've never even left Genos, so I can't quite say I understand what sort of place that is. But when I think of you as a child eating food like this with your family, I find it kind of amusing for some reason."

Shumiral didn't seem to know how to reply, and just kept on staring at Vina Ruu.

When she noticed that, she shook her head and smiled at him. "I simply said what I was thinking, so there's no need for you to reply."

"I see. Thank you."

"What in the world are you thanking me for?" Vina Ruu shrugged her seductive shoulders, then resumed eating the shaska. Since there were nobles present, she must have been having to steel herself more than usual. This kind of felt like a new side to her, considering how often she tended to get all flustered around Shumiral.

It's also pretty amusing how Shumiral seems to be the one losing his cool right now. Will they eventually be able to just speak naturally like Sheera and Darmu Ruu? I pondered as I added a bit of

the spices from the bowl to the shaska.

Ai Fa immediately leaned in close to me with a look of shock. "Hey. This dish isn't spicy enough to hurt your tongue now, but you're intentionally making it stronger?"

"Huh? Ah, yeah. I want to see how it will impact the taste."

And besides, if this were tan tan ramen back in Japan, I'd say that it would be just right if it were a bit spicier. When I looked around the table, though, Kukuluel and I seemed to be the only ones who were adding spice.

I stirred the added powder in and gave it a try. As I chewed my next bite, I found that the spiciness, bitterness, and sourness had all gotten stronger by exactly the right amount, with the firm texture of the shaska serving to harmonize them. It was definitely more to my personal tastes like this.

The shaska had a really unique texture, and the dish wasn't difficult to eat in the least. Its flavor was certainly very complex, but it was undeniably delicious. From what I could tell, everyone else from the forest's edge seemed to be satisfied with it as well.

"By the way, what kind of meat did you use in this?" I asked as a great sense of satisfaction welled up in me.

Varkas's vacant gaze turned my way. "Sir Asuta, what sort of meat do you believe it to be?"

"Let's see... I think it's definitely karon for sure. Karon chest meat, maybe?"

"Yes, I used karon chest meat, fat and all."

Apparently, I hadn't let the master chef down. Though, given how finely minced it was and how many different seasonings had been added to it, even I hadn't been able to figure out what it was without half guessing about it.

Still, from Varkas's point of view, it was probably only natural that I'd know. If anything, he probably found it disappointing that I would ask such a pointless question.

At any rate, the meal had finally reached its midpoint. Even after eating all of that wonderfully satisfying shaska, though, my appetite and my anticipation for what would come next were still at full strength.

3

"Next, we have the vegetable dish."

This one was also brought in and served by Tatumai, Shilly Rou, and the old woman. There were no covers over the plates this time around, but even so, I wasn't sure what I was looking at. They seemed to be hemispherical in shape, but they were covered in highly viscous creamy white sauce that completely obscured whatever was underneath.

They looked like they had a diameter of around six or seven centimeters, or about the size of a tennis ball that had been sliced in half. Rather than being nice and smooth, though, their surfaces were uneven enough that even the thick, plentiful sauce wasn't enough to totally smooth them out. It almost looked like he had simply piled the ingredients up in order to create that shape. It certainly wasn't a very substantial dish, but that was in line with how Varkas typically planned meals—he liked to serve light dishes after heavy ones.

"Some rather rare vegetables came into my possession for the first time in a while, so I used them to prepare this dish. It is called 'tinfa and lemirom with fermented gyama milk.'"

I was even less sure of what it was after hearing the name. Still, it seemed I had at least learned what the sauce was. In all likelihood, it was the fermented gyama milk he had mentioned.

"You decided to use that tinfa and lemirom this soon? And I certainly did not expect to taste fermented gyama milk here in Selva," Kukuluel said.

Varkas's absent-minded gaze turned toward the merchant. "I hardly ever receive ingredients from the Barud region. It is an abundant land blessed with an inland sea and a number of major rivers, so I am told it is quite rare for people there to engage in trade by land. I would be truly grateful if more people would go there."

"If the path through the forest's edge sees use in the future, I would imagine the number of merchants from Sym passing by Barud will increase by a fair bit. I've found it to be a very appealing place to visit."

Polarth, who had been listening closely to their exchange, then grabbed his fork. "Tinfa, lemirom, and fermented gyama milk are all ingredients I know only by name! I cannot wait to find out how they taste!"

"I'm very much looking forward to it too," Merrim commented. And with that, she and a number of the other guests also excitedly reached for their forks.

Ai Fa leaned in close to my ear with a pensive look. "Asuta, this white milky substance on top seems similar to something we saw in Dabagg."

"Yeah, that was probably some sort of fermented food too. But that was karon and this is gyama."

A good while back, we had traveled to the nearby town of Dabagg, where we had been able to sample a wide variety of dishes made with karon meat. We had also eaten something very similar to this fermented milk there.

As I recall, they made it by stuffing karon milk into a sausage casing and letting it ferment. It went down smoothly and was basically like yogurt without much sweetness to it. I wonder what it'll taste like this time.

The ingredients hidden underneath were also a complete mystery. And so, with great anticipation and curiosity welling up inside of me, I gave it a try.

I stabbed my fork into the top of my helping, and found it to be soft and tender. When I gently pulled back, a piece of a vegetable in the shape of a flat square came loose. It was around five millimeters thick, and when I checked the underside of the vegetable where the sauce wasn't covering it, I found that it was white as well. Also, there seemed to be another layer of that same vegetable underneath the bit I had removed. It looked like he had made the dish by layering five-centimeter-wide square cuts of the vegetable on top of one another.

Is it soft because it was boiled, or because the vegetable was soft to begin with? I suppose I won't know until I try it.

Having finished my analysis, I took a bite of the white sauce-covered vegetable, and an unexpected taste burst forth, leaving me

somewhat surprised. I had been expecting it to be sour, typical of dairy products of this type, but instead I was hit with the flavors of all sorts of herbs.

I should've known. Of course simple fermented milk wouldn't be enough for Varkas.

The chef had already astounded me in the past with one of his other vegetable dishes. I had assumed that he would use this course to give our tongues a rest after the shaska and meat dish, but that had been foolish of me. The dish had an amazing aroma, and its flavor was incredibly complex.

I found it difficult to hazard a guess as to what sort of ingredient fermented gyama milk was. It was indeed primarily sour, but rather than just being plain fermented milk, there seemed to be some other source of sourness in it, perhaps originating from mamaria vinegar, or some kind of fruit or herb.

There was also a mellow sweetness layered on top of the sourness, and this time where it came from was no mystery. I was easily able to pick out the flavors of the panam honey and minmi fruit juice that had produced it.

There was even a fair bit of saltiness and spiciness to it as well. The spiciness was sharp, and reminded me of sansho pepper, and I had also noticed a bit of that in the shaska from before. The aroma that accompanied it contained some bitter notes as well.

As for the unfamiliar vegetable, the crisp texture it had was quite pleasant. Due to the overly striking flavor of the fermented-gyama-milk-based sauce, I couldn't make out the taste of the vegetable itself, but I could certainly tell that its texture paired very well with the taste of the sauce.

What is this? Its texture feels really familiar somehow...

It was a little rude to do so, but I decided to push aside a bit of the sauce on one of the vegetable pieces. It was white and square, though I had no clue what shape it had been originally. The surface was slippery, and I saw what looked like faint leafy veins running along the flesh.

Further observation revealed that it didn't have a consistent thickness. It was five millimeters at its thickest, but was only two or

three at its thinnest. I felt like the previous piece that I had eaten had been thicker overall, but this one was sagging under the weight of gravity in its thinner parts.

So then, it wasn't cut to this thickness; this is the shape it had originally, huh? Taking its sort of leafy appearance into account, is it a leafy vegetable like tino?

I took a little bite of the vegetable without any sauce on it, and a shocking sweetness filled my mouth—the sweetness of panam honey and minmi that I had picked up on before. It had been coming from the vegetable.

I'm at a loss. This stuff must have been steeped in panam honey and minmi fruit juice. There's no way I can make out its original flavor like this.

But where had that sense of déjà vu I had felt before come from, then? If it wasn't because of the flavor, then that just left the texture. It was crisp and brimming with moisture. If you removed the peach-and maple-syrup-like tastes from the equation...it seemed like the texture might have been similar to that of napa cabbage.

What's the actual answer, though? If it really is something like napa cabbage, I'd definitely love to use it, I thought.

A moment later, Polarth spoke up with a question. "Hmm, this is yet another mysterious taste! Which is the tinfa and which is the lemirom?"

"The tinfa is found along the surface, while the lemirom is hidden inside," Varkas said.

Upon hearing that there was another ingredient within the little hemisphere, I started digging further into it as I ate. There wasn't all that much volume to the dish, so the lemirom showed itself after I went through around three more layers of tinfa.

"My, how adorable! It's like a little baby dumpling!" Eulifia said excitedly.

Sure enough, it was a perfectly round little dumpling, three centimeters or so in diameter. It was deep green in color, and when I added some sauce to it and took a bite, I found that it had a unique, pleasant crumbly texture that easily broke down in my mouth. It had a candy-like sweetness to it, and it seemed like some minmi that had

been boiled down into a sort of jam had been mixed into it as well.

"Both tinfa and lemirom have textures you cannot find in other vegetables, and I believe that they harmonize well with sweet flavors. The fermented gyama milk I prepared to go with them is what I find to be the most fitting pairing," Varkas explained.

"Then, when you aren't able to get ahold of tinfa and lemirom, would you use other vegetables as substitutes?" Polarth asked.

"Yes. I will often use sweet boiled tino and nenon, or even chamcham," Varkas said, and then his gaze shifted my way. "Sir Asuta, what are your thoughts regarding tinfa and lemirom?"

"Well, I'd say this is definitely good. But you added so many different flavors that I can't make out the original tastes of the vegetables at all."

"I see. Would it be difficult for you to make delicious food using these ingredients?"

"Huh? Well, there's no way for me to know until I actually give it a try. But these ingredients are rare, aren't they?"

"They are indeed. But if other chefs begin seeking out tinfa and lemirom, the nobles may begin to take an interest in promoting trade with the Barud region. In order to achieve that goal, I believe that it will be essential to...*share them*...with you, Sir Asuta," Varkas said, placing a hand to his chest and knitting his brows with a pained look. It caused him distress to share precious ingredients with anyone, but if more people were to learn about what could be done with them, that would benefit him in the long run. That must have been the dilemma playing out in his mind. It really was just like him.

"Right now, you are the only buyer for the ingredients Sir Kukuluel brought from Barud, correct, Sir Varkas? Around half of what was delivered is still in storage in a pantry, so could we ask for your assistance with popularizing them in the post town once more, Sir Asuta?" Polarth asked.

"Of course," I replied with a nod. "I'm still not too sure what sort of ingredients they are, but they don't seem to be overly quirky. I would definitely be happy to do what I can if that's all right."

"In that case, I would like to have you give them a close examination sometime. It would be nice to have easterners do more

business with Barud, but it would also be very beneficial to enter into dealings with a land we have not had ties with up until now, especially considering our surplus of fuwano," Polarth said.

There had been a dramatic decrease in the use of fuwano in the Genos domain, and this would provide new customers for it. From the other side of the table, I noticed Torst shooting me a pleading look.

"Barud is located half a month's journey from Genos by wagon, correct, Sir Kukuluel?" Polarth continued.

"Yes. I have heard that people from Genos purchase live fish from the rivers between here and there. If you follow those rivers northwest, you shall arrive at the inland sea of Barud."

"Ah yes, I see. If a route can be properly established, travel to and from should not prove difficult. In that case, I would like to officially request that you examine those ingredients, Sir Asuta. There should be a number of other ones besides the tinfa and lemirom for you to take a look at as well."

"Of course."

We had been talking for some time, so at that point, Varkas bowed and addressed the room. "Well then, I must briefly depart in order to put the finishing touches on the meat dish. This is something I must attend to personally. I thank you for your patience."

We were still in the midst of eating the vegetable dish, so we all went back to savoring it as we waited for Varkas to return.

The people most responsible for driving the conversations in the room were Polarth and Merrim at our table, and Eulifia at the other one. Neither easterners nor people of the forest's edge were big talkers, so it seemed only natural that the nobles were taking the lead.

"Shumiral, I was surprised, when I heard, that you changed gods..." I heard Arishuna say, which immediately caught my attention. "My people, were exiled, from Sym. But we did not, change gods, to Selva. Perhaps that, has made me, overly curious, about the subject, and yet I can't, help but ask...what does, it feel like, to do so?"

Shumiral brought a hand to his mouth and pondered the question. Beside him, Vina Ruu's gaze turned down toward the table. I didn't think even Arishuna could've guessed that the one who had caused the man to choose to discard his homeland was seated right there. I found myself unable to look away from them.

"Well...even if I have, changed gods, it does not, change the fact, that I was born, in Sym. I shall remain, eternally grateful, for that."

"Does that not, make it all, the more painful?"

"It does not. I am happy, with my new life, at the forest's edge. Selva is the one, who brought me, this joy, so I have, no hesitation, declaring myself, a child of, the western god."

"I see... You are, a very strong person. I am, impressed."

"I do not know, if I am strong, or not. But I am, often told, that I am, a strange man," Shumiral replied with a faint smile. That expression by itself was proof that he considered himself a westerner now.

Arishuna narrowed her eyes as if she were staring at something dazzling as she looked at him. "Shumiral, you..."

"Yes? What is it?"

"Ah, no... It is forbidden, to speak of, the movements, of the stars, of those who, do not wish, to hear. Do you want, to know, where your star, is heading?"

"No. I wish to decide, my future, by myself."

"Very well," Arishuna said, holding her tongue.

Next to Shumiral, I breathed a stealthy sigh, and Vina Ruu silently looked back up from the table.

After that, Merrim asked Kukuluel about his travels, and they discussed that for a bit. Once everyone had cleared their plates, Varkas finally reappeared pushing a cart, with three people following him. This time, though, Tatumai had been replaced by Bozl.

"Thank you for waiting. We shall now present the meat dish."

Bozl went around laying out plates with silver dome covers in front of each of us, smiling and bowing as he went. Out of everyone in Varkas's group, this southerner was the only one who was particularly friendly. A few of us, such as Rimee Ruu, were happy to smile back at him in return.

"This dish consists of three varieties of herb-grilled meat."

As the covers were removed, the most striking aroma yet filled the air. Up until now, all of the dishes aside from the shaska had been served cold, so their scents had been nothing but an appetizer leading up to this one.

Sure enough, there were three different pieces of meat atop the plates. They were long and narrow in shape, and were positioned so that they radiated out from a central point. Colorful vegetables and herbs filled the spaces between them, and a dark green sauce had been drizzled over everything.

"This certainly does have a luxurious appearance!" Polarth remarked in admiration alongside the other residents of the castle town. Naturally, I shared that opinion.

"What meat is this, exactly?" Kukuluel asked, and Varkas turned his way, leaving the cleaning up of the carts to his apprentices.

"Karon back meat, kimyuus chest meat, and finally eraupa."

"Eraupa?"

"It is a type of freshwater fish, of a kind that we briefly discussed a moment ago."

Sure enough, there was what looked like a slice of fish on our plates. It seemed to be from a white fish, but the surface had been well cooked to a golden brown. If I recalled correctly, among the four kinds of freshwater fish that I knew about, there was one type called a gilebuss that was basically a huge snakehead, and another char-like one called a rillione. That left two other types of freshwater fish: one that looked like a black porgy and another that resembled a parrotfish.

This cut looks pretty thick, so I guess it's from that parrotfish-like one. I remember them looking like they'd be pretty tasty when cooked.

As for the other cuts, the karon had been grilled to a reddish-brown, while the kimyuus was more whitish. Both were around one and a half centimeters thick, and the kimyuus meat still had skin on it. Judging from how they were seared, I figured he must have cooked them in an oven.

"To use kimyuus, karon, and freshwater fish all at once... Just

what I've come to expect from you, Sir Varkas! I've never seen a dish like this before!" Polarth declared.

"I am honored. Please, eat while the food is still hot."

It seemed like this dish would call for a knife and fork. For the sake of my fellow people of the forest's edge, I went ahead and took the lead, picking up both utensils. Once I had provided them with a demonstration of what to do, they all followed along and cut into the meat.

I started with the safest choice, the kimyuus chest meat. The mildly flavorful meat was similar to chicken tenders, but with the skin still on, it certainly didn't come across as being overly basic. Besides, the herbs it had been grilled in had given it an incredibly striking aroma, so there was no way it would have a dull taste.

It also had an impressive array of vegetables accompanying it, but I started with just a bite of the meat on its own, and when I tried it, an even richer flavor than I had expected spread all throughout my mouth. Sourness had been the core of the last dish, but this time around, I found myself unsure how to describe the taste. It was very much the sort of unbelievably complex flavor that Varkas specialized in—sweet, spicy, bitter, and sour. A dizzying torrent of scents and flavors washed over me. The courses we'd had so far had utilized a huge range of herbs, but it never got to be too much, which really spoke to the chef's skills.

No matter what he was working on, he was meticulous in his craft. Just looking at the sweet part of the flavor, he had used sugar, honey, fruits, and even herbs all blended together to produce it.

The spiciness felt chili-pepper-like at its core. But in addition to the readily identifiable chitt seeds and ira leaves, there seemed to be a number of other aromas mixed in. Even if chitt seeds had served as the base, numerous other herbs had been incorporated in order to both make the chitt stand out and harmonize it with the other flavors.

For the sourness, there was a strong taste of mamaria, but it also seemed like he might have added fermented gyama milk here too.

As for the bitterness, he had used not only gigi leaves, but also something with an astringent flavor that I was unfamiliar with.

Whether it was fish liver or medicinal alcohol from Sym, Varkas often employed a bunch of ingredients that I had never used. That being the case, there was no real point in trying to figure out what I was tasting.

"This is truly delicious! I cannot possibly imagine offering any complaints!" Polarth joyfully exclaimed.

"And this fish is very good as well. What a truly mysterious taste," Merrim excitedly chimed in.

Across from the married couple, Vina Ruu's and Shumiral's eyes were wide with amazement.

"How surprising. This is, the first time, I have eaten a dish, like this."

"Truly. I'm at a complete loss for words."

As I listened to the chatter around the table, I gave the karon meat a try, and it really shocked me. It was as if I was eating an entirely different dish.

Karon had a stronger flavor than kimyuus, and it reminded me of high-quality beef. Despite everything that had been added to it in the dish we were currently eating, the way that it had been prepared seemed to emphasize that delicious flavor, rather than muting it.

I feel like the vibe suddenly shifted, even though the sauce is exactly the same.

I was a bit thrown, but it seemed clear that these weren't dishes that had been prepared separately. The karon had been imbued with the same complex flavoring as the kimyuus chest meat, but the addition of the clear sense of presence it had resulted in an incredible change in the impression it gave.

My heart started beating a bit quicker in anticipation as I reached for the slice of fish, which turned out to be equally surprising. The sauce and herb flavors harmonized so perfectly with the fish that it felt like they had to have been specifically tailored to it. And as I chewed, I felt confusion wash over me.

If I switch back to the kimyuus chest meat here, will it feel lacking? I thought, but that was not the case at all. When I gave the kimyuus meat yet another try, I felt like that one was the best version. The tenderness of the kimyuus and the oily skin that was

nice and fragrant after having been grilled combined splendidly with the complex flavoring. It had a deliciousness that was truly distinct.

Holding on to that thought, I gave the karon and eraupa another try, and once again found them to be absolutely sublime as well. Amazed, I continued to go around and around the dish, eating it in a cycle.

It is no simple feat to use karon, kimyuus, and fish at the same time, and then make them all stand out to boot.

In order to calm myself back down a bit, I tried some of the accompanying vegetables, and found that they were exceptionally tasty too.

Tino, nenon, pula, ma pula, chamcham, ro'hyoi, chan... Those seemed to be the vegetables he had used. They were equivalent to cabbage, carrots, bell peppers, paprika, bamboo shoots, arugula, and zucchini respectively. On top of that, I noticed the cloud-ear-like and brown-beech-like mushrooms, as well as a variety of herbs.

Some of the herbs had been sliced finely and cooked alongside the vegetables in the oven, while others seemed to have been cooked in advance and powdered. And knowing Varkas, he had probably removed any herbs that had only been meant to add flavoring after the cooking process. After all, I couldn't imagine such a complex taste coming from just the herbs I could see in the dish.

Of course, he must have employed a good number of seasonings and herbs in the sauce that had been added to the entire dish. And he had clearly done something to the meat and vegetables in advance as well before cooking them together in an oven. In all likelihood, he had marinated them in a totally different sauce.

He had put in an absolute ton of effort, and the end result was a dish that felt truly complete. It felt like I was being shown Varkas's true skill for the first time.

"Asuta, eating them all at once may be the best way to approach this dish," Ai Fa whispered to me.

"Huh?" I said, turning toward her.

My clan head was pointing at the end of her own fork, which had small pieces of karon, kimyuus, and eraupa skewered on it together. "I tried mimicking what that Kukuluel man was doing, and I found it

was most delicious this way. Of course, it's still quite tasty otherwise as well."

Finding myself at a loss for words, I went ahead and did as Ai Fa had instructed. And when I tried the result, I found that she had undoubtedly been speaking the truth. Now, all three types of meat were serving to elevate one another while also harmonizing sublimely.

After that, I tried each of the different combinations of two as well, and astoundingly, all of them were incomparably delicious. At that point, I was feeling an incredibly deep sense of admiration for Varkas's work. It was almost as if he had cast some sort of spell on me.

"Is it to your tastes, Sir Asuta?" Varkas asked.

"Of course," I replied. "After the last few months, it seems like I've started to forget how much you've always surprised me. This is just as shocking as the first time I tried your cooking."

"I am honored to hear you say as such," Varkas stated. But of course, he didn't show any emotion even then. However, his eyes seemed to be staring intently at me and me alone.

4

"Finally, we have dessert, which is another round bake."

Shilly Rou and the old woman then proceeded to set out the last of the plates. The round bake looked identical to the ones we had been served as appetizers, including still being blackish-brown in color. However, when I wrapped it up in the cloth I had been given and lifted it, a sweet smell that I found very dessert-like instantly wafted through the air.

"Ah, what a calming flavor. I feel as if my tongue and stomach are being soothed after that awe-inspiring meat dish," Polarth said, precisely expressing his feelings.

The dessert that Varkas had served last time had also had a gentle flavor like this one. However, it was clear that a lot of thought had gone into making this dish have the right effect. The crispy

texture from the black fuwano, the abundant flavor of panam honey, and the sweet aroma that reminded me of cinnamon made for a wonderful combination. The dough also had ramanpa nuts mixed into it, providing a pleasant bit of texture.

"Um, did you use the milk of a beast other than a karon in this?" Myme asked from the other table.

"Yes," Varkas replied with a nod. "I was able to obtain a single female gyama the other day, which provided the milk I used. My gyama are solely fed fruit, so I do not believe its diet should have added any unpleasant flavors."

"You're right! It has a very mild taste, and I'm really enjoying it!"

"I imagine that there are not many people who could tell that this does not use karon milk. You certainly are Sir Mikel's daughter."

"Ah, no," Myme replied with a smile and a shake of her head. "Toor Deen was the first one to notice. I might not have picked up on it if she hadn't said anything."

From where I was sitting, I could only see Toor Deen's small back, but from how her hand was clinging onto Myme's clothing, I sensed that she must have been rather flustered.

"Lady Toor Deen... You are the chef from the forest's edge who sends sweets to Lady Odifia, are you not?" Varkas asked, looking at Toor Deen with a gaze that showed no clear emotions. "I have heard about you from my apprentice, Shilly Rou. You defeated her in a taste competition at a tea party from what I am told. Your skills truly are impressive for one so young."

"N-No, I'm nothing special." Toor Deen shrunk down so much that I couldn't see her past the back of her chair any longer. And behind Varkas, Shilly Rou was staring down at the floor expressionlessly.

After briefly glancing back at his apprentice, the head chef continued, "I have not taken the time to polish my skills at creating confections that serve as the main focus for a meal. I am sure that if I went up against you in such a contest of taste, I would likely not be able to win a single point."

"Huh? No, that's not—"

"However, Shilly Rou has devoted herself to studying such things with as much dedication as any other kind of dish she prepares. I

look forward to the two of you continuing to compete and creating incomparably delicious sweets in the process."

Shilly Rou looked up in surprise and stared at Varkas's back for a moment, before turning away and rubbing her eyes with the back of her hand. I quickly turned my gaze away from her before she could catch me staring.

"But as the conclusion to a six course meal, I certainly have no complaints about this dessert! Even if you leave it to your apprentice to prepare treats for the noblewomen, I hope that you will continue to prepare delicious offerings like this one yourself, Sir Varkas," Polarth interjected.

"You have my gratitude," Varkas replied with a bow. "Now that all of the dishes have been served, I would like to introduce you to my apprentices."

"Yes, please do so!"

The old woman bowed and exited the room. Shortly after, Bozl and Tatumai entered and lined up alongside Shilly Rou. As an irregular helper, Roy unsurprisingly didn't show up.

"The four of us cooked the food that you ate here today. Starting from the right, their names are Tatumai, Bozl, and Shilly Rou. Tatumai primarily worked on the shaska and vegetable dish, Bozl the meat dish, and Shilly Rou the appetizer and dessert."

"Sir Bozl and Lady Shilly Rou demonstrated their skills quite well at my house's dance party. They did a truly splendid job there," Polarth noted.

"Yes. Without their assistance, I would be unable to make enough food for twenty people in a single day. My apprentices are truly irreplaceable." Though Varkas tended not to let his emotions show, I sensed that those words were more than mere lip service. Tatumai remained expressionless, Bozl smiled, and Shilly Rou looked determined as they all listened to their master speak. "They are all skilled enough to run a restaurant of their own. However, I certainly hope that we will all continue to help one another improve well into the future."

"I would certainly like to count on you all again when the situation arises," Polarth said. Then he turned toward us. "Dear

guests from the Black Flight Feathers and the forest's edge, were you satisfied with the meal?"

"Yes. I am very proud that the ingredients we brought from Sym and various other lands were used to prepare such wonderful food. I believe it will be over half a year until we return here, but I hope to once again bring goods that will satisfy you," Kukuluel replied without hesitation.

Varkas offered the merchant another polite bow. "I am truly grateful to all of you from the Black Flight Feathers for delivering live gyama and a great many other ingredients here. I would very much like to discuss further business with you related to that later."

Now it was the people of the forest's edge's turn. As our representative, Vina Ruu turned to face Varkas.

"Your cooking has earned quite a bit of acclaim among the Ruu clan. I am not as fine of a chef as my younger sisters, and yet...tonight I have truly learned how remarkable the dishes found in the outside world can be."

"I am honored. Would you mind speaking as well, Sir Asuta?"

"Sure. I was seriously impressed too. It really is amazing that you were able to make food that folks from Sym, people of the forest's edge, and someone born in a distant land like me could all enjoy."

"I could say much the same about you," Varkas said, tilting his head ever so slightly. "I wish to taste your cooking again sometime, Sir Asuta. You do not currently have plans to prepare food for future events in the castle town, do you?"

"No, not at present."

It would be the folks from the castle town who decided that, not me. That being the case, I glanced over at Polarth, but I saw that his eyebrows were drooping, and he looked troubled.

"We are sorely tempted to invite you to the castle town as well, Sir Asuta. But for now, we must wait until the right moment."

"The right moment?" Varkas repeated, knitting his brows quizzically.

"Correct. We believed that the observers from the capital would arrive soon after the end of the rainy season, but we have yet to hear any news about them. We would prefer to invite Sir Asuta to

the castle town once they have come and gone, to avoid any issues."

"Is there some sort of inconvenience related to people from the capital arriving here?" Kukuluel questioned, sounding confused.

With his eyebrows still drooping, Polarth smiled and replied, "Indeed, though that is a matter that involves not only to Sir Asuta, but all people of the forest's edge, as they are unique among citizens of Genos, and we would prefer that any visitors from the capital notice them as little as possible. If they were to learn of such people being invited to the castle town as chefs, it would attract a fair bit of unnecessary attention."

"Ah, I see... I can see why it might be difficult for people from your capital to understand the circumstances surrounding the people of the forest's edge," Kukuluel replied, seeming satisfied with that explanation. However, Varkas and the other chefs looked confused.

"I do not quite understand, but until the people from the capital come to Genos and then leave, Sir Asuta will not be invited to the castle town?" Varkas asked.

"Indeed. That is what Sir Melfried and I believe is best."

"Quite so," Eulifia chimed in with a diplomatic smile. "Odifia has been wishing to invite Toor Deen to a tea party as well, but I've told her that she must hold off for the time being. Lady Diel has been saying similar things as well. You promised to prepare a dinner for her, did you not, Asuta? My husband and Sir Polarth had to give her a bit of a talking-to about that, and ever since, she has been sulking just as much as Odifia."

"Oh, is that so? I hadn't heard."

Diel hadn't shown up at the stalls for a while. If I had run across her, though, I was sure that she wouldn't have held back at all with her complaints about the situation.

"Well, the observers from the capital only come twice a year. Things should be quiet for a while after they pass through, so we shall be calling on you again when that time comes, Sir Asuta. And you as well, dear members of the Ruu clan and Lady Toor Deen."

"Yes, of course," I replied.

"In that case, I shall focus on my own diligent studies until that time comes," Varkas said with a sigh. His expression hadn't shifted

at all, but he looked very disappointed even so.

"Well, um... Should we refrain from inviting Varkas to the forest's edge for now too?" I asked, causing Polarth's eyes to shoot open wide.

"No, that would be no real concern. But still, would you even agree to go somewhere outside of the castle town, Sir Varkas?"

"I would not," the chef plainly replied. "I do my best to never leave the castle town, and I do not intend to do so in the future. I will eagerly await the day that Sir Asuta is invited here once more."

With that, Bozl gave a laugh. "If Varkas ever said he was leaving the castle town, we would be worried out of our minds. He is a delicate man who doesn't even go to the market here." The man then turned toward his fellow apprentice. "Shilly Rou, you've visited the settlement at the forest's edge before, haven't you? Would it be possible to bring Sir Varkas there?"

"M-Most certainly not. If Varkas went to a place like that... Why, I'm sure he would faint before he could take even a single bite of food," the chef replied, and then she turned our way in a fluster. "Oh, but I am not trying to paint you all as savages, mind you. It's more that Varkas... He is the sort to feel unwell when surrounded by a crowd."

In that case, I could definitely see how the liveliness of a banquet at the forest's edge would make him swoon. Unfortunately, it seemed I had to give up on any hope of inviting Varkas to the forest's edge.

"I guess I'll just have to wait till I'm invited to the castle town the next time, then. But what about you, Shilly Rou?"

"What do you mean?"

"I'd like to invite folks from town to the forest's edge again eventually. If you were one of them, you wouldn't consider it an unwelcome offer, would you?"

Shilly Rou stumbled backward, looking incredibly shocked. "Wh-Why me? Are you sure you aren't thinking of the wrong person? If you wish to invite Roy, I shall inform him later."

"I'd like him there too, but I was definitely thinking of inviting you as well. I mean, we've already gotten to know one another a bit by

now.”

Shilly Rou wriggled uncomfortably, and Bozl gave another hearty laugh.

“You *were* wanting to go to the settlement at the forest’s edge again, weren’t you, Shilly Rou? Why not accept his kind invitation?” he said.

“I-I wasn’t... I mean, I shunned them and all...”

“You don’t have anything to worry about. It would make me very happy to be able to invite you all,” Reina Ruu said, chiming in for the first time in a while. Naturally, she had been participating in all sorts of discussions over at the other table, but I hadn’t been able to catch what she had been talking about. “Mikel and Myme are staying at the Ruu settlement now too, so there’s a lot for you to gain there. I hope that you’ll consider it.”

“B-But...”

“I would also be overjoyed if you were to come, Shilly Rou. Even putting aside the matter of cooking, I would like to deepen my bond with you,” Sheera Ruu said in a gentle tone. Her words made me remember that she had accompanied the chef from the castle town for a while at the previous welcome banquet.

Shilly Rou just kept on wriggling and hanging her head, until Bozl smiled again, crossed his arms, and said, “Hmm, if at all possible, I would appreciate an invitation as well. I would certainly like to see giba being prepared at your settlement with my own eyes.”

“You’re interested in how giba meat is processed, Bozl?” I asked.

“Indeed. We’ll finally be able to purchase fresh giba meat in the castle town soon, so I believe I should see how that meat is prepared.”

Varkas tasked Bozl with procuring meat for their kitchen. Perhaps his motivations were similar to ours when we had asked to observe a karon ranch in Dabagg.

“So you all will eventually start working with giba meat as well?” Reina Ruu asked, her voice sounding deadly serious.

“Yes,” Varkas replied with a nod. “Smoked giba meat and sausages are already being eaten throughout the castle town, but if the opportunity arises to handle fresh meat, I would very much like

to take it. If it starts to be distributed regularly, I would be overjoyed."

"I see... I'm certainly looking forward to seeing what you will create with it."

I couldn't see her expression since she was seated so far away, but it would have been impossible for me not to notice the tension in Reina Ruu's voice. I was feeling a sense of eagerness welling up inside of me as well. If Varkas were to use giba meat, what sort of dishes would he make? That was something a chef from the forest's edge couldn't possibly ignore.

"I am truly glad to see that the bonds between you chefs have deepened as well., I look forward to seeing what sort of wondrous dishes you will unveil in the future," Polarth said with a smile, lifting up a wine cup. "Now then, why don't we also get to know one another better while enjoying some post-dinner wine? We've already made arrangements with the guards at the gate, so could we ask you to enjoy another hour with us here, dear guests from the forest's edge?"

Just as Polarth had asked, we ended up pleasantly chatting with them for another hour or so.

Polarth and Merrim were both skilled conversationalists, so things were quite lively at our table. Quite a few different topics came up, from how beautiful Ai Fa looked at the dance party the other day to how graceful Sheera Ruu was, and how delicious the food and sweets that Rimee Ruu and the others prepared were, and even how much praise Arishuna's fortune-telling earned from the noblewomen.

And then there were Shumiral and Kukuluel. Since they had both traveled about the continent, they had a huge number of stories to tell. Rimee Ruu and Merrim listened with excitement sparkling in their eyes as the two merchants discussed mysterious customs from Sym, the icy land of Mahyudra, the dazzling sights of the western capital Algrad, and more.

As the conversation continued, Vina Ruu's distrust toward Kukuluel seemed to fade away to nothing. It seemed she had finally realized that the man actually had a lot in common with Shumiral.

Partway through, Vina Ruu even started smiling and asking questions about what life was like on the Sym grasslands.

But even so, I still saw some little moments where she looked like she couldn't quite relax. Whenever Shumiral and Arishuna spoke to each other, the eldest Ruu daughter looked rather nervous. It wasn't like the two of them were being overly friendly or anything. But since they had both originally come from the Zi tribe, there was a definite sense of understanding between them. Furthermore, women from Sym were incredibly rare in Genos, so that alone might have been enough to get Vina Ruu all worked up.

"Are all Sym women slender like you?" she finally asked Arishuna.

The star reader's eyes were like a lake at night as they turned toward Vina Ruu, and she tilted her head a bit before speaking. "My apologies. I was born, and raised, in Selva, so I do not, know what is, normal in Sym."

"Ah, I see. But when you were young you lived together with your family, didn't you?"

"Yes. My mother and aunt, were both slim. But we were poor, and could not, get much to eat, so it would likely, have been difficult, to put on weight."

Kukuluel had been discussing Totos with Rimee Ruu, but at that point he turned to address Vina Ruu. "For the people of the grasslands, it is seen as unsightly to put on excess weight. It is considered a sign of being self-indulgent."

"I knew it."

"However, that custom only applies to the grasslands. Women there ride totos as part of their work, so their figures are naturally honed in the process. It is also believed that thin people can do more work than heavy folks, as they place less burden upon their totos," Kukuluel said, his eyes gently narrowing. "But as I said, that custom doesn't apply outside of the grasslands. There is no advantage to those who do not ride totos making themselves as thin as possible, and here in Selva, women like you are seen as beautiful, are they not?"

"Yes, that is certainly true. All of the women from the forest's edge I have seen are quite lovely, but you may be the most beautiful

person I have ever seen, Vina Ruu," Merrim chimed in with a smile. "If at all possible, I would definitely like to invite you to a dance party. Just imagining what you would look like in our castle town banquet clothes gets me all excited."

"If we did that, we would need to have a gentleman accompany her. Otherwise, all the young noblemen would surely swarm her," Polarth added with a truly joyful smile.

Vina Ruu fell silent with an indistinct look on her face, so Kukuluel calmly added a few more words to the discussion.

"At any rate, what matters most is not one's appearance, but rather what is inside. No matter how lovely someone may look, if they are rotten at their core then they are best avoided. What matters most to an easterner is how bright someone's star—their soul—truly shines."

"Their soul..." Vina Ruu whispered. Then she took a sip of fruit wine.

As he looked at her worried face from the side, Shumiral didn't say a word. And Kukuluel continued to watch the two of them with his usual calm gaze.

The hour passed by in a flash, and we exited The Silver Star.

"Thank you for coming. We shall eagerly await your return."

Varkas and company saw us off with those words after momentarily returning to the kitchen, after which we all quickly boarded the carriage. And as soon as we did, another conversation erupted between us. We chefs from the forest's edge had been holding back in the restaurant, but now we all started discussing Varkas's cooking.

"I was so surprised that I couldn't even speak! How in the world can you combine so many wildly different flavors like that?" Reina Ruu passionately remarked.

"Right?! I would love to make a dish that can move people like that too!" Myme added in agreement.

Though the two of them were the most passionate, the rest of us were pretty worked up as well. The only difference was how much we were letting it show.

"I don't want to become *like* Varkas exactly... But if I could become that skilled at working with ingredients, I could make my family and comrades so much happier," Toor Deen said with her eyes closed as if she were praying. It was a little unusual for the quiet young girl to say so much.

Reina Ruu nodded along with her, then turned to face Sheera Ruu. "You feel the same way, don't you? Starting tomorrow, we're gonna have to work even harder!" she said.

"Yes, of course. But I'm a bit uncertain as to what I should be working on."

"Yeah, that's true. Hey Myme, was Mikel as skilled of a chef as Varkas when it came to using herbs?"

"I wouldn't say he never used them, but he said that he only recognizes about half of the herbs being sold in the post town now. Back when my father was a chef, only those with ties to Count Turan could get ahold of them."

"Ah, I see... What do you think, Asuta?"

"Well, Varkas's cooking certainly is amazing, but it's not something we can mimic directly, so we just have to compete with the ingredients that we have," I replied, but then a thought came to me. "Still, a single herb can make a dish much more delicious. With that in mind, I would certainly like to learn more about how to use them. That's why I was thinking of asking Jizeh to teach me."

"Jizeh is that inn owner with eastern blood, isn't she?"

"Yeah. She's apparently been regularly purchasing several different herbs for some time now, so I figure she may be even more skilled at handling them than some folks from the castle town like Yang and Mikel."

"I see! When you go to her to ask about lessons, please let us come with you!" Reina Ruu said, her eyes sparkling like those of a lovestruck maiden. Out of all of us, she was probably the most openly ambitious when it came to improving her culinary skills.

After having been silently listening the whole time so far, Ai Fa chimed in with a rather serious look on her face. "It's all well and good that you are passionate when it comes to making delicious food, but don't be too reckless, all right? From our point of view, the

food that you all make is far more delicious than what Varkas prepares."

"But Varkas said he intends to buy giba meat, didn't he? If he were to make a more delicious giba dish than me, that would be unbelievably frustrating," Reina Ruu shot back, sounding agitated. She could be surprisingly direct, but it was rare to see her speak that way to my clan head.

Ai Fa's expression grew even more serious. "I am not especially worried about that. What I find most delicious is food that chefs from the forest's edge prepare for their comrades."

"But...!" Reina Ruu protested, leaning forward, only to stop herself when Sheera Ruu gently placed a hand on her shoulder.

"I feel the same way. I'm sure all people of the forest's edge find food prepared by their comrades more delicious than any other dish could possibly be. That said, I think this is a problem that solely exists on our end."

"It is an issue for you chefs, not those eating the food?" Ai Fa asked.

"Correct. We make food for both the people of the post town and the nobles of the castle town. If those people were to say that Varkas's giba cooking is superior to Asuta's, would that not leave you feeling a bit frustrated?"

It would surely be more than just a bit. After all, Ai Fa already looked like she was desperately trying not to frown at the mere suggestion that such a thing could happen.

"That is why we wish to gain as much skill as we can," Sheera Ruu continued. "But please do keep an eye on us so that we don't do anything too imprudent, Ai Fa."

"Of course," my clan head replied, a sour look still fixed on her face nonetheless.

Then, Toor Deen worked up the courage to say, "Wh-Whenever I eat Varkas's cooking, I always find it truly surprising. But I don't think that Asuta is inferior to him at all. Isn't it just a difference in how deeply familiar they are with the ingredients?"

"Hmm? What do you mean?" Ai Fa asked.

"I-I mean, Varkas has worked as a chef here in Genos for

decades. But it's only been about a year since Asuta arrived at the forest's edge, and Asuta hadn't ever seen any of the ingredients here before that. He's only been using the ones that are similar to the ingredients he was familiar with, and yet he's still managed to make so many incredible things with them. That's really amazing, isn't it?"

Everyone's eyes were on Toor Deen now, and that made her face go bright red. But even so, she did her best to continue.

"Once Asuta becomes as familiar with the ingredients of this land as Varkas, I'm sure he'll be able to make even more delicious dishes than that man. O-Of course, I don't think he's inferior to Varkas even now, and cooking isn't meant to be a competition in the first place... Still, when Asuta does become that knowledgeable, I really want to see how good the food he makes will be then."

"I see," Ai Fa replied, the tension in her shoulders loosening up. "As I said at the start, I do not believe your passion is an issue. But you were speaking with such fervor that I became worried you might go too far somehow."

"Ah, no... I-I'm sorry for speaking out of turn."

"You have nothing to apologize for. Your words made me quite happy, Toor Deen."

The young chef's face went even redder as she cast her gaze downward.

Rimee Ruu, who had been clinging to my clan head's arm, then turned to look at her older brother. "Darmu? Were you worried about me and Reina too?"

"That's not anything for me to worry about... Even if Reina gets out of control, Mia Lea will be there to correct her."

Now it was Reina Ruu's turn to go red in the face as she said, "Jeez!" and swung at her brother's arm. Darmu Ruu, however, just crossed his arms and pretended not to notice.

"Well, it's not like I'm a chef or anything. I feel the same way as Ai Fa, more or less. It's true that I was surprised by what that Varkas man made, and I thought it was enjoyable too, but what we desire is food prepared by chefs from the forest's edge," the hunter continued, glancing at Sheera Ruu, who was sitting next to him.

“Regardless, the amount we were given wasn’t enough to fill me. You’re not going to tell me to go to bed hungry, are you?”

“My, you still haven’t had enough to eat, Darmu? It’s rather late, so I’ll only be able to make something simple.”

“It will be the equal of that man’s cooking, even so.”

If Ludo or Lala Ruu had been present, that comment definitely would’ve earned him some teasing, but Rimee Ruu just giggled in amusement instead.

At any rate, Varkas’s cooking had gotten every last one of us chefs fired up, including me, naturally. That was proof of how much of an impact his skills had left on us.

I wanted to make food that was even more delicious than I currently could. That simple desire had been greatly reinvigorated within me that night.

Chapter 4: Birthday

1

The twenty-fourth of the yellow month—my eighteenth birthday—had arrived at last. Of course, I had picked that date myself because it was kinda convenient, but even so, this was a day that held even greater meaning to me than my original birthday.

In my old world, I had perished in a blazing inferno, but something supernatural had granted me a second life here in this other world. And as I had been wondering what in the world had happened, a giba had attacked me out in the forest of Morga, and then Ai Fa had rescued me. That had all occurred one year ago, on the twenty-fourth of the yellow month.

After having died once, that day had been the beginning of my second life, and so I felt it was only fitting for it to serve as my new birthday.

Now, that day had finally come back around. And yet, it started out very peacefully, just like any other.

"Hrngh... Morning already, huh...?"

The gentle morning sun streaming in through the window acted as my alarm clock. I turned over on top of my bedding in order to escape it, and when I did, I saw Ai Fa sitting cross-legged in the center of the room, doing up her hair.

"So, you're finally awake. You should also get dressed."

"Got it, clan head... Hup!"

"You make such foolish faces every single morning..." Ai Fa said with a faint smile as she skillfully did her hair. That expression was every bit as charming as always too.

I went ahead and moved over to the storage room in order to get dressed. I would always change into a different T-shirt and loincloth

at this point, then do the washing after. Ai Fa always got up before me, so she had already gotten dressed before she started dealing with her hair.

After tossing the clothes I removed into a woven basket, I passed my arms through the sleeves of a fresh T-shirt. It was a new one I had asked to have made for me in the castle town shortly before the end of the rainy season. When I'd had my clothing for the rainy season made, I had learned about materials that would work well for producing additional T-shirts and towels to wrap around my head, so I had ordered a number of them through my connection with Yang.

As for my original T-shirt from before I had purchased those replacements, it was being stored in the room I was currently in, along with the rest of my old chef's uniform. Having swiftly finished changing, I found myself staring at those clothes for no reason in particular.

Though I said they were in storage, they were really just hanging on the wall in the back of the room. The T-shirt was inside the chef's uniform, so I wasn't able to see it where it hung. On top of that, the underwear, socks, and worn-out towel I had used frequently in the past were stored in the pockets.

And finally, sitting on the floor below all of that were my old worn-out deck shoes. Aside from my old man's knife, this was everything that had come along with me to this world.

The logo of the Tsurumi Restaurant decorated the chest of the chef's uniform. No one here in this land could ever read what was written there, though, since it was a foreign form of writing that only I understood. As I ran my finger over the black embroidered letters, I couldn't help but sigh.



It's been a year since then, huh? Well, there was that extra month this year, so it's actually been closer to four hundred days, I thought to myself, my gaze shifting ever so slightly. Next to my chef's uniform were two hunter's cloaks. The first was the one Ai Fa had worn when she was young, and the other was the one she had been using from three years ago until her birthday this year.

The smaller of the two had been made by Ai Fa's mother. Once, after her father had been injured and rendered unable to hunt in the forest, my clan head had gone out and captured a young giba in a simple trap. That giba's pelt had provided the materials for her first cloak.

Naturally, it wasn't a true hunter's cloak. The pelt had come from a young giba, so it was only thirty centimeters or so long at most, and there was no way a young girl like Ai Fa would have been given a proper hunter's cloak in the first place. Even so, Ai Fa's mother had worked on that little cloak with all her heart, for the sake of her daughter who had saved their family from the crisis it faced. When I imagined Ai Fa at the age of ten or so wearing that small cloak and proudly climbing trees or running around the house, I felt warmth welling up inside me.

As for the other cloak, it was a memento from Ai Fa's father. She had lost her dad at the age of fifteen and had hunted all alone from then on. She had taken down countless giba, but she hadn't even had another clan member to tan the hides and make them into cloaks. That was why she had kept on wearing her father's until Saris Ran Fou and the others had given her a new one for her birthday this year.

My chef's uniform was hanging alongside those mementos Ai Fa had kept. This was something I saw every single morning, but today, it was making me feel especially emotional.

Well, I guess there's no helping that today. After all, it's the one year anniversary of when I first met Ai Fa.

I forced myself to look away, then picked up the basket of laundry and opened the door. But as soon as I did, a fist came flying right at my nose only to suddenly stop. Its owner shifted it to the side, and beyond it I saw Ai Fa peering at me.

“Ah, you’re done getting prepared? You were taking so long that I was about to knock on the door.”

I had figured that was it, but it was still rough on my heart even so.

With a composed look on her face, my clan head lowered her fist and turned the other way. “Let’s get going. I’m unsure how much water we have in the jug, so we should replace that as well.”

“Gotcha.”

After dumping out the small amount of water still inside, I set the jug on top of a pulling board meant to transport it, and as I did, Brave came energetically running over from his resting place beside Gilulu. Though there wasn’t any way for the pup to help us with this particular task, it had become customary for him to accompany us to the watering place each morning.

I took the water jug while Ai Fa handled the pots and utensils we had used for dinner last night, and we all headed off together. When we arrived a short while later, we found that the Fou and Ran had beaten us there and had already gotten to work. The Fou clan’s hunting dog was also with them, so Brave had a friend to play with for a bit.

“Today’s finally the day for the meat market, isn’t it? We’ll take care of everything; you should be able to just stand back and watch us, Asuta,” one of the Fou women said with a smile while washing a pot.

As I started doing some cleaning of my own, I nodded to her and replied, “I know. I’ll keep an eye on things, but I won’t butt in if I’m not needed, okay? Oh, but if you do have any trouble, feel free to let me know right away.”

“I’m sure it’ll be very reassuring to have you around today.”

Today would be the first time that the people of the forest’s edge were participating in the meat market, and since I happened to have the day off from work in the post town, I had made the decision to accompany them. Reina Ruu was originally supposed to serve as their guide, but I wanted to see the giba meat getting sold there personally.

“We’ll see you later, then. Um, it’s at a quarter past the third hour,

right? We'll be working on getting things ready until around then," she said.

"Good. I hope it all goes smoothly."

Since we were going to be working together, all of the clans near us had had sundials installed at their settlements. A quarter past the third hour would be equivalent to 8:15 or so, by my reckoning.

I turned to Ai Fa and asked, "What should we do until it's time? Gather firewood like always?"

"Indeed. And I would not feel right heading to town without cleansing my body."

It had still only been around half an hour since sunrise, so we had about two hours or so of free time. That would be plenty of time to both bathe and collect firewood.

"I'm a little surprised by how much this feels like just any other day..." I said once the two of us were alone.

"Hmm?" Ai Fa questioned with a tilt of her head.

"I mean, it's the one year anniversary of when I first met you, isn't it?"

"Indeed. But I did not find you out in the forest until the sun was setting. A year ago at this time of day, we still weren't even aware of one another's existence," my clan head bluntly replied, her attention turning back toward the washing. "I can wait until dinnertime to celebrate. Until then, we should focus on our own work."

"Right, got it."

Though that had been a rather dry exchange, I was perfectly fine with it. Everything about Ai Fa was charming to me, that stoic nature of hers included.

Honestly, getting to spend an ordinary day together makes me happy enough, I thought as I focused on scrubbing off the soot that was stuck to a pan.

After that, Brave also accompanied us to the outskirts of the forest, where we bathed in the Lanto River and gathered firewood and herbs.

Over the past however many days, the amount of fruit we had in our area had been steadily declining. We saw damaged trees here

and there as we walked—evidence of giba headbutting the trunks because they were unwilling to wait for the fruit to ripen and fall on its own. I could also see signs of gigo-like roots having been dug up out of the ground.

Before much longer, the blessings of this part of the forest would be all eaten up, meaning a break period for the area was fast approaching. The Ruu had just seen one of theirs end the other day, and it was common for the clans in our area to get one roughly a month after.

"It's been over four months now since our last break period, has it not?" Ai Fa noted.

"Hnn. That one ended halfway through the gold month, didn't it? Then we had the brown, red, vermilion, and yellow... Yeah, that was more than four months ago."

"Looking at the state of the forest's blessings, we should still have around half a month left until our break period. That means there will have been about five months between this one and the last."

"Since they're supposed to happen three times a year, five months is a bit long, isn't it? Do you think there's some specific reason for that?"

"In all likelihood, it is now taking longer for the fruits of our hunting grounds to be exhausted because we have been hunting more giba around here than ever before."

It was true that not only the Fa clan, but also the Fou, Ran, and Sudra were hunting more giba than they previously had been. And the introduction of hunting dogs had made the difference even more noticeable.

"The Ruu should be seeing the same thing happening, then. If our break periods still come a month after theirs, they'll also be having gaps of five months between one break and the next."

"Indeed. The Ruu resumed hunting soon after the start of the silver month, and they held their previous festival of the hunt at the end of the vermilion month, so that would indicate gaps of around five months for them."

Ai Fa's memory really was exceptional. I certainly couldn't recall when the Ruu's break periods had been right off the top of my head

like that. But then, the silver month kicked off the new year, and their last festival of the hunt had coincided with Granny Jiba's birthday, so perhaps those dates were just easy to remember.

"If we're managing to hunt as many giba as the Ruu clans, that is something to be proud of. However, the blessings of the forest are so abundant in their area that they're probably still hunting quite a few more than us."

"Yeah, but the Sudra have been heading to the Suun hunting grounds because they feel like there aren't as many giba around here anymore, right? So the clans around here must be hunting more than they used to."

"That is certainly true... And it is proof of how your delicious cooking has strengthened both the Ruu and the clans around us," Ai Fa remarked, picking up a bit of firewood off the ground and then turning to face me. "I am proud of you, and I hope that you will continue to offer your strength to our comrades at the forest's edge."

"Of course I will. It makes me happier than anything to hear you say that."

With a commanding expression befitting her role as clan head, Ai Fa nodded and said, "Indeed." There was an incredibly gentle light in her eyes that made me feel all warm and fuzzy inside.

After that, we wrapped up our morning work and headed back home, arriving right before we needed to head to town, so we immediately hooked Gilulu up to his wagon and headed over to the Fou settlement with our full household. Just to be on the safe side, Ai Fa had decided to accompany us this morning.

"Ah, Ai Fa and Asuta, we've been waiting for you," one of the women from the Fou said. They looked to be all ready to go.

One of their men would be coming along as well to act as a guard. If all of the giba meat they had prepared for today sold out, they would earn at least 3,420 red coins. There was a real chance of outlaws taking notice when you brought in that kind of money, so the Fou and the Dai had both decided that sending a hunter was necessary.

Two women were going to be in charge of sales. One was the woman I had spoken to at the watering place—the wife of one of

the Fou branch family heads—and the other was a young Ran woman. The young Fou man who would be their bodyguard rounded out their group.

"Well, folks around town won't mess around with women of the forest's edge lightly either. But we've never walked around with so much money before, so we figured it best to stay on the safe side," the Fou woman explained.

"Yeah, I'd say that's an important step to take. I could see outlaws from out of town going after the money because they don't know much about the people of the forest's edge."

We had been attacked by such outlaws in Dabagg, since they hadn't known how much they needed to fear hunters of the forest's edge, so this definitely felt like the sort of situation where it was best to take precautions.

After that, we headed south to the Ruu settlement, with us in Gilulu's wagon, while the Fou and Ran took Fafa's wagon. Though neither of our wagons had all that many people in them, they were also bringing over two hundred kilos of giba meat, which made taking two wagons necessary.

Twenty minutes or so later, we arrived at the Ruu settlement, where four people were waiting for us by the entrance: Jiza, Ludo, Reina, and Rimee Ruu.

"Sorry for the wait. So, you got it down to just four people in the end?"

"Indeed. You will be there as a guide, Asuta, and I felt that I would suffice as an observer on my own," Jiza Ruu commented.

"I'm here to guard these two," Ludo Ruu said with a yawn, meaning his sisters.

"Even with Asuta coming along, I was originally supposed to serve as the guide, and I still wish to fulfill my role properly," Reina Ruu said with a very serious look.

"Me too!" her little sister chimed in.

Well, it was no surprise that Reina and Rimee Ruu felt the same way I did. I wanted to personally see whether the giba meat would sell, and if the Fou and Dai would be able to complete their task with no problems.

The four members of the Ruu clan then boarded Gilulu's wagon. Considering how crowded the market got, we felt it wouldn't be a good idea to bring more wagons than necessary, so they would be riding with us.

After following the path farther south, we found the Dai clan's wagon awaiting us near the T-shaped intersection that led to the post town. They had bought it and the totos pulling the vehicle during the last break period with money borrowed from the Fa clan. It looked like their entire group had gotten down from their wagon to wait for us there.

"We've been waiting for you. We look forward to working together today."

There were two young unmarried women there, and a young man as well. The latter bowed deeply to Jiza Ruu, who was looking out from our wagon.

"It's been some time, Jiza Ruu. You may not remember me, but I am Deel Dai, the head of a Dai branch house."

"Deel Dai? Ah, yes... I don't recall how long it's been exactly, but it's good to see you looking well."

"Indeed. I shall do my best today, so as to not bring shame to the Dai name."

He seemed to be quite a mild-mannered man, fairly tall and more on the slender side, with a rather soft face for a hunter. There was a look of what seemed to be reverence in his eyes as he stared at Jiza Ruu.

There sure are a lot of humble folks in the Dai clan. Is that because they've got big leading clans to both the north and south of them?

The Dai and their subordinate clan, the Ren, were the only ones located between the Ruu and Sauti, who had been the largest clan groups other than the Suun long before they had become leading clans, which might have made the Dai feel a little inferior. But as I was thinking about that, a familiar onion-like head peeked out of the wagon behind them.

"How long are you gonna keep on talking? If you dawdle too long, the meat market will start without us." It was none other than

Tsuvai Rutim, who had been given the important role of acting as the supervisor. The members of the Ruu clan and I were going as observers of sorts, but she was a full member of the team doing the work. Since the Rutim settlement was located farther south than the Ruu's, it had been decided that she would meet up with the Dai along the way.

"Well then, why don't we get going?" the Fou woman said, and our three wagons were soon moving down the path to the west. It was all downhill from there to town, so the shaking in the wagon was a bit stronger than usual.

As I sat my back up straight against the wall so I wouldn't fall over, I found myself with a question for the eldest Ruu son. "Jiza Ruu, you and that Deel Dai guy are acquaintances?"

"I wouldn't go that far. We've only met a single time before. But I am told my father Donda and Darmu Ruu have met him at the clan head meeting numerous times."

Since the hunter had introduced himself as the head of a branch house, he was probably the second son of their main house. If that was correct, it would make sense for him to accompany his clan head to the meeting, like Darmu Ruu did for his father.

"I believe it was at the celebratory banquet we held for the Ririn when they became a Ruu subordinate. That Deel Dai man was watching the celebration from a distance."

"Even though he's a member of the Dai? Why'd he do that?"

"Pure curiosity, apparently. Though, he did have some interaction with Vina."

Jiza Ruu fell silent then, so Reina Ruu whispered into my ear, "I don't really know the details myself, but apparently, that man fell for Vina at the banquet and asked her to marry him the next day without permission from his clan head."

"Huh? That's pretty bold. But wait, didn't the Ririn become a subordinate clan to the Ruu quite a while ago?"

"Yes. Vina had only just turned fifteen, so it must have been around six years now. But she was very mature even back then, so in those days there were a lot of men who requested to marry her." That was certainly quite the story. But then, Reina Ruu whispered

something even more surprising into my ear. “Before Vina, he apparently fell for Yamiru Lea too. Back when she was part of the Suun clan, I mean. That’s really something, isn’t it?”

I let a goofy “Whoa” slip out without meaning to.

Reina Ruu giggled, and Ai Fa—who was sitting up in the driver’s seat, keeping her back turned to us—said, “Don’t go making strange sounds.”

“Th-That really is something else. Even Rau Lea hasn’t taken aim at both Yamiru Lea and Vina Ruu. Deel Dai didn’t look like the sort of guy who would do something that crazy.”

“Yeah. That was my first time seeing him too. I didn’t expect him to be so slender. You really can’t judge someone just by looking at them,” Reina Ruu replied with an amused laugh, her expression a mix of both mature and childish. “Still, I heard it caused a bit of a commotion back then. It was really shocking for someone to fall for the eldest daughters of both the Ruu and the Suun. When the Dai clan head apologized to Papa Donda and Zuuro Suun at the next clan meeting, he apparently bowed so low that his forehead touched the ground.”

Considering the relationship between the Suun and the Ruu at the time, what he had done had basically been like a bomb thrown into a crowd. If either Vina Ruu or Yamiru Lea had felt like it, they could easily have caused the other side to seriously lose face in the eyes of the other clans, which likely would have resulted in the volatile relationship between the two becoming actively hostile.

“Oh yeah... Now that you mention it, I heard something about Vina Ruu and Yamiru Lea feuding a while back. I think it was shortly before the clan head meeting?” I said.

“Ah, yes, I heard about that from Vina and Lala myself. Yamiru Lea visited your stall, didn’t she?”

“Yeah, that’s right. There was a real feeling of rivalry between the two of them. That grudge went back six whole years, huh? It’s kinda surprising to be putting that all together here and now.”

“I can imagine. But apparently, Deel Dai took a wife from a branch house soon after, so it didn’t end up being a serious issue.”

“Huh? After falling for two women, he went and married a

different one right away?"

"Yep. Yamiru Lea insisted he do so in order to make up for causing such a major disturbance between the Suun and Ruu."

I could easily remember Yamiru Lea's snakelike glare and the smell of blood that lingered about her back when she had been part of the Suun clan. I had found her truly frightening. Deel Dai must have had some serious nerve.

Actually, maybe it's more that his senses were out of whack somehow. Like, he might not have noticed just how ludicrous his actions really were. I can't help but think of Jou Ran, to be honest.

Still, that had all been wrapped up six years in the past. If he had gotten married back then, it was possible that he even had an adorable kid or two at this point. If at all possible, I wanted every person of the forest's edge to live a happy life.

"Oh! We're almost there!" Ludo Ruu excitedly said, looking up from where he was playing with Rimee Ruu and Brave.

I peered out of the wagon beside the driver's seat, and I found that I could see buildings on the other side of the trees ahead of us. It was a rather amusing coincidence that we had done our preliminary inspection on Rimee Ruu's birthday, and now we were taking part for the first time on mine. Quickly growing excited, and wondering what the outcome of the day would be, I got myself ready to watch the show.

2

After following the path Telia Mas had shown us, we arrived at the plaza where the meat market would be held.

We had left with time to spare, so there weren't many people out on the street. But as soon as we set foot in the plaza, we saw that a number of wagons were parked there already, and a good number of folks were getting set up to do business.

"Ah, so you really did come, huh?" a familiar voice called out. When I turned to look, I saw Marth, a young platoon commander from the guards who we were acquainted with.

"Oh, so you're finally back on duty, Marth?"

"I am. My arm still isn't back to full strength yet, but if I just keep resting forever, I'll dry up and fade away." Marth was opening and closing his right hand as he spoke. During the cutting of the path through the forest's edge, he had been seriously injured in a giba attack, but it looked like he was mostly back to normal.

When he spotted Marth, Ludo Ruu called out, "Hey there. So your broken arm has finally healed? Glad to see you looking well."

"Ah, you're a Ruu hunter, aren't you? I owe you for your actions back then." Despite the stern look he still had on his face, and how he seemed to be puffing up his armored chest self-importantly, Marth's expression of gratitude seemed to be completely earnest.

Then Rimee Ruu peeked out from behind her older brother. "I'm really glad you're feeling better! I'm sure it's because you ate lots of giba meat!"

During his time off, Marth had stopped by our stalls once every few days. Even to Rimee and Reina Ruu, he was a familiar regular at this point. The second Ruu daughter also greeted him with a smile, which made Marth somewhat uncomfortably scratch the tip of his nose.

"This sort of stuff gets harder the more people you know personally. You lot are here to sell giba meat, aren't you? In that case, you should hurry up and get ready," he said.

"We will. Are you on patrol, Marth?"

"It's more that I'm acting as security here. When you have a lot of money in one place, you'll often see outlaws gather too."

It was true that I had seen guards around here and there when we had come to inspect the meat market. Still, now that he mentioned it, I noticed that there seemed to be quite a few of them present.

"When you first started doing business with your stalls, it caused a real commotion in town, didn't it? There was some concern that something similar might occur today, so we tightened up security."

"Are you talking about the incident where our customers from the east and south almost got into a huge fight with one another?"

"Yeah, that one. That happened because you ran out of goods to

sell, didn't it? We'd rather not take the chance of something like that happening again today."

Polarth had cautioned us about that in advance too. He had said that there was sure to be a scramble for our giba meat stock, so we would be wise to prepare a lottery for it.

"Well then, we're gonna go ahead and get ready now."

We parked our wagons along the wall. The proper procedure for this was apparently to line up starting at the end of the road, so we took our place beside three people who were already unloading boxes. And when we did, one of them turned toward us with a suspicious look.

"Oh, you're the meat sellers from the forest's edge, aren't you? I've heard about you." From that cold, formal tone, I had a pretty good guess as to who we were dealing with. They must have been karon merchants from Dabagg. "So you'll finally be selling giba meat at the market, will you? I hear that you're sure to get plenty of attention, but who knows how true that really is."

"I'm not sure myself. I'm hoping we will, though."

The Fou and Dai were busy unloading the boxes, so I naturally ended up being the one to reply to him.

"Hmph," the merchant from Dabagg muttered while wiping the sweat from his forehead. "Well, I guess we'll just have to see how much demand there is for your product. That'll have a big impact on our business going forward, after all."

"Of course."

These men didn't work for the ranches themselves. Rather, they collected meat from the ranches in order to sell it in other towns. First they went to the castle town and sold as much stock as they could there, then they came to the post town the next morning, and after they were done here, they would head back to Dabagg. Judging by how well-dressed they were, they were probably even permitted to lodge in the castle town.

He seems a bit on edge. There's a chance that us selling giba meat really will lead to them losing out. That was why I wanted to make a point of forming proper bonds with them too. As I was thinking about that, though, a real stir filled the plaza as a very fine

boxed carriage slowly advanced into it.

There were guards on either side of the carriage guiding the totos that were pulling it, and it was obvious that they were from the castle town, given how much nicer their armor was than that worn by Marth and the other post town guards. They were members of the totos cavalry who often accompanied us when we entered the castle town.

The carriage pulled up in front of us, and an elegant-looking man stepped out of it and promptly addressed us. "We have come to pick up the giba meat. Is the person in charge present?"

The Dai woman who had been helping the Fou to unload their goods stepped forward and said, "Yes, the giba meat is loaded in this wagon. There are five boxes of leg meat, four of shoulder meat, and three each of rib and back meat, adding up to fifteen in total."

"You have my thanks. Our people shall transport the goods."

Three burly men then emerged from the carriage and began moving boxes from the Dai wagon to their own vehicle. The Dai were the ones in charge of all the meat that was to be handed off to the castle town.

"We confirm that we have received fifteen boxes of meat. Please check that your payment is all here," the elegant man said, holding out a small cloth bag. Though it wasn't very big, it looked like its contents were fairly heavy.

The Dai woman took the coins out one by one and handed them to the Ren woman as Tsuvai Rutim casually slipped over to them. The payment was supposed to be equal to 1,710 red coins, which could be converted into 1 silver coin and 71 white coins. It was a little troublesome that there was no denomination of currency that we could exchange a hundred red coins or ten white coins for.

"Yes, this looks like the correct amount," The Dai woman said.

"Well then, we ask that you please accept this as well. It is what is known as a tally."

"A...tally?"

"Correct. The people who come to pick up the giba meat in the future will bring this other half of the tally with them. It is possible that someone could misrepresent themselves in order to fraudulently

take possession of the goods in the future, after all."

Based on what Polarth had told us, this guy must have been a wholesaler rather than a noble. The reason he had guards accompanying him was because he was attending to business directly relating to the nobility.

"Well then, please excuse me."

They didn't seem inclined to stick around and talk any more than was necessary. Their carriage slowly departed back the way they had come from, and as she watched them leave, the Dai woman placed the coins back into the cloth bag and then handed it to Deel Dai. It certainly made sense to have a man be the one to carry a small fortune like that.

A bit of a commotion then filled the plaza again. It was pretty unusual for someone to leave the castle walls in order to pick up goods, but the meat sellers from Dabagg beside us didn't seem to be especially interested. They had almost certainly done business with wholesalers like that in the castle town too.

"That made me kinda nervous. Now we just have to sell the rest of the meat, right?" the Dai woman said. She and the Ren woman then went back to assisting the others. When it came to selling meat in the market, they would all be working together regardless of clan.

As we were dealing with the folks from the castle town, more and more meat sellers had been steadily arriving. I also started seeing people who looked like customers here and there. The market would open at the fourth hour, which was now drawing very close.

"Oh my, am I the first one here?" a tall figure pulling a wagon called out as she approached. She was the owner of The Ramuria Coil, Jizeh. Everyone from the Ruu clan who was with us except for Jiza Ruu already knew her, so they greeted one another. Then the folks from the Fou and Dai also went ahead and introduced themselves to her. "I'm sure lots of people will be coming by soon, though. But here's to doing business with you fine folks from the forest's edge." Jizeh was gentle-mannered and polite, and I could feel the warmth in all of the little gestures she made, so I was sure she was the type of person who would be easily accepted by the people of the forest's edge. She greeted us one by one, until her

eyes landed on the final person in our group and narrowed. “My. It’s been a while since I last saw you. Do you remember me?”

“I remember your face, at least.” Naturally, that had come from Tsuvai Rutim. She had also encountered Jizeh during the meeting at the start of the month.

“I saw you back at that meeting, didn’t I? Is that Mida Ruu fellow doing well?”

“I’ve got no clue. The Ruu and Rutim may be related, but we live in different places.”

“Ah, I see. How lonesome.”

Tsuvai Rutim hadn’t revealed her past identity, so Jizeh had no way of knowing that she and Mida Ruu used to be siblings. But Tsuvai Rutim defending Mida Ruu and then summoning him from the settlement at the forest’s edge must have left a very strong impression.

“It will soon be the fourth hour,” Marth said, having returned to us along with his four subordinates after taking a look around the perimeter. “Hmm. I was worried that we were going to have a large number of people crowding around you before the market opened, but it seems those fears were unfounded.”

“Yeah. We were warned that it might cause a really big problem if we went with a first-come-first-served system, so we announced in advance that we would be holding a lottery right when the fourth hour rolled around.”

“I see. How well prepared of you. But even so, this is still quite a small crowd,” Marth started to say, right before a bunch of people pulling wagons started approaching us all at once. Most of them looked to be innkeepers.

“Hmm? Hey guard, do you have some sort of business here? You’re not planning to get in the way of our business, are you?” the large inn owner at the head of the group asked, glaring at Marth without any fear in his eyes.

With a quick sigh, Marth met his gaze and glared right back at him. “As long as you lot don’t cause a commotion, we won’t get involved. Go about your business while keeping to the laws of Genos.”

After that, Marth and one of the guards remained with us, while the other three moved back behind the innkeepers.

With a "Hmph!" that large man who had spoken up turned his gaze toward us. "We came here to buy giba meat. We can just wait here, can't we?"

"Of course. Please hold on a little longer until the fourth hour arrives," I said. I was really only supposed to be keeping an eye on things, but I wasn't going to ignore a familiar face. Still, that was the sort of interaction the folks from the Fou and Dai would have to handle in the future.

With that thought in mind, I looked back at our work space, where I found that the women had been watching the exchange between me and the inn owner with serious looks in their eyes. None of them had participated in our business at the stalls, so they hadn't had all that many opportunities to interact with townsfolk. It seemed they were earnestly trying their best to learn how to handle their future customers from my example.

"Looks like quite the crowd after all," Marth quietly muttered from the spot where he had stationed himself beside our sales space.

There were people joining the crowd around us one after another, some familiar and some not. Of course, the owners of the inns didn't necessarily have to come personally, and undoubtedly, plenty of the people swarming around us were just ordinary folks who weren't connected to the inns as all.

It wasn't like there had been any grand announcement for the common folk, but we certainly weren't trying to hide what we were doing, so rumors about our participation must have spread naturally. We had been working on our plans to sell giba meat since the start of the month. That was plenty of time for word to get around.

"Hmm. I can't imagine how you could have any meat go unsold with things like this," Ludo Ruu whispered.

Right after he said that, a sharp flutelike sound rang out from the center of the plaza. There was a large pedestal there in the middle, and it was equipped with a sundial. Now that it was showing the fourth hour, the guard in charge had announced that the market was open.

The folks who had been waiting for that signal all crowded in, and the older Fou woman took a small calming breath before calling out, "We are now open for business. First off, could anyone who wants to purchase giba meat please raise a hand?"

There were quite a few customers in front of us now, in a group that stretched a fair distance across the plaza, and with questioning looks on their faces, every single one of them raised their hands. The Fou woman turned around to look at the Fou man, who had climbed up into the driver's seat of one of our wagons at some point. He scanned the crowd with his eyes and reported, "Thirty-one people."

"In that case, I will be placing thirty-one wooden tags in this box, so could I have you pull them out one at a time? Then we will begin selling giba meat, starting from the smallest numbers."

This was the lottery method I had thought up. Back when we had been selling a limited number of giba cutlet sandwiches at the stalls, we had used a similar setup, which I had adjusted for our purposes here. Of course, all we had to do was write numbers on wooden tags, put them in a box, and have people draw them, so it was hardly complex. The people who drew the smallest numbers got to buy giba meat first, and once we sold out, that was it.

The only tricky part was that the people of the forest's edge didn't know how to read or write, so this time around, we had placed symbolic marks on the wooden tags instead. It was a very primitive system of notation, with one through nine being represented by small dots and tens being represented with big ones.

We had prepared up to fifty of those tags to be safe, but we only added numbers one through thirty-one to the box. There was a round hole just big enough for an adult hand to fit through in the top of the box, so they wouldn't be able to peer inside when pulling one out.

"Well then, one at a time, please."

The Ran woman held out the box, and the inn owner who had been arguing with Marth before turned to face Jizeh.

"You got in line first, so you should go before anyone else."

"My, I appreciate it," Jizeh said with a smile, reaching her slender

hand through the hole in the box. Then, with her eyes closed, she rummaged around inside for a bit and pulled out a wooden tag. There was a single small dot on it.

"My... That's number one." Even the Ran woman couldn't help but sound surprised, and a round of dismayed cries sounded out from the crowd.

The guy who let Jizeh go first was getting little jabs in the shoulder and the like from the people around him, but he just frowned and said, "Hey, it's not my fault."

"Well then, could we have you purchase your giba meat now? The amount you buy may change the number of people who will get to make a purchase after you."

"My, I certainly appreciate the opportunity. I imagine if I were to buy all fifteen boxes now, everyone else would hold quite a grudge against me for it, wouldn't they?" Jizeh said, glancing over the crowd.

"Hey, Granny Jizeh, cut it out with the bad jokes, okay?"

"Heh heh... It isn't like I could bring all fifteen boxes back on my own anyway. And if I were to get too greedy and let some go to waste, why, that would be simply awful." Ultimately, Jizeh ended up ordering one box each of back, rib, and shoulder meat. That was rather shrewd of her, to not take any of the leg meat that we had prepared the most of. "So, how much do I owe you?"

"Please hold on for just a moment. Um..." The Dai woman brought a hand up to her mouth. Tsuvai Rutim carefully observed her from the side until she spoke again. "The rib and back meat cost 150 red coins each, and it's ninety for the shoulder meat... So that would be 390 red coins in total."

"Then, it will be thirty-nine white coins, correct?"

After paying the requested amount, Jizeh loaded the three wooden boxes into her wagon. Despite being an older lady and quite slender, she didn't seem to have any trouble at all with lifting a box that weighed fifteen kilos.

"Thank you for everything. I look forward to the day when we meet again," Jizeh said with a bow, and then she swiftly departed.

With a sour look on his face, that inn owner from before stepped

forward and said, “I’m next.” However, the number he drew was twenty-two. With only twelve boxes left, that put him in a pretty hopeless situation. And so, with his burly shoulders slumping, the man dejectedly stepped back.

People steadily continued to draw lots, some reacting with joy and others with sorrow. The young fellow who drew number three broke out in a little dance, while the man who drew number seven was somewhat more ambivalent. Buying three boxes would allow people to pay a cheaper wholesale price, so if everyone purchased that amount, we would run out of stock by number five.

Right around when we were halfway through, someone managed to draw number two. I wasn’t familiar with the young woman, but she seemed to be connected to an inn. She gave an excited cheer of “Yay!” which earned her some envious and disappointed looks from the folks who hadn’t drawn lots yet. “I’ll take two boxes of leg meat and one box of back meat, please!”

“Of course. In that case... Um... That’s two boxes at ninety coins, and one at a hundred fifty, so...three hundred...three hundred twenty coins...?”

“Three hundred thirty,” Tsuvai Rutim sharply interjected, prompting the Dai woman to bow to her before accepting the payment. “Hey, I taught you that it’s easier to calculate things in terms of white coins instead of red when you’re selling boxes, didn’t I? It’s easier to count out smaller numbers, after all,” Tsuvai Rutim quietly added as the girl was loading up her boxes.

With a terribly embarrassed look, the Dai woman hung her head and said, “My deepest apologies.”

“Well then, can I make my purchase too?” the young man who had drawn number three before asked with a smile as he stepped forward.

“Ah, yes, please go ahead. What would you like to purchase?”

“Let’s see... I’d like enough leg meat for twenty people.” In the post town, the amount of meat that was considered a standard serving for one person was 250 grams, so for twenty people, that would work out to five kilograms. As soon as he said that, around half of the crowd started jeering reproachfully. They must have been

with the inns. Someone buying a small amount meant there would be less left to buy at the wholesale price. “Hey, I can’t help it. We’re a household of only five people. We scraped together as much money as we could,” the young man said with a look of satisfaction on his face.

Someone shouted, “Yeah, that’s right!” as if to cut off all the criticism. That must have been another customer who wanted to purchase a smaller amount of giba meat like him. If the first five buyers had all been connected to inns and bought three boxes in order to get the cheaper rate, none of the ordinary folks would have an opportunity to get any.

“Enough leg meat for twenty? That would be sixty red coins,” the Dai woman said, briefly shooting Tsuvai Rutim a nervous look. The young girl just silently crossed her arms. When split into smaller portions, a kilo of leg meat would cost twelve red coins, meaning the price for a single portion was three red coins, so she hadn’t made any mistakes there.

We had a study session where we reviewed basic math to prepare for today, but practicing something and doing it for real are very different things, huh? It’s only natural for her to be taking a bit longer now.

Incidentally, we had used this opportunity to adjust the prices of the meat we sold a little bit. Up until now, the prices for the four cuts had been all over the place, but since back and rib meat were close in price to one another, and so were leg and shoulder meat, we took the midpoint between them and made them cost the same. That halved the effort involved in memorizing the prices and running the calculations.

Tsuvai Rutim and I fall outside of the norm, but we have to give everyone else some time to get accustomed to the process. There’s no need to rush, I thought to myself as the lots continued to be drawn. Before the final one was pulled, though, numbers four and five came up, and they were both drawn by people from inns. On top of that, one of them bought four boxes instead of three, which meant only a single box of rib meat and around ten kilos worth of leg meat were left.

At that point, all of the remaining innkeepers left dejectedly. It seemed they had no intention of buying meat at the higher price. There were only around ten people left after that, so roughly twenty out of the thirty-one had been connected to inns. And as the ones who gave up were turning in their wooden lots, most of them said something like "Make sure you come sell meat again as soon as possible, okay?"

From there, we had the people who remained make their purchases starting from the lower numbers, and by the fifth person, the meat all ran out. One person bought enough meat for thirty, so those twenty-five kilos of meat vanished in a flash.

"I sure am glad I managed to get some. My family's going to be overjoyed," a young man said with a smile as he purchased the last ten portions of both the rib and leg meat. His brightly shining brown eyes looked over everyone on the sales team, then finally stopped on me. "You're Asuta of the Fa clan, right? Thank you for always being there for my grandmother."

"Huh? Your grandmother?"

"Yes. I'm the grandson of Mishil the vegetable seller."

I was seriously, completely, and utterly shocked. The young man continued looking at me with a smile.

"I get sent into town to make purchases a lot, so I've bought food from your stalls every once in a while. My other family members haven't had that opportunity, though, so they've been begging me to get some giba meat for them."

"Ah, I see. Well, thank you very much."

"I'm the one who should be thanking you. My wife has been visiting Dora's house and taking lessons on how to make better meals there. Thanks to that, dinnertime has become a lot more enjoyable as of late." The smile on his face was bright enough that it was hard to believe he was related to Granny Mishil. "By the way, I didn't see anyone from Dora's house here. You let them know about today, didn't you?"

"Yes. But they decided to hold off for now, since they wanted to give people who have never tasted giba meat a chance to try it first."

"Ah, I see. They did it for the sake of people from families like

mine. I certainly appreciate their consideration.” As he held the leather bags filled with meat in his hands, the young man gave a little bow. “Since I actually got ahold of some giba meat, I’ll have to tell my mother and wife to really show off their skills. I’ll stop by your stalls again too sometime, so I’ll see you then.”

“All right. And thank you again for your purchase.”

With that, the young man left, which wrapped up our business for the day. Four inns and six households had purchased over two hundred kilos of giba meat in total, and we had been able to sell that same amount to the castle town as well. That amounted to an income of 3,660 red coins in total. The contents of two of the boxes had been sold in smaller quantities, so we had earned more from those. For our first day, that was a seriously fantastic result. This business I had started out of a desire to bring prosperity to the forest’s edge had taken yet another big step forward.

3

“We won’t get anywhere if such simple calculations are enough to trip you up! I’m seriously worried about the future!” Tsuvai Rutim complained inside the wagon after we had finished cleaning up. We were done with our sales work for the day, but the plaza was so crowded that it would have been difficult to navigate it with our totos and wagons. We decided to hold a review meeting on the spot as we waited.

Since the wagons weren’t going to be moving, most of us had loaded into one without concern for the normal weight limit. The Fou, Ran, Dai, and Ren women were all inside, along with Tsuvai Rutim, Reina Ruu, Rimee Ruu, and me, while Ai Fa stood at the front and Jiza Ruu at the back.

“One portion of leg or shoulder meat costs three coins, and one box costs nine white coins. For a portion of rib or back meat, it’s five red coins, and fifteen white coins for a box. There’s nothing more to it than that, so working it out should hardly take any time at all.”

“We’re so sorry,” the other four women replied, hanging their

heads. They had taken turns handling the sales so that all of them could gain some experience with doing the math, but none of them had been able to satisfy Tsuvai Rutim.

"You there from the Ren. Back when we were studying this at the forest's edge, weren't you able to answer pretty smoothly? So why did you stumble so much today?"

"W-Well, it was my first time selling to townsfolk, so I might have been feeling a little out of sorts."

"It wasn't like there were outlaws lurking about, and we had men with us too, so what was there to get upset about? And you there from the Dai, you mixed up the price of leg and rib meat, didn't you?! If I hadn't caught your mistake, it would have seriously cost us!"

"I-I'm really sorry. I wasn't in my proper state of mind either."

As the two women dejectedly slumped their shoulders, Tsuvai Rutim's gaze turned toward the left, to where the older Fou woman was seated.

"You seemed to have the easiest time with the calculations. At the very least, you didn't mix up any prices."

"Yes. Perhaps I was simply calmer than the others because I've lived longer."

Though the Fou woman has spoken casually to Ai Fa and me, her tone was more polite when she was talking to someone tied to a leading clan.

Tsuvai Rutim snorted, "Hmph!" and then glared at me. "Is that really all there is to it? I don't recall these two being able to calculate stuff like thirteen portions of leg meat and seven of rib meat very quickly back when we were teaching them either."

"Well, these two were actually chosen for this job because they were the most skilled at counting out of the members and subordinates of the Fou. And when I taught them, they did really well," I noted.

"Hmm? I thought that the younger woman was better at counting than the older one," Tsuvai Rutim said.

The Fou woman smiled softly and replied, "Before we became friends with the Fa, our clan was poor. We often had to think

carefully about how to best use our limited funds. That was especially true for me, as I am the wife of the head of a branch house."

"I see," Tsuvai Rutim said, her lower lip jutting out. "At any rate, we won't get anywhere with things like this. If we start selling significantly more meat than this, there will be more people making small purchases too. Could you handle a purchase like three portions of leg meat, eleven of rib, thirteen of shoulder, and four of back?"

The Dai and Ren women looked downright flustered.

Tsuvai Rutim sent yet another glare my way. "That wouldn't be enough to cause you trouble, would it?"

"Well, it would take a second... Um, I think it should be forty-eight and seventy-five coins, which would add up to one hundred twenty-three in total."

The four women looked at me wide-eyed, and so did Reina and Rimee Ruu.

"That was amazing! How were you able to reply so quickly?" one of them asked.

"Well, first, I added the shoulder and leg meat together as well as rib and back meat since they're the same price, then I multiplied them by their costs. Ah, but multiplication might not be a concept you're very familiar with, so I suppose that might make it tricky to do it that way."

Multiplication was actually something the people of the forest's edge used in their everyday lives. Without it, they would have a lot of difficulty calculating something like how many aria and poitan they could buy for the tusks and horns of a single giba. But that was a narrow skill they had cultivated on a day to day basis, so it wasn't as if they had learned a proper method for how to do it like I had. Looking at it from a different perspective, I had trouble understanding how they could manage such calculations without having any concept of what a multiplication table was.

"What do you mean? We're talking about stuff like how three times three is nine, and nine times nine is eighty-one, aren't we? That isn't difficult at all," Tsuvai Rutim said.

"N-No, I couldn't possibly calculate nine times nine so quickly. You

and Asuta are the only ones capable of that, aren't you?" the Ren woman timidly asked.

"Hmm..." Tsuvai Rutim grumbled, thinking.

I decided that now was a good time to tell her about something I had been thinking about for a while. "I actually have a suggestion for how they can calculate price totals."

"What is it? We still haven't solved this problem, but you're planning on bringing up another one now?"

"No, I'd say they're the same issue at their core. Would you mind taking a look at this real quick?" I then grabbed the bag that was sitting beside me and pulled a pair of secret items out of it: a notebook and writing brush I had bought in the post town.

"Oh? Those are the tools townsfolk use to do that writing thing, aren't they?"

"Yeah. I was thinking that we should write down our sales here in this notebook in the future. And I've actually already had some of the townsfolk teach me how to write numbers the way the people of the western kingdom do."

I turned over the B5-sized notebook, showing them where I had written each of the numerals that represented the numbers from zero to nine in the Western Kingdom of Selva, with a small set of marks next to each of them to indicate their value.

"Hmm. So this one with nothing written next to it is zero, then?"

"It is. So if you want to write twenty-four, you put this character for two on the left and this one for four on the right. And if you want to record our income of 3,660 red coins from today, you would do it like so." On the following page, I went ahead and wrote the number using the numerals of Selva. "Then, if you write down the amount of money you used to purchase meat from other clans and subtract it to get the pure profit, you'll be able to show how much the people of the forest's edge have benefited from your work at the next clan head meeting."

"I see..." Tsuvai Rutim muttered, turning back to the previous page. Her eyes that showed a strikingly large amount of white were glaring intently at those ten numbers. After a few seconds, the girl turned back to the other page, then snatched the wooden brush

from me and quickly started writing.



"This should be the amount of money the Dai and Ren used. Sure enough, there shouldn't be any worry about them making off with the money the Ruu clan loaned them with numbers like this."

"T-Tsuvai Rutim, you already memorized all of those numbers?" the Dai woman asked in amazement, and the young girl shot her a doubtful look.

"You should only need to see them for a moment to commit them to memory. It really isn't tricky at all."

"N-No, I couldn't possibly memorize them anywhere near that quickly... But of course, if we need them in order to do this job, I'll try my best to learn."

"I believe memorizing them will prove quite helpful down the line. It should be especially useful when it comes to practicing multiplication," I said, writing down some fresh numbers in another notebook. As an example, I wrote down the twos column of a multiplication table. "Here, you can see what you get when you multiply two by everything from two to nine. Two times two is four, two times three is six, and so on. If you write it all out on a bigger board or something and practice it when you have the time, that should prove really useful when you need to do a calculation."

"You think so?"

"It may not make sense to you without learning how to read numbers first, but it should be good practice in the long term. And if you add a verbal component like saying 'two two is four' and 'two three is six' as well, it'll become even easier to remember."

"Ha ha, that sounds like some sort of charm from Sym!" Rimee Ruu said, getting all excited like a little puppy.

Next to her, Reina Ruu was staring at the notebook with a serious gaze. "The idea of writing numbers down is quite interesting. It seems like learning this would be helpful when it comes to cooking as well."

"Yeah. You can write things like ingredient quantities or cooking times, which will be really useful. If you only have words to work with, it can be pretty difficult to teach people how to cook, right?" However, our meat market business came first, so I smiled heartily at the four rather nervous-looking women. "This is just an initial

trial, and I imagine it'll take a while to pick it up properly. But if this work is something you intend to pass down to your descendants, I'm sure the effort you put in won't go to waste."

"Yeah... But is this something we'll truly be able to master?"

"We won't know until we actually give it a try. But I don't think it'll be any problem at all. You already know how to do basic multiplication without any formal techniques to help you, which is something I honestly find really amazing."

I really did mean that too. The women of the forest's edge had done an incredible job of learning how to cook and manage businesses without writing down so much as a single note. That had to mean they were incredibly talented when it came to either calculation or memorization.

"With multiplication, you've just been running calculations in your head up until now, right? But if you can look at a sheet like this and speak out the formulas, you should be able to use your eyes and ears to learn it even better. If that turns out to be too tough, I'll try to come up with a different method, but why not give this a shot first?"

"Sounds interesting," Tsuvai Rutim said quietly. Her eyes were still fixed on the numbers in the notebook.

Seeing that, the Dai woman turned to face me with a resolute look. "Understood. We mustn't give up before even trying. And, well...even if I am no good at it, there might be other women among us who will benefit greatly from this knowledge. So yes, please. I would like you to show us how this is done."

The other women all nodded along seriously too, as Jiza Ruu and Ai Fa silently watched us talking. For now at least, it seemed my comrades at the forest's edge had accepted the plan that I had come up with.

After around half an hour later, things finally settled down at the plaza, and we were able to return to the settlement at the forest's edge.

Once we got back to the Ruu settlement, we started working on the plan we had previously been discussing right away. I wrote out a

pair of full multiplication tables on some large wooden planks, then presented them to the Fou and Dai women. I had also bought as many notebooks and brushes as I thought we might need, and I distributed those as well.

"I figured the Ruu clan would need them too, so I bought extras," I said as I handed Reina Ruu a notebook and brush, making her look seriously surprised.

"So you really do think these techniques will be useful for cooking as well, Asuta?"

"Yeah. Back when we had a study session in the castle town on how to handle black fuwano, someone wrote down the amounts of ingredients that were being used each time, remember? Ever since I saw that, I started thinking that I'd like to do something similar here at the forest's edge too."

"Thank you! I'd love to record the contents of as many different dishes as I can, as soon as I can!"

If it was going to make her this happy, maybe I should have proposed the plan even sooner.

But at any rate, that wrapped things up on the meat-selling end of things.

"The meat market is held once every three or four days. It'll be kinda hard to participate every time right from the start, so how about skipping every second one and going again six or seven days from now?" I suggested.

"Okay. If the plan is to bring the same amount next time, that should be no problem at all," the Fou woman said.

"In that case, if you have the time to spare, how about adding a few more boxes? The castle town said they could easily take even twice as much as we gave them today, and that they would buy any that is left unsold in the post town."

And that was the last thing that we had to discuss. I then said goodbye to everyone and got ready to head home. But as I was doing so, Tsuvai sneaked over to me and whispered, "Next time, I won't lose."

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

Rather than responding to my question, Tsuvai Rutim swiftly

hopped into the Dai wagon. As I was left tilting my head, Reina Ruu smiled at me, as she happened to be standing nearby.

"I'm sure she must have been frustrated because the women you taught ended up doing better than the ones that she did."

"Huh? That's just because they're naturally skilled. It had nothing to do with me."

"Well, no matter the reason, I'd say this was good for Tsuvai Rutim. She was acting really strict with the Dai and Ren women, but...it almost felt as if she was interacting with her relatives."

"Ah. You may be right."

On top of that, Tsuvai Rutim had been watching every little thing the women had done very carefully. The Dai and Ren women also seemed to have a lot of trust in and respect for the girl too.

"Her tongue is as sharp as always, but I really do believe that Tsuvai Rutim has been changing. Of course, Gazraan Rutim wouldn't have granted her the Rutim name otherwise."

"Yeah, I think so too," I agreed.

After that, I took care of some odd jobs at Mikel's house before heading back home. If I wanted to take on the challenge of writing down recipes, I would need the assistance of someone familiar with the western writing system. Milano Mas and the other folks I knew in the post town were only familiar with numbers and some simple characters, so my most reliable ally on that front was Mikel, who had been raised in the castle town.

I ended up spending a fair bit of time there, so we didn't make it back to the Fa house until right before the sun hit its peak. It was now time for Ai Fa and Brave to head out into the forest. However, they would just be checking the traps they had set, so it was more of a half day.

"I'll be back in around two hours. You haven't forgotten what I said, have you?"

"I haven't. I'll head over to the Fou settlement after this, so it shouldn't be an issue."

Since today was my birthday, Ai Fa had decided that she would prepare my celebratory meal. And she couldn't concentrate with other people around, so I had been given strict orders to stay out of

the kitchen.

"Very well. Make sure you return before the sun sets, all right?" she said.

"Got it. You take care too. I'll be praying to the forest for you to return safely. And that goes for you as well, Brave."

Brave rarely ever made a sound, so all he did in response was blink his clever-looking black eyes and wag his short tail.

After watching the two of them vanish into the forest, I went ahead and set off in the wagon toward the Fou settlement. I would be borrowing their kitchen in order to handle the prep work for business tomorrow while also holding a cooking study session.

When I arrived at the Fou settlement, I found that a large crowd had already gathered there—all women who fell under the Fou, Gaaz, and Ratsu. Fei Beim and Lili Ravitz would only help out on days when they came back with us from the stalls, so this was the full lineup for today.

But as that thought passed through my head, I realized someone important was missing. Though she was attached to a clan that opposed the actions of the Fa, just like the Beim and Ravitz, she was singularly important when it came to making our work routine go at full speed. In other words, Toor Deen was nowhere to be seen.

"Ah, Asuta, I heard that you've been working hard all morning. One of the Fou women was just telling me about how things went at the meat market," Yun Sudra said with a smile, her gray-brown ponytail that she wore off to the side swaying as she spoke. I could already see for myself that the other women were gathered around the board with the multiplication table written on it, excitedly chatting with one another.

"Yeah. I'd say we did really well for our first day. By the way, has Toor Deen still not arrived?"

"She hasn't. And according to the sundial, the sun has hit its peak, so we should—" Yun Sudra started to reply, until we both heard the sound of a wagon coming into the plaza.

The chatting women suddenly went silent, and a few moments later, the wagon came to a stop in front of the main Fou house's kitchen.

“I’m so sorry for being late. Have you started working already?” Toor Deen asked, descending from the wagon and deeply bowing her head. That wagon belonged to the Zaza clan, and Sufira Zaza was the one holding the reins.

“I just got here myself. Thanks for coming all this way, Sufira Zaza,” I said.

“This was all my younger brother Geol’s idea, and our clan head gave his approval for it, so I cannot see any reason for you to thank me.”

Lately, Toor Deen had been heading to the northern settlement in the early afternoon on days before we had a day off, and staying there until around this time the next day so she could provide cooking lessons.

Since Sufira Zaza was the one who had brought Toor Deen here, and she was a familiar face, the other women all loosened up a bit. Even though they had befriended the Deen and Liddo who fell under the Zaza, to them, the people of the northern settlement deserved greater reverence than the Ruu clan did.

“Well then, I’ll see you again in five days, Toor Deen. Farewell,” Sufira Zaza stated.

“Oh, hold on a moment. There’s actually something I’d like to tell everyone up in the northern settlement too,” I called out, earning a suspicious raised eyebrow from Sufira Zaza.

“What is it? If this is about selling giba meat in town, there shouldn’t be any issues with it that need discussing before the next clan head meeting.”

“No, this is a separate matter. I was actually just about to talk to everyone about it, so if you have the time, would you mind listening too?”

Sufira Zaza’s eyebrow remained raised, but she went ahead and tied the reins of her totos to a nearby tree and approached the kitchen.

“Everyone else, I want you to please listen up before we start prep work. It’s actually regarding the numbers written out here on this board.” I then started to explain again how useful it would be for cooking to be able to note down things like ingredient quantities and

cooking time. “There’s no need to memorize the numerals of Selva in advance. You can just write down which symbol corresponds to which number elsewhere. If you place a number of dots next to each one, that should keep you from mixing them up.”

“I see. That certainly would be useful when it comes to learning trickier dishes,” an older Gaaz woman remarked.

Next to her, a young Ratsu woman chimed in. “But how will we tell which dish those amounts are for? It wouldn’t be an issue if we only write down instructions for one or two dishes, but if you’re talking five or ten, we could easily mix them up.”

“Well, on a more basic level, you also need to be able to figure out which numbers go with which ingredients, right?” This was something I had also considered in advance. “Initially, I imagine we’ll have to stick with pictures and colors. You could draw a round shape for meatballs, or write salt in red, for example. But what about trying to memorize the writing of Selva as well?”

“Memorize the writing of Selva?”

I figured it would be quicker to show them what I meant.

“There aren’t that many characters that see use in the post town, so I had to ask Mikel—the Ruu clan’s guest from the Turan lands—to teach me this... This red one says salt, this blue one is sugar, and this yellow one is tau oil.” The writing systems of Selva and Jagar used strange characters that reminded me of hieroglyphs. All of the women who were staring at my notebook were making impressed sounds. “You can rely on the colors to tell them apart at first. These are the only three dyes we have, but you can make something like ten different colors by mixing them together. So if you split up the ingredients and seasonings, you should be able to get by for the time being.”

“Hmm. But wouldn’t it be difficult to memorize which color applies to which ingredient?”

“To help solve that problem, you can write the name of the ingredient in the place where you store it, using the correct color. With seasonings, you can write it on the container, and you can stick a note like this on a shelf or basket for vegetables. Then if you see it on a daily basis, eventually you’ll naturally remember what those

characters mean, and there won't be any need to use different colors anymore."

It was really tough to learn unfamiliar characters from scratch. Even I didn't want to spend all that much effort on it. But this method I had come up with seemed like a way to at least learn the characters for ingredients and seasonings.

"The other important thing is the dish names. For those, I think we'll just have to memorize them one by one. But if we start out with only two or three types, we shouldn't have any issue with mixing them up."

"I'd like to learn how to properly prepare cream stew. When I make it at home, it never turns out as good as yours, Asuta."

"Cream stew is a term from my home country, so it seems like there isn't a character we can use to write it directly. But I discussed that problem with Mikel a little while ago too."

The characters used in Selva were ideographic. The next phrase I showed them in my notebook was composed of ten or so of those characters, and included the one for "karon milk" that I knew from elsewhere. Apparently, it meant something like "soup dish prepared with karon milk that uses many fillings."

"If we write these characters for cream stew in red, and then other dishes in blue and yellow, then you can start by learning to tell those three apart. Once that stops being confusing, we can add a new dish," I said, turning toward Sufira Zaza at the end. "What do you think? I believe this method will allow Toor Deen's lessons to go more smoothly."

"What do you say, Toor Deen?" the Zaza woman asked, passing my question along.

"Y-Yeah! I-I think that sounds wonderful!" Toor Deen replied, her voice sounding shrill and excited. "It may be difficult at first, but it should save us a lot of trouble in the future!"

"I see... But those brushes and notebooks can't be cheap, correct?"

"They aren't cheap, but they aren't that expensive either. At least, that's how I see it."

Apparently, there was a town near Genos that produced large

numbers of notebooks and a bunch of different dyes, so they didn't cost all that much. These types of notebooks in particular used a relatively cheap kind of paper made from a tree known as a papula. I hadn't run across them in the post town before now, but apparently, the innkeepers used them for ledgers behind the scenes.

"Understood. I will discuss this matter with my clan head. If it reduces the amount of effort needed on Toor Deen's part, then we cannot be stingy in terms of coins."

"Oh, I'm fine either way," Toor Deen insisted. "But if we can write down amounts of ingredients like that, we could pass down our recipes from parent to child, and it would be very convenient in other ways too."

"That's true," Sufira Zaza said with a faint smile. It was the sort of mature expression that could often be seen on her face lately.

When she saw that, Toor Deen broke out in a bashful smile of her own.

Sufira Zaza nodded. "Very well, I will tell the clan heads about this as well. And Asuta?"

"Yes? What is it?"

"I am grateful that you are willing to freely share your knowledge with us as well, without discrimination." She didn't smile at me, but her feelings still came across perfectly clearly. And with that, Sufira Zaza returned to her totos wagon.

A moment later, Saris Ran Fou approached me. "Asuta, I would like to thank you as well. I don't think most of us fully understand what you're aiming for yet, but I believe this is something truly amazing. And it's rather surprising as well."

"I'm just glad, and a little surprised, that everyone seems to have accepted it so readily."

"Yes. With this, we'll be able to cook even better, and make our families even happier. I'm so incredibly grateful that Ai Fa found you a year ago on this day," Saris Ran Fou said with a bright smile. "But of course, I won't do anything to interrupt your dinner, so don't worry. I hope that you will enjoy your time together with Ai Fa to the fullest."

"O-Okay. Thanks for being so considerate."

"And no matter what sort of food she serves you, please don't get angry or upset, okay? She's never received cooking lessons from you, after all."

"Of course. No matter what sort of food it is, if Ai Fa made it for me, then that's something incredibly precious in and of itself."

Saying that was a little embarrassing for me, but since I was dealing with none other than Saris Ran Fou, I decided to express my true feelings rather than trying to hide anything.

Of course, there was still plenty of time left until dinnertime would arrive.

4

I arrived back at the Fa house around when the sun had halfway set off to the west.

After finishing up the prep work for tomorrow, I had gone around to several of the clans in the area in order to attach labels to the shelves and jars where various ingredients were stored. In a single day, I had done so for the main houses of the Fou, Gaaz, Ratsu, and Deen, and we would be expanding our project to their various branch houses and related clans starting tomorrow.

"What a busy day," I couldn't help but say to myself. It really had been packed. After all, we had participated in the meat market in the morning too. Plus, since the Gaaz and Ratsu were located fairly far away, the amount of traveling back and forth I'd had to do was pretty uncommon for me.

When I finally arrived back at the Fa house, I took a moment to give a big stretch up in the driver's seat of our wagon, then hopped down and knocked on the door of the main building. Since there was light streaming out through the windows, I knew that Ai Fa must have been home.

"It's me, Asuta. I'm back."

"Good. Dinner will be ready shortly," my clan head called out from beyond the door. I gave a little smile, feeling glad that she had made it back from the forest safely.

"Okay. I'll take the stuff we made for tomorrow around back, and be in shortly."

"Understood," Ai Fa replied.

I led Gilulu around to the back where the kitchen was. Stepping into the pantry, I placed the dried pasta, curry base, sliced giba meat, and so on in their respective wooden boxes and then peeked into the kitchen, which I noticed was still fairly warm.

Ai Fa had cooked for me and me alone. Even when I had collapsed from illness, she had left the cooking up to others like Toor Deen, so honestly...I was pretty sure I hadn't tasted Ai Fa's cooking since the day when we had met.

A long while back, she helped out with some banquet preparations, but lately the most she's done is help carry things. This might have even been her first time making baked poitan.

Saris Ran Fou had been concerned that our dinner tonight might come out really bad, but I wasn't worried at all. Even if she served giba meat that had been reduced to a scorched lump with a side of half-done poitan, it would still be food that Ai Fa had prepared for me. That made me so happy that how the food actually tasted hardly mattered.

Actually, she did know how to grill meat before she met me, so it's probably rude to underrate her that much.

After closing the door to the kitchen, I headed back over to the main house. Along the way, I released Gilulu from his wagon and grabbed his reins to bring him with me. After knocking once more and opening the front door, I was greeted by Brave looking up at me in the entranceway as he gnawed on a giba thighbone. Gilulu walked past him and curled up, and I removed my leather sandals. Ai Fa was there waiting for me, sitting cross-legged with one knee up, the same as always.

"Welcome home. Dinner is ready, so you can sit."

"All right. Thank you, Ai Fa."

I went ahead and sat directly across from my clan head. Between us, numerous wooden plates were laid out. But before we could get to those, the birthday ritual came first.

As soon as I was seated, Ai Fa began talking with a solemn

expression and tone. “I wish to offer a blessing on this, the day that my clan member Asuta turns eighteen. May you continue to live a healthy life and bring no shame to the Fa clan’s name.”

“Of course. As a member of the Fa clan, I swear to live a life that won’t bring any shame to the mother forest,” I said, repeating the words I had learned back at Rimee Ruu’s birthday.

“And so you shall,” Ai Fa said with a nod, then she stepped around the plates of food and approached me. “I grant you this flower alongside my blessing. Continue walking the path that you believe is right, as you always have.”

“I will. Thank you.”

With that, she placed a mizora flower with truly splendid petals on my chest. It was yellow, similar to the one Shin Ruu had once gifted to Lala Ruu.

“Well then, let us begin the celebratory meal.”

And so, I went ahead and recited the premeal chant. It was kind of strange, having Ai Fa’s name be the only one included in it. But I held back the joy I felt welling up inside as best I could so I could say, “Well then, thank you for the food. It looks like a really luxurious meal.”

“Well, it *is* a celebratory dinner, after all.”

I couldn’t help but be impressed by the number of dishes on offer. There was a main dish, soup, a hearty helping of meat-and-vegetable stir-fry, fresh veggie salad, and baked poitan.

Naturally, the main course was hamburger steak. Of course, this was the first time that Ai Fa had ever prepared the dish, but at least in terms of appearance, it looked just fine. The meat was well-done and nicely browned. It looked truly delicious. There was a reddish-brown sauce on top of the patty, and it was accompanied by grilled chatchi and nenon. She seemed to have done an excellent job of replicating the hamburger steak I always made.

“This is amazing. You really made all of this by yourself?”

“What point would there be in keeping others out if I didn’t intend to do it alone? Now eat up before it gets cold.”

“Right. Well then, thanks for the food!”

I went ahead and picked up a plate and started with the

hamburger steak. The more I looked at it, the more impressed I was by how it had turned out. The scent of the meat juice and fruit-wine-based sauce was amazing, and it was really stimulating both my hunger and excitement.

Using a wooden spoon, I scooped up a single bite's worth, and as soon as I did, cream-colored cheese came spilling out of it. Apparently, it was hamburger steak with dried milk inside.

"Th-This is incredible. I honestly didn't think you could make something this complex all by yourself."

"I decided that I should make the foods that I find most delicious for tonight. This is ultimately just something I learned how to do through imitation."

As Ai Fa watched me with a serious look on her face, I bit into the piece of patty on my spoon that was dripping dried milk. It must have been the last dish that she had prepared, as both the meat juices and the gooey dried milk were still plenty warm. She had even added minced aria to the patty, and it almost seemed to melt in my mouth. From the way it had been heated through, to the amount of salt and pico leaves, and even how she had prepared the sweet and aromatic sauce, it had all come out fantastically.

"Oh yeah, this is delicious. In fact, it's so delicious that it's blowing me away."

"Aren't you going a bit far there?"

"Not at all. I know I'm repeating myself here, but it really is hard to believe that you made this all on your own."

"I see," Ai Fa replied, breaking out in a smile for the first time. It was a truly joyful, incredibly charming expression. "I didn't think it was anything all that amazing, but I trust that you wouldn't lie to me."

"It's the truth. I intended to avoid speaking negatively about your cooking, obviously, but at the same time, I wouldn't want to give it overblown praise."

"Of course not. You would never dissemble like that, especially when it comes to cooking." My clan head brought a hand to her chest and breathed a little sigh. "I put the most effort into the hamburger steak, so if you found it delicious, then I am truly glad. I

feel as if the strength has drained right out of me, somehow."

"I'm glad too. Thank you so much, Ai Fa."

"You're welcome," she said, her eyes narrowing. Seeing her joyful expression was making the happy glow in my chest get brighter and brighter.

"Still, it really is amazing that you were able to make something like this. You didn't have someone give you lessons, did you?"

"As I said, I learned through imitation. I have watched you prepare hamburger steak countless times by now, after all."

"That's really impressive. It came out well enough that you could serve it for pretty much any occasion just fine."

As a sweet sense of euphoria filled me up inside, I went ahead and picked up the next plate. It was the soup dish—a giba soup, naturally. From the aroma and coloring, it looked like it had tau oil in it, and she had used aria, chatchi, nenon, ma gigo, and sheema as well. She had gotten an excellent stock from the giba meat and vegetables, and there weren't any issues with how she had flavored it with the tau oil. The taro-like ma gigo and daikon-like sheema were a bit tough, perhaps, but that was about all I could complain about.

This must have been Ai Fa's very first time working with ma gigo or sheema, so I wouldn't have expected them to have turned out even this good.

Overall, the soup was wonderful, and filled me with pure bliss. While I recognized that it was rude to compare people to one another, I would say that she had done as well as the Fou and Ran women who I had taught would have.

As for the fresh vegetable salad, it was mainly composed of sheema and gigo cut into strips. The shapes were a bit uneven, but that didn't do anything to harm the taste. The dip she had prepared using dried kiki and tau oil, meanwhile, had a simple, pleasant flavor to it.

"Everything I've tried has been delicious. Considering how skilled you are with your hands, you might make a pretty good chef too," I said as I reached out for the last dish. It was the meat-and-vegetable stir-fry, which had a number of different ingredients in it.

Since this was a celebratory meal, she hadn't skimped at all. From what I could tell, she had used aria, nenon, pula, ma pula, ro'hyoi, pepe, and the brown-beech-like mushrooms. "Hmm, this one looks tasty as well."

I scooped up a big spoonful of the dish, popped it into my mouth, and was instantly hit with an indescribable flavor, strikingly full of the saltiness of tau oil and the sourness of mamaria vinegar. The sweetness of sugar was noticeable in it too. Unfortunately, she hadn't managed to make those various conflicting tastes magically come together in harmony the way Varkas could, so I ended up letting out a strange sound like "Gymph!"

"So you can't tolerate it either, huh?" Ai Fa said with a terribly apologetic look on her face. "I got the feeling that it was lacking something so I added all sorts of seasonings to try to fix it, but I couldn't get it to come out right in the end. My apologies for serving such a poor dish."

"N-No, it's not that bad. Though it does certainly have a unique taste."

"Are you trying to say that it's as good as the other dishes?" Ai Fa asked with a sad frown. "It's a crime to lie. If it is bad, then say so clearly."

"No way! I'm not going to complain about the food you made to celebrate my birthday!"

"Then why are you crying?"

"That's just the mamaria vinegar stinging my eyes." As I chewed apart and gulped down some pula that still had its core inside, I shot Ai Fa a smile. "It's fine. And anyway, if you had managed to do everything perfectly when you were manning the stove for the first time in nearly a year, that would be kinda awkward for the other women, wouldn't it?"

"In other words, you're saying it's bad, right?" Ai Fa said with a displeased look. "When you talk in such a roundabout manner, all it does is make me feel even more pathetic. Don't mince words. Tell me directly how you feel."

"R-Really? Well then, um... The hamburger steak and soup were so amazing that it's hard to believe the same person made this dish."

"What part of that is direct?"

"Come on, give me a break. Just having you cook for me makes me unbelievably happy."

Ai Fa continued to sulk for a little longer, but eventually she seemed to pull herself back together as she picked up a plate. Now that I thought about it, she had been watching me the whole time and hadn't taken even a single bite herself yet. She bit into the hamburger steak, slurped some soup, and had a bit of the meat-and-vegetable stir-fry. Once she had tried all three, she smiled in a way that looked rather strained.

"It is bad indeed. Even as the one who made it, I still have no idea how I did such a poor job."

"With stir-fries, if you don't cook them quickly, the ingredients will burn. It's also difficult to adjust the flavor while you're making it."

"Hmm. It would have been better if I hadn't tried to use tau oil, sugar, and vinegar all at once, wouldn't it? But because it was a celebratory dish, I added unnecessary ingredients, and this was the result." My clan head then smiled gently once more. "If I had a bit more room in my stomach, I could have eaten this entire bungled dish myself and remade it. But I was already at my limit from the hamburger steak."

"Hmm? What's that about the hamburger steak?"

"Dealing with my failed attempts at it filled my stomach up quite a bit. I messed up three times before getting it right," Ai Fa said with a little giggle. "Still, I wanted to share in this celebratory dinner with you, so I wasn't able to eat anything else while I was cooking. I ask for your forgiveness."

"There's nothing to..." I started to say, but then I suddenly found myself at a loss for words.

Something warm was welling up inside of me. I felt incredibly strong love for Ai Fa as she smiled away, looking a little embarrassed and a tiny bit childish.

"I will take half of this ruined dish, so we'll have to manage to eat it somehow. Even if it is bad, we cannot simply throw it out," she said.

"Of course. As if I'd let any go uneaten," I managed to reply

before I resumed eating.

It was a rare experience for me, feeling so much bliss that it caused my chest to ache. But no matter how much it hurt, it didn't change the fact that I was truly happy. Just spending time alone with Ai Fa was enough to bring me incomparable joy. And as we happily ate our meal together, all sorts of memories raced through my mind.

The oldest memory of them all was the one of Ai Fa pointing her blade at me, her blue eyes blazing bright. When she was facing someone she deemed hostile, my clan head could be every bit as intense and intimidating as Donda Ruu, and that was exactly the kind of look she had hit me with upon our first meeting.

At the time, I had been nothing but an unidentified trespasser to her, one who had set foot in her hunting grounds without permission and ruined a giba trap she had set up, which only made things worse. To top it all off, I had insisted that I hadn't even known how I had gotten there, so it wouldn't have been unusual at all for her to have executed me on the spot. But instead, Ai Fa had taken me back to the Fa house and had even fed me. That had been my first and last opportunity to try Ai Fa's home cooking.

However, its quality hadn't exactly been what I expected from home cooking. She had just tossed some roughly chopped giba meat, aria, and poitan into a boiling pot, and once they had all been heated through, she'd called it good. The giba meat hadn't been bloodlet, so it'd had an overwhelming animalistic stench, the onion-like aria had only been half cooked, and the dissolved poitan had given everything a texture like muddy water. It had been so bad that it had made me ask her if I could make the food myself starting the following day.

However, the Fa house had only had giba meat, aria, and poitan available, so it had been quite a difficult task to prepare a delicious meal under those conditions. But during the day, I'd happened to be present when Ai Fa had taken down a giba, so I used what little knowledge I had managed to gain back in Japan in order to carry out the bloodletting and butchering. Then I had prepared a soup even though I'd been completely and utterly exhausted. And when

we had tried it, I had seen a faint, gentle smile from Ai Fa for the first time.

At first, my clan head had insisted that there was no good or bad taste when it came to food, and that it was simply a means to keep on living. But when she had seen how much effort I put into preparing the meal, she had acknowledged my actions as proper and called my cooking delicious.

Ai Fa's words and smile in that moment were what had ultimately decided my fate.

I had been cast into this unfamiliar world after losing everything, but I had decided then and there that I had a reason to keep living: to make delicious food that would bring her joy. Of course, in the year that had passed since then, I had put my efforts toward all sorts of different endeavors, but ultimately, all of it had been for Ai Fa.

For the sake of the forest's edge where she lived, for the domain of Genos that the people of the forest's edge belonged to, and for the world that Genos was a part of... The reason I had been able to find the resolve to go on in this world was because Ai Fa had been the first person I had met, and she had accepted me into her home. I was able to live in this world because Ai Fa was here with me.

A whole lot had changed over the last year, and our little corner of the world had undergone some serious upheaval, but the feelings I held in my core hadn't changed in the least.

"Why are you staring at my face so intently?" Ai Fa asked, looking puzzled.

"Well," I said, smiling vulnerably. "I was just thinking back on everything that's happened. It really has been an eventful year."

"Indeed. First we reconciled with the Ruu clan, then the crimes of the Suun and the house of Turan were exposed... You started running stalls in the post town, and earned the favor of the nobles in the castle town... It truly is amazing that it has only been a single year," Ai Fa said, sighing quietly. "I was prepared to perish alone, bringing an end to the Fa clan, but instead I have found myself pulled along on quite a wild ride. And it all started with me bringing you back to the Fa house."

"Ah ha ha, if you have anything you want to complain about, I'm certainly willing to listen."

"How could I ever?" Ai Fa replied, and then she smiled softly.

It was the same smile she had shown me when she had first eaten my cooking. However, the affection shining in her eyes was much deeper than it had been back then. That was proof of how strong the bond we had forged over the past year had become.

Later that evening, following the conclusion of our blissful dinner, yet another reason to be happy came my way. After we had cleaned up the tableware, Ai Fa called out, "Hold on a moment," and then vanished into the storage room. When she reappeared, she was holding a long and narrow bundle.

"Asuta, this is for you."

"Huh? What is it?"

"A present for your birthday."

My clan head got down on one knee in front of me and presented the bundle, which I accepted, feeling rather surprised.

"A present? Isn't the custom here at the forest's edge to just give flowers?"

"But you have given me gifts on all sorts of occasions, have you not? First there was this necklace, and then you gave me this hair accessory for my birthday. I simply wish to follow *your* customs as well," Ai Fa said, seemingly unable to help herself from breaking out in another smile. "I didn't make any requests for accessories, but receiving them made me indescribably happy nonetheless, so I wished to share that same happiness with you. Please, simply accept it without complaint."

"Th-There's no way I'd complain about getting a gift!"

Still half dazed, I went ahead and unwrapped the beautiful cloth bundle.

What I found inside was a huge cooking knife held in a leather sheath. When I carefully pulled it out, I was greeted by a silver shine. The blade itself had to be over thirty centimeters long, with thickness and heft to match that size. It was a splendid meat carving knife. The grip was made of metal, with a wave pattern engraved into it to prevent it from slipping in your hand. The shininess of the

sharpened blade was really attention-grabbing.



"Th-This is a meat carving blade from Jagar, isn't it? Where did you get something like this?"

"I had that chef Yang purchase it for me from the castle town."

"W-Wait, Yang? But how?"

"After you left for the post town, I borrowed Fafa from our neighboring clans and visited the inn where he works. I was careful to make sure that you wouldn't learn of the gift until today, following your customs," Ai Fa said, staring at my face. "You purchased your own knife for cutting meat, but when you perform tasks like removing giba meat from the bone, you use the knife you received from me, correct? That was a memento from my father Gil, so it was originally meant for cutting through branches and vines. I felt a knife specifically meant for carving meat would be more fitting for a chef such as you, so I decided it was a worthy purchase."

"I see... But this must have been really expensive, right?"

"Indeed. However, since we barely touch the coins earned from the tusks and horns of the giba I hunt down, it was no issue at all." There was a remarkably gentle light in Ai Fa's blue eyes as she looked at me. "It will bring me joy if you are able to use that knife to prepare delicious food. Please."

"Yeah, of course. Thanks, Ai Fa... Seriously, thank you so much."

As I resheathed the meat carving blade, I sent her the brightest smile I was capable of, and the smile on her face brightened even more too.

A gentle silence fell over the room. I was so happy that I could feel a lump forming in my throat again as she continued to smile at me.

"I feel your joy as if it is my own, Asuta," she said, almost in a whisper. "Seeing your good cheer makes me feel the same way."

"Yeah."

"It has been a year now since I welcomed you in as a member of the Fa clan. When I first saw you, I thought that you were strange and suspicious." Though Ai Fa's voice was quiet, there was no chance of me missing anything she was saying in the silence of the night. "But you also looked like you were suffering terribly. Having lost your homeland, your family, and your comrades, you were even

more isolated than I was. And that was why I couldn't simply leave you be."

"Yeah."

"But before I knew it, you had saved me. I came to think of you as a true member of my family. Our meeting was the forest's guidance, and now I'm certain that the best path forward for me is here by your side."

"I feel the same way."

"And I trust that those words represent your true feelings. That brings me great joy, and I feel blessed."

With that, Ai Fa's eyelids finally started to flutter as a film of tears rose to coat them.

"On top of that, you have given your all to bring joy not just to me, but to all people of the forest's edge. Those efforts have borne fruit, and today, raw giba meat has at last started being sold in town. Surely, no one could have ever expected that our people would one day go among the townsfolk selling meat like that. You consulted with Gazraan Rutim, borrowed Donda Ruu's aid, and started doing business in the post town. And now, a year later, you have helped accomplish something truly incredible."

"That's thanks to your strength, and the strength of all the people of the forest's edge. And besides, we're still only partway done."

"That is true. However, it does not diminish everything you've done for us. I am truly proud of you, and you are the source of my joy." Ai Fa placed her hands on the floor and leaned farther forward. Smiling and looking like she was about to cry, she came in close enough that our noses were almost touching. "Asuta... There is just one request that I would like to make of you."

"What is it? You can ask me for anything."

"You should not answer this so lightly. It is a completely selfish, unfair request."

I stared straight back into Ai Fa's eyes. Even if she said that, I couldn't possibly imagine refusing.

"I wish to live my life as a hunter. I cannot imagine myself even doing anything else. But, even so..." She trailed off hesitantly.

"Go on."

"Even so...as Raielfam Sudra once said, a time could come in a year, or five, or ten...when I feel I have completed my work as a hunter. And if it does..."

"Yeah?"

"Will you take me as your wife?"

Though I was seated on the floor, I could still feel myself reeling dizzily. "There's no way I'd turn that down, right?" I said.

"No, but I'm asking you to save yourself for the sake of a day that I don't even know will ever come. I lack the determination to cast aside my work as a hunter, yet I am saying I don't wish to let any other woman have you. It's truly unfair to..."

"It's not unfair. Hearing you say that makes me happier than anything I could possibly imagine." It was possible that I was both crying and smiling at this point. "Whether it's a year, or five, or even ten, that's just fine. Being your husband would make me happier than anything. I'm happy enough as I am now, but that would be on a whole other level."

"I trust that you are speaking truly," Ai Fa said while still smiling, the tears now finally flowing.

With my fingertip, I gently wiped a tear from her cheek. I only touched her lightly, but it was enough to let me feel her powerful warmth. Holding back a desperate urge to hug her tight, I held out the pinky finger on my right hand toward her.

"Ai Fa, my home country has a custom of doing this when you make promises. Could you hold out your pinky too?"

"Hmm?" she questioned with a light tilt of her head, but she did as I asked, and I wrapped my pinky around hers.

"If the day comes when you decide you have finished your work as a hunter, we'll get married. Until then, I will wait for you."

"I promise to keep on loving you and you alone."

I could feel the heat coming off of Ai Fa's graceful pinky finger. There was no question in my mind that we were sharing in the same blessed joy. Just as Ai Fa had said, being able to trust someone else like this was a wonderful feeling.

Someday, Ai Fa could perish out in the forest. Eventually, I might vanish from this world too. But in that moment, we felt such

overwhelming happiness that there was no room for such awful thoughts to get in the way.

And that was how my wonderful first year together with Ai Fa came to a close.

What kind of future awaited us? We had no way of knowing, but we would set forth into this new year with hope and joy in our hearts nonetheless.

Intermezzo: A Later Development After the Study Session

After circling around to the rear of the inn, Toor Deen reached out to knock on the door, only to hear a man shouting inside.

As a timid girl, she instantly drew back and pulled her hand away. Next to her, Yamiru Lea furrowed her brow suspiciously.

"What was that voice just now? A burglar, perhaps?"

"Y-Yamiru Lea, please don't say scary stuff like that. This place is Yumi and her parents' inn, you know." Feeling terribly uneasy, Toor Deen took Yamiru Lea's graceful arm and wrapped both of her own around it without thinking.

The older girl looked down at her, shrugged, and said, "I was only joking. Even if this is a slum with more than a few outlaws about, no one would ever try to rob a place like this in broad daylight. I'm sure it must be that Yumi girl arguing with her father."

It was true that it was still morning, with over an hour left until the sun would hit its peak. That day, Toor Deen and Yamiru Lea had been the ones tasked with delivering giba meat to The Westerly Wind—the inn where Yumi lived—so the two of them had gone there first thing upon arriving in town. They would start their real work at the stalls later.

The inn was located a ways down a backstreet off the main road, in a slum. There were a lot of impoverished ruffians in the area, so it was apparently quite dangerous to walk around alone there at night.

"B-But what if it really is a burglar? Should we call for the guards before knocking on the door?"

"I'm telling you, that was just a joke. If we summon the guards over a simple family squabble, we could get charged with some sort of crime ourselves," Yamiru Lea replied, brushing aside her long bangs with her free left hand. "By the way, how long do you intend

to keep on clinging to my arm? We're both women, so there's no need to be concerned about anyone else seeing, but I still cannot help but feel a touch uneasy."

"Ah, s-sorry!" Toor Deen quickly let go of Yamiru Lea's arm, her face going red.

As she stared down at the girl, the woman's eyes took on a cynical look. "You know, I'm even weaker than you are. Clinging to someone like me won't do you any good."

"Huh? But...you're as reliable as a hunter."

"I'm shocked you'd say that. Have you forgotten how awful I acted back when we were both part of the Suun clan?"

It was extremely rare for Yamiru Lea to bring that up so casually. It made Toor Deen falter for a second, but after a moment she said, "No. Y-You were certainly very frightening back then. You coerced us into participating in the wrongdoings of the Suun clan. But still...we were at fault too for not doing anything to correct the clan's mistakes. We were weak. I couldn't possibly allow myself to pin all the blame on you."

"You won't last if you keep taking every last joke I utter so seriously."

"Even when you are joking, I want to accept all of your feelings and form a proper bond with you, Yamiru Lea."

After giving a listless sigh, Yamiru Lea placed a hand on her tight waist. "I see you aren't someone I can joke around with. Let's hurry up and finish this job so we can head over to the stalls."

"Ah, but there's still some kind of argument going on inside, so we really should call a guard and..."

"I have no interest in going through all that hassle."

Before Toor Deen could stop her, Yamiru Lea went ahead and knocked on the door.

Not long after, the arguing voices stopped, and the door opened a moment later to reveal Yumi, who had her usual bright smile on her face.

"Toor Deen, Yamiru Lea! Hey there! So it's you two today? We've been waiting for the giba meat to arrive!"

"Ah, s-sorry. Um, Yumi...it sounded like there was a big

commotion of some sort going on in there just now. Is everything all right?"

"Ah ha ha, you heard that all the way out here? My stupid old man sure is loud."

"Who are you calling stupid, you stupid daughter?!" a deep, masculine voice shouted out from over Yumi's shoulder. That was undoubtedly her father, Sams.

"Anyway, thanks for the giba meat! I'll go get your payment!"

Yumi seemed the same as always, so Toor Deen and Yamiru Lea went ahead and carried the wooden boxes in their wagon through the door into the kitchen of The Westerly Wind.

However, as soon as Toor Deen stepped inside, she detected a foul stench. "Um, did you burn some sort of food?"

"Yeah. Well, it was more of a dessert, really. I gave those hotcake things you taught us about a try, but they ended up all burnt," Yumi replied.

In the center of the kitchen, Sams snorted, "Hmph! Not only were you messing around with something we don't plan to sell, you wasted precious ingredients to boot! You really think the folks who come to a place like ours would spend coins on something like that?!"

"Aw, shut it. I only messed up because you were hovering over me running your mouth the whole time, old man. And besides, we won't know if our customers will pay for desserts until they actually give them a try."

Sams had a really stern-looking face, but Yumi was sticking her tongue out at him without showing a hint of fear. Of course, since Toor Deen was used to being around hunters of the forest's edge, the man's face wasn't scary to her either.

"Still, how did you mess up? With your current skills, it shouldn't be difficult at all for you to make hotcakes, Yumi," Toor Deen said.

"I told you, it's because of my old man here. He was standing right next to me, babbling on and on and on, so my hand must have slipped or something."

"Stop running your mouth while trying to gloss over your own screwup! You used sugar, eggs, and karon milk in that batter you

burned! Do you know how much a single bag of sugar costs?!”

“Ugh, this is why I hate dealing with poor people,” Yumi moaned. “Anyway, don’t worry about me, Toor Deen. This sort of fuss happens all the time.”

As Yumi handed over a bag of coins to Toor Deen, the young chef shook her head and said, “No, if you messed up, then it’s possible there was some sort of issue with what we taught you. Would you mind if I try to figure out what exactly went wrong?”

Sams drew closer to them with a scary look on his face and said, “Hey, don’t go butting into our business. It’d be a real mess if she went and burned even more of our precious supplies.”

“But if there was a problem with the instructions we gave everyone, then we’re responsible for Yumi’s mistake. If something ends up going to waste, then I’ll pay for it, so would you please let me take a look and see for myself?”

“She screwed up because her skills weren’t good enough. You lot aren’t responsible for that in the least,” Sams replied, scratching his head with a frown.

Next to him, Yumi broke out into a big grin. “With Toor Deen here, we’ll figure this out in no time!” she declared. Then she looked down at the young chef. “We don’t need you to pay for anything. Just keep an eye on what I’m doing, okay?”

“Okay. Please, go ahead.”

“All right, let’s take a look at my screwup first. It got totally stuck to the pot, and it took some serious effort to pry it loose,” Yumi said, pointing at a wooden plate that was sitting on the workstation. There was a pitiful lump of burnt poitan on top of it.

“This really is a mess. I can’t believe you would mess up this badly, Yumi,” Toor Deen said.

“Heh heh, it actually stings a bit to hear you say that, Toor Deen. I’m not all that great of a chef!”

“No, your skills were good to begin with, and after you ran that okonomiyaki stall during the revival festival, you should be especially accustomed to cooking poitan.”

“I thought so too. But apparently things are different with these hotcakes, somehow.”

As she spoke, Yumi started tossing the ingredients for another round of hotcakes into a deep dish. The amounts she used were correct, matching the recipe she'd been taught at the inn meeting and the previous study session. There weren't any issues with how she mixed them together with a wooden skewer either. Then she added some fresh firewood to the glowing embers under her stove and reached out for a container of milk fat.

When she did that, though, Sams said, "Hey, we don't have any extra milk fat around, so don't go wasting it. We just got giba meat delivered, so use some of that fat instead."

"Huh? Giba fat's tasty, but it doesn't go with hotcakes at all! You're such a cheapskate!" Yumi was glaring at her father, but she followed his order and pulled her hand back from the container of milk fat.

But then, Toor Deen called out in a fluster, "H-Hold on a moment! When you tried this before, did you cook the batter without adding any milk fat, perhaps?"

"Yeah. My stupid old man kept going on about it, so I poured the batter into the pan as is. Was that bad?"

"Y-Yes. Hotcake batter has sugar in it, so it burns very easily. That must be why you weren't able to cook it properly."

Yumi's eyes shot open wide for a moment, and then she triumphantly said, "See?! It really was your fault! Burning the other ingredients just to spare some milk fat sounds like a big enough screwup that it could turn into some sort of saying!"

"Q-Quiet, you! You're the one who poured the batter into the pan without thinking!"

"Hey, if it were just ordinary poitan, it wouldn't have burned that easily. But these hotcakes are totally different!"

After that, Yumi cooked up the batch of hotcakes with milk fat like the instructions said. And sure enough, they came out perfectly, with their surfaces being exactly the right brown color.

"Ha ha, they're so easy to make now! Just a little milk fat makes a huge difference!" Yumi said.

"Yeah," Toor Deen agreed. "If you don't have milk fat, you can also use reten oil. But I think the smell of milk fat adds a lot to

hotcakes. Apparently, in Asuta's home country, people even spread milk fat on top of them when they're done."

"Yup! I love the smell of milk fat too! And I bet our customers would probably be willing to spend some money on this stuff for the smell alone!" Yumi shot the young chef a bright smile. "Thanks, Toor Deen! I really appreciate the help, and I hope I can keep counting on you for stuff like this!"

"Ah, well, I'm just glad I was able to help. But we still have our work at the stalls, so..." Breathing a sigh of relief, Toor Deen started to slowly make her way to the exit, along with Yamiru Lea.

But before she could escape, Sams called out with a surly look on his face, "Hey, sorry for causing you trouble. But I have to say, if you don't rein in your instinct to be helpful, it'll come back to bite you eventually."

"What are you on about now?" Yumi said. "Do you seriously think you've always gotta throw in some kind of extra comment? I swear, you're so stubborn!"

"Th-That's enough out of you!"

Even with the hotcake problem resolved, it seemed like things were going to remain as lively as always at The Westerly Wind.

After bowing one more time, Toor Deen exited the kitchen.

As soon as the door closed, Yamiru Lea broke her silence and remarked, "Heh, perhaps shouting at one another is how those two show affection? It certainly is a difficult relationship to understand."

"True. You don't really see stuff like that at the forest's edge. Still, even if Yumi and Sams are a little rude to each other, it's easy to see how much they care, which is something I really like."

"Hmph, perhaps they're just happy to have someone to shout at."

That statement from Yamiru Lea caused Toor Deen to feel uneasy, so she clung to her companion's arm once more.

"Y-Your blood ties with Zuuro Suun, the man who was your father, were severed, and you won't be able to see him for ten more years, right? I'm sorry if I made you feel sad!"

"Listen... You had your ties to the Suun clan severed too, didn't you?"

"But I was permitted to remain with my father."

“Zuuro Suun and I didn’t have the sort of relationship you’re imagining. You really should do something about that excessively good-hearted nature of yours,” Yamiru Lea said, looking down at the girl with an expression that made it seem as if she was holding back a strained smile.

Looking a bit embarrassed, Toor Deen let go of her former clanmate’s arm. “A-About what you were saying before...” she said.

“Hmm? What do you mean?”

“Y-You said that I wasn’t the sort of person you could joke around with. But then you knocked on the door, so we weren’t able to finish talking about that, remember?”

As Toor Deen spoke, Yamiru Lea raised a questioning eyebrow. “It wasn’t my intention to cut our discussion short. But still, what of it?”

“W-Well, I want to properly deepen my bonds with you, Yamiru Lea...so feel free to say anything you want to me, jokes included.”

With a deep sigh, Yamiru Lea reached down and lightly flicked Toor Deen’s forehead. It was the first time the young chef had seen the woman do anything like that, and it caused her to freeze in surprise for a moment.

“Wh-What was that for? Did I make you feel uncomfortable again?”

“That’s enough of that. If you don’t stop talking, I’ll pull your hair next,” Yamiru Lea said as she walked toward the cart. Normally, a comment like that would have left Toor Deen feeling uneasy for a bit, but for some reason, this time felt herself filling with warmth instead. And somehow, that warmth seemed to be coming from the spot where Yamiru Lea had touched her forehead.

Group Performance: The Girl from the Castle and the Girl from the Forest's Edge

1

Odifia's day began with the bell for the upper third hour.

The girl was a deep sleeper, though, so even with her window open, she had never once actually heard that bell. But when that time arrived, her wet nurse would always come in and mercilessly shake her awake.

"Good morning, my lady. Your bath has been prepared for you."

Those were the first words Odifia heard as she sat up and rubbed her sleepy eyes, just like every other morning.

Soft indoor shoes were placed on her feet, and she was led to the nearby bathhouse. Ever since she had turned five, her wet nurse had stopped holding her hand, so she had to take care not to trip, no matter how tired she was.

The door to the dressing room was opened for her, and two lady attendants in light attire were waiting for her within. Their graceful fingers swiftly stripped away Odifia's night clothes.

Now fully undressed, she was led into the bathroom, which had a stone floor and walls and was filled with white steam. The air within smelled of herbs and flowers. As Odifia drowsily took in the aroma, the attendants began cleansing her body with soft washcloths.

Once she was good and clean, she was made to sit in a bathtub filled with tepid water that had a large number of flower petals floating on its surface. Odifia moved her arm around, causing those petals to swirl about. She didn't find that to be particularly fun, but she didn't have anything else to do until the attendants finished

washing her hair. She wouldn't have bothered, if not for the fact that she felt like she might drift off to sleep if she just sat there silently in the water. And so, Odifia once again focused her efforts on making those petals dance about, an important job that served to fend off her drowsiness.

Around the time when her arms were starting to get tired, the attendants announced that they had completed their work.

After the three of them returned to the small room outside, her attendants toweled her off, combed her hair, and applied perfumed oil all over her body. Odifia wasn't all that fond of the perfume smell, but if people in Genos didn't use it, their skin would burn and tan.

What's wrong with that, though?

Odifia's grandfather Marstein had very tanned skin, but she didn't think that made him look bad or anything, and a lot of men had skin like that. Maybe men didn't put on perfumed oil?

But then there were men like Odifia's father Melfried, who had pale skin. But she remembered hearing that that was because his mother was a pale-skinned person born farther to the north.

Melfried's mother—Odifia's grandmother—had passed away before the girl was born, so she didn't even remember the woman's name. But judging from the portrait hanging in the palace, she certainly did seem to have been very pale and pretty.

That woman also had pale gray eyes, which was where Odifia and Melfried got their eye color from. Whenever she saw her grandfather, the man would smile and rub his cheeks up against hers while telling her she was starting to resemble that lady more and more.

"My apologies for the wait. I shall now lead you to your mother's chambers."

While Odifia's mind had been wandering, her attendants had finished getting her ready for the day. Her perfumed body was now dressed in white clothes with lots of decorative frills. Since her mother Eulifia was fond of white, that was the color Odifia usually wore.

As she walked down the hall between her wet nurse and a maid, they didn't pass anyone but female attendants. They were within the

inner palace of Genos Castle, which men were forbidden to enter as a general rule.

"Good morning, Odifia. I see you have another lovely outfit on today," Eulifia said with a smile as soon as she laid eyes on her young daughter.

Odifia grabbed the decorative frills that came up to around her knees on her dress and replied, "Good morning, mother."

They were in the antechamber in front of Eulifia's room. Her mother was lounging atop a couch with an infant in her arms—Odifia's younger sister, who had turned two in the prior silver month. However, the child had been born in the indigo month, so she was still very small. Before taking a seat, Odifia took a good look at her sister's face. She was a little baby with a round face. Her skin was pale just like Odifia's, but her eyes were light brown. She had gotten them from her mother.

"May I touch her?"

"You may, but be gentle. She's being nice and quiet today."

Odifia's sister would start crying frantically over any little thing. That was something Odifia herself had witnessed many times during morning teatime. She most certainly didn't wish to make her sister cry, so she took care to be gentle as she stroked the girl's cheek, which was very soft and pleasant to the touch. Fortunately, that didn't result in any crying. The infant simply stared blankly back at Odifia.

"You have hardly ever cried, Odifia, even when you were a baby. You really are so much like your father," Eulifia remarked with a joyful smile. Odifia was often told she was more similar to her father than to her mother. She hardly ever cried, but she hardly smiled either, which was apparently similar to how he was.

"Isn't it a bit abnormal, to barely smile or cry at such a young age?" Odifia had heard people whisper. She hadn't had many opportunities to interact with children around her age, but supposedly, normal children would do those things quite frequently.

That wasn't something she really understood. Even Odifia felt happy when things went well and sad when things were difficult. And it wasn't as if she was trying to hide that either. Her face simply

didn’t express those things as strongly as other people’s did.

“What is the matter, Odifia?” Eulifia said.

“Why do you ask?” the young girl replied, causing her mother to laugh.

“You usually just sit down right away, but today you have remained standing, and you keep tugging on your cheek. Are you trying to check whether yours or your sister’s are softer?”

“It’s nothing,” Odifia said, taking a seat across from her mother. It would seem that she had started to act oddly while she had been thinking about how inexpressive her face tended to be.

“Your father and I can read your emotions perfectly well. There is no need to force yourself to express them.”

Odifia hadn’t said a word, but her mother had seen right through her.

“Well then, let us have our tea. Would arow tea be fine for today?” Eulifia asked.

“Yes.”

Her mother’s maid, who had been waiting in the corner of the room, promptly started preparing some arow tea for them, making a bittersweet aroma fill the room.

“It seems your father is busy again today, but for the first time in a while, he said that he should be able to have dinner with us tonight.”

“I see.”

“I must step out myself for a bit after finishing our noontime snack. I believe I will be back by the lower third hour, but you must be certain to see to your studies properly.”

“I will.”

It was a scene that played out almost without change every morning.

As they talked, the bell indicating that it was half past the lower fourth hour rang out.

“It seems it is time for your studies. I shall see you again at noon.”

“I understand.”

Odifia then departed, and was escorted back to her own room by

one of the maids who had been waiting in the antechamber with them. The older woman who served as her teacher was standing outside of her room when they arrived.

"Good morning, Lady Odifia. Today, we shall practice writing characters."

"Understood. I am ready to begin," Odifia said, returning the noblewoman's bow before following her inside.

Odifia had been taking lessons like these ever since she had turned five. As she was now six and it was already near the end of the yellow month, that had been a year and a half ago now. Most of her lessons were on how to read and write. Lately, though, her teachers had started adding mathematics to the mix on occasion. Once she could handle reading and writing without issue, she would study the history and laws of the kingdom as well.

She studied those academic topics in the morning, and at midday she would be instructed on proper manners within the palace. When she was older, she would also learn sewing, dancing, and totos riding. However, totos riding was not seen as a topic that was truly necessary to learn. It was essential for men, but among young women, only half of them would study it.

Despite that, totos riding was the subject that Odifia was looking forward to the most. Not for any special reason, though. She simply found it more enjoyable to use her body rather than her mind, and she thought that totos riding sounded more fun than dancing.

Eulifia also rode totos when she had the time. Though noblewomen couldn't go out and ride totos in the open, supposedly the activity was very good for maintaining your health. When she saw her mother dressed in clothes like what men wore as she gallantly rode about in the castle's interior plaza, Odifia thought she looked very striking, and that it seemed like a lot of fun too.

"Now then, on to the next characters. Do you remember how these are read?" the old teacher asked, pointing at some example writing. The words there said "totos," "karon," and "kimyuus."

It rather amused Odifia, seeing as she had just been thinking about the large riding birds. The old woman didn't seem to notice at all, though, so Odifia simply replied to the question.

"Yes, correct. You are quite brilliant, Lady Odifia."

Everyone within the palace was always kind to Odifia. Even the words she occasionally heard that sounded decidedly unkind were spoken where they thought the young girl wouldn't overhear. Even the people who said such things were nice when speaking to her directly.

This old woman might well have spoken ill of her in secret at times. Still, that didn't make Odifia sad. She only felt that way when she heard people saying cruel things about her family.

Her younger sister was still so little that not much was said about her. People sometimes complained that she cried too loudly, but that was all. No, the family she was thinking about were her parents and grandfather.

Eulifia is selfish.

Melfried is coldhearted.

Marstein is a despot.

Though only occasionally, Odifia *had* heard people saying things like that. She hadn't known what words like "coldhearted" and "despot" meant, though, so she had asked Eulifia about them. What she had learned had made her feel incredibly sad.

"I'm sure that people fail to realize you are there because you are so small. Still, you needn't worry yourself about such things, Odifia," her mother had said, gently stroking her hair. "Your father needs to be strict in order to protect order here in Genos, and your grandfather must do the same to safeguard the town's prosperity. Sometimes that causes issues for a few people, or they lose wealth because of it, so they complain about it when they think we cannot hear them."

"What are *you* protecting, mother?"

"Well, in my case, the complainers may be right. Perhaps I am somewhat selfish," Eulifia replied with an amused smile.

However, Odifia just felt more sad when she heard that.

"If they can make themselves feel better by speaking ill in secret, then that is not truly a problem," her mother continued. "Your father and grandfather are simply carrying out their duty as members of the ducal house of Genos, so they do not pay such gossip any heed."

Odifia remained silent.

"My, it seems you are still not satisfied. Then allow me to ask, who did you hear such comments from?"

"I don't know... I heard it at a banquet at the castle."

"Were they nobles? Or pages and maids?"

"Nobles."

"I'm not surprised. Your father and grandfather are not the sort of people who would make their servants say such things. If what you overheard was nobles gossiping and complaining about the two of them making proper decisions for the sake of Genos, there is even less reason to pay any attention to those words. They may grumble about the duke and Melfried if they want to, so long as they follow the house of Genos's orders properly," Eulifia said, breaking out in a smile. "I feel the same way when it comes to gossip about me. I would be rather sad to hear the pages and maids call me selfish, but that is not what you heard, correct?"

"Yes. Only nobles said bad things about you."

"Then simply leave it be. Any noble who would call me selfish is undoubtedly far more selfish than I am, after all," Eulifia said, hugging Odifia tight. "Nobles, you see, must wear separate faces in public and in private. And as long as they do not share bonds of friendship, they will only ever show other nobles that public side of themselves."

"I understand."

"No matter what one who only knows your public face may say about you, it is no different than if they were to complain about the banquet clothes you are wearing. As long as I am loved by my family and friends, that is enough for me."

It was a little difficult to understand what Eulifia was saying, but even so, Odifia felt her sadness receding a bit. However, another doubt arose in her mind to take its place.

Odifia tended not to show much in the way of facial expressions. Didn't that mean that her true personality would be hard for others to see? The members of Odifia's family all understood her. Her parents and grandfather would always notice how she was feeling. Even though she didn't get to see her grandfather all that often, he

could still pick up on her moods easily.

When she became an adult, would she be able to properly smile and cry then? That was the thing that concerned Odifia the most.

"It seems our time is up. Fine work today, Lady Odifia," the old woman politely stated after the bell indicating it was half past the upper sixth hour rang out.

Her study time had amounted to two hours in total, with three breaks in the middle. The old woman gave a bow before exiting the room, and when she was gone, Odifia immediately flopped down on top of the table. The maid who had been watching from her seat along the wall giggled at that and stood up.

"Well then, shall we head to the dining room? Or would you prefer to rest a bit first?"

"No, I'll go."

Somehow managing to lift her heavy head, Odifia rose from her seat. As she left the room and walked down the hall, her heart started beating faster. Would today be a lucky day, or no? She would have no way of knowing until she made it to the dining room.

"My, you certainly are early. Were you awaiting the meal that anxiously?" Eulifia remarked with a gentle smile, already seated in place. Most of the time, the two of them enjoyed their noontime snacks by themselves, with Odifia's younger sister entrusted to the wet nurse. As a true tea lover, Eulifia was already enjoying a cup all on her own. "There is still some time left until noon, but shall I have the food carried out?"

"Yes."

Eulifia turned to one of the maids. "In that case, could you bring my portion as well? And also a new cup of tea."

"At once. It will be out in just a moment."

Odifia had a seat in the chair that another maid pulled out for her, her heartbeat gradually speeding up. Seemingly noticing that, Eulifia brought a hand to her mouth and laughed.

"Only getting something once every few days is difficult, isn't it? Wouldn't it be easier if you knew the specific dates when they would be coming instead?"

"No," Odifia replied with a shake of her head.

The dates Eulifia was referring to were the ones when Odifia got lucky, and they were usually decided on in advance. However, there was never any guarantee that nothing would go wrong with the schedule. If some sort of unforeseen incident occurred, then those plans could be disrupted. That was why Odifia said that she didn't want to know the dates. If she went to the dining room on a day that she thought was a lucky one only to have her expectations betrayed, that would be a tremendous disappointment. She had made up her mind to not ask about the dates in advance in order to avoid that.

Every third day was supposed to be a lucky one. However, occasionally the lucky day took four days to arrive. Apparently, there was something specific that caused those delays on a regular basis, but Odifia didn't ask what that was either.

Today was the third day. As long as there hadn't been any unforeseen incidents, today or tomorrow would be a lucky one. She tried to not let her anticipation get the better of her, but she wasn't able to stop her legs from kicking excitedly.

That was when the maid returned, and the first thing she did was set a plate down in front of the young girl.

"My apologies for the wait. Today, I present you with a baked treat from Lady Toor Deen."

It seemed that today really was a lucky one.

Odifia stared intensely at the treat laid out before her. It had a fluffy yellow crust with pink specks here and there. It appeared to have been made with fuwano and poitan, with dried minmi sprinkled over top.

"This dessert is meant to be eaten with this added on top."

A small silver container was provided alongside the dish, filled with a thick dark-brown sauce. It was a sweet condiment that had been made using gigi leaves, and when she saw it, Odifia's legs started moving about even more restlessly.

"My, how rare for her to use minmi. Does it perhaps pair well with the slight bitterness of the gigi leaves?" Eulifia wondered aloud as a similar plate was placed in front of her. Since she'd heard that the two of them generally ate their midday snack together, Toor Deen

had prepared a portion for Odifia's mother as well. "Well then, let us eat. The tea is chatchi, by the way."

Odifia had already started pouring the gigi sauce over her dessert as Eulifia was speaking. The glossy sauce soon enveloped the fuwano and poitan treat. To the young girl, the sauce's shine looked more beautiful than any gem.

Grabbing a knife and a three-pronged skewer, Odifia cut into the treat. Somehow, it seemed even softer than usual. Within the yellow cross section that she made, she could see even more sparkling pink.

With her heart rate picking up speed again, she popped the skewered piece of her bready treat into her mouth. The taste of gigi leaves hit her instantly. Supposedly, they were normally only used to make bitter tea, but the chocolate sauce that Toor Deen had prepared was very sticky and sweet. From what Odifia had heard, she used sugar, karon milk, and milk fat to make it. Gigi leaf sauce was a condiment that the young noblewoman especially adored.

Today, though, she found an even greater surprise awaiting her. Just as she had assumed, the fuwano or poitan or whatever was even softer than usual. It melted in her mouth with hardly any need to bite into it at all. It was a dreamlike dish, as light as cotton and very sweet.

"My. The last time she sent us a baked treat was not all that long ago, but this one is remarkably more delicious," Eulifia said in surprise. "It seems like it might be somewhat similar to that fluffy dessert that Varkas prepared before... No, she used normal fuwano and poitan in this dish... At any rate, it is truly wonderful, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"It seems that the minmi fruit was dried. At first, the flavor was hidden under that of the gigi leaves, but it lingered a bit longer in my mouth so I was able to appreciate it as well. Ah, is that why she used dried fruit...? If she left the minmi soft, it would have slid smoothly down our throats along with the rest."

"Right."

"My, Odifia, have you already eaten all of it? I have only had a single bite myself."

True enough, Odifia had eaten the entire sweet in a flash. It was even softer and lighter than usual, which also meant it had disappeared incredibly quickly.

Somehow, she couldn't help but feel terribly unsatisfied. She had been so happy, but an even greater sadness was now welling up inside of her. But then, the maid who had been waiting beside the table smiled softly at her.

"This sweet is not a very filling one, so two were prepared for each of you. Lady Toor Deen said that if it is too much, the rest could be saved for dinnertime, but would you like it now?"

"I want to eat it right away."

"Very well. Hold on for just a moment."

Odifia's sadness up and vanished as if it had never been there to begin with. And seeing her daughter's excitement, Eulifia once again smiled.

"You look so happy. Your eyes are positively sparkling, Odifia."

"I am."

"I do not think that the confections served in the castle are inferior to these, but the cooking techniques they employ certainly are quite different. The treats Toor Deen learned to make from Asuta are the ones that match your tastes the best, though, are they not?"

"Yes," Odifia nodded, staring back at her smiling mother. "Mother, can we not invite Toor Deen to another tea party?"

"I am afraid not. As I said before, until the observers from the capital have come and gone, we will not be able to place people of the forest's edge in charge of our kitchens. It is surprising that the end of the yellow month is near and they still have not arrived, though."

"Hmm."

"Be patient for just a little longer. I am certain that they will come in either the green or blue months." Eulifia had said the same thing last month and the month before that. The observers had been expected to arrive soon after the end of the rainy season. Or, really, it was more like their arrival had been expected for a full five months now, and they still hadn't shown up. "Do not look so upset, Odifia. You will make me sad as well," Eulifia said, reaching out and stroking

her daughter's hair. "Now that I think about it, I heard that Toor Deen may be attending the special dinner that will be held at The Silver Star..."

"Huh?"

"Your father mentioned it yesterday. The event is meant to welcome some important guests from the east, and a few people of the forest's edge will be invited as well. As Toor Deen is a passionate chef, Polarth said that she will surely wish to partake of Varkas's cooking."

"I wish to go as well, then."

Eulifia's eyes narrowed as she smiled. "Toor Deen will only be there as a guest, you know. You will not be able to eat her desserts, so do you still wish to attend?"

"Yes," Odifia replied with a nod.

Eulifia stroked her daughter's hair once again. "Very well. In that case, I shall ask your father and Polarth to make certain that I can bring you along. Varkas will be preparing spicy and bitter dishes as part of the meal, and you will be expected to eat enough of them so as not to be rude."

"I know."

Warmth seemed to be filling Odifia's chest. She would be able to see Toor Deen for the first time in quite a while. The thought alone brought her the same sort of joy she felt when Toor Deen's treats were placed in front of her.

Was the young chef from the forest's edge doing well? Would she smile at Odifia once more with a gentle look in her eyes? That was what Odifia thought about until the second plate was brought out, her legs kicking excitedly all the while.

2

The dinner at The Silver Star was on the twenty-second of the yellow month.

From the morning until noon, Odifia studied characters, then in the afternoon she was given etiquette lessons, as per her usual daily

routine. But after that, she and her mother left Genos Castle. Her father was busy, however, so he wouldn't be attending the event.

"Remember, Polarth is in charge of managing everything for today. He went out of his way to make certain there was a seat for you, so you have to thank him, all right?"

"Yes, I understand."

As the totos carriage swayed along, Odifia once again felt a bit of excitement rising in her chest. Until they actually arrived, she would have no way of knowing whether or not Toor Deen was coming. Because of that, she felt much the same as she did when she was waiting to see if her noontime snack would be a lucky one or not.

After a fair bit of time had passed, the totos carriage came to a stop. Eulifia stepped down first, followed by Odifia and then their maids. Now that she was six, Odifia was finally able to descend such tall steps on her own.

A line of soldiers in white armor was waiting for them on the ground. Passing by them, she and her mother stepped into the restaurant.

"We have been waiting for you. You are Ladies Eulifia and Odifia, correct? Your companions have already arrived," an old woman with a kindly face said, greeting them with a smile. Odifia thought it was rather refreshing to not hear her mother referred to with the overly long title of "wife of the first son of the lord of Genos."

The restaurant was in the castle town, but in an area where commoners lived. However, the price of a meal there was such that almost all of the clients were nobles. Though Odifia's parents had taken her to many places in the past, today was probably her first time visiting a restaurant like this one.

"Ah, there you are, Eulifia. If you do not mind, could you please sit on this side?" Polarth called out as they entered the dining room. There were two large tables within, one to the left and one to the right, and a number of people were already seated at them. Among them, Odifia recognized Polarth's wife Merrim, Torst of the house of Turan, and the fortune teller Arishuna.

"My, what an unusual seating arrangement. Is this something that you thought up?" Eulifia asked.

"I wouldn't say that it is anything I spent all that much energy on. I simply felt that it would be nice to have people of different standings interact as much as possible."

Both tables had a jumbled up mix of easterners and nobles from Genos sitting at them. The seats around the left side of the table that Polarth had pointed toward had two easterners and one noble sitting in them, with the five seats on the other side completely open.

"I see. This arrangement allows for five people of the forest's edge to sit at each table. That's just the sort of delightful thinking I have come to expect from you."

With that, Eulifia smiled equally at both of the tables while heading toward her indicated seat, and Odifia followed after her.

As the two of them took their seats, Polarth said, "Allow me to introduce you to the members of the Black Flight Feathers. Here we have Lady Eulifia, the wife of the first son of Duke Genos, Lord Melfried, as well as their first daughter, Lady Odifia."

The other guests were also introduced to them in turn. The three other easterners besides Arishuna belonged to a merchant group called the Black Flight Feathers, while the unfamiliar noble was in charge of foreign affairs.

Odifia sat down next to the two easterners, while the foreign affairs person was seated on their other side. Apparently, the easterners were the assistant head of the merchant group and the person who ranked just under him.

"Normally, we would have a second person from foreign affairs present, correct? We are deeply sorry for stealing away that seat," Eulifia said with a glance in Odifia's direction.

Understanding what her mother wanted, the young girl added, "My apologies," and bowed her head.

The noble from foreign affairs, meanwhile, shook his hand in a fluster and said, "Think nothing of it. It would have been rather sad to only have a single noblewoman at this table. And the original occupant of that seat would have been Sir Melfried, so I cannot think of anyone better than you, his daughter, to take his place, Lady Odifia."

"Thank you very much," Odifia replied with another bow of her head. She didn't want anyone thinking poorly of her mother because of her.

After she had also thanked Polarth for organizing things, Polarth's wife Merrim, who was sitting next to him, smiled at her and said, "My, it hasn't been long since I last saw you, Lady Odifia, but you seem to have grown a great deal more mature in that time. You already look like a fine noblewoman."

Odifia wasn't doing anything more than repeating the polite words she had memorized. And even then, she had to take a moment to mentally prepare herself before saying them. She was still a long way from truly being a fine noblewoman.

An older woman then poured some tea for everyone and they continued chatting for a while, until it was finally announced that the people of the forest's edge had arrived. Though the beating of Odifia's heart had slowed down after a while, that made it start pounding again. Under the table, she gripped the hem of her dress tightly as she waited for the people of the forest's edge to enter the room.

A number of darker-skinned young people who looked sort of familiar but sort of not streamed into the dining room. Ten guests had been invited from the forest's edge. Among them, only two had pale skin: the chef named Asuta, and an unfamiliar girl who seemed to be around ten years old.

And then there was Toor Deen, almost hiding in the shadows of her two lighter-skinned companions. When she saw her, Odifia's legs started kicking under the table without her even being aware of it.

However, Toor Deen didn't seem to have noticed Odifia. When there were a lot of people around, the young chef tended to just stare down at the ground. And when she started walking over to the opposite table with Asuta, Odifia let slip a little "Ah..."

"My, are you going to sit over there as well, Toor Deen? But Odifia wished to speak with you," Eulifia called out, causing Toor Deen's eyes to anxiously shift around the room.

But then, the girl beside Toor Deen with the pale skin smiled and joined arms with her. "How about the two of us eat at that table? I'd

like to stick with you, Toor Deen."

The girl was very cute, and had her hair tied off on either side of her head just like Toor Deen. She looked to be about the same age and height as the young chef from the forest's edge. Unlike Toor Deen, though, she was smiling brightly. Apparently, she was someone who lived outside of the castle town, but was not a person of the forest's edge.

Whoever the girl was, though, what mattered was that Toor Deen sat down at the left table with Odifia. There ended up being a bit of distance between their seats, however. A chef from the forest's edge named Sheera Ruu took the seat across from Odifia, and then Toor Deen was seated on her left.

"My, you are Sheera Ruu, are you not? I didn't recognize you at first. Your hair is shorter than it was before, and you are wearing a different style of outfit as well," Eulifia remarked.

"Yes," Sheera Ruu replied with a graceful smile. "When women of the forest's edge are wed, they cut their hair and start wearing a different style of outfit."

"My, so you have married someone recently? Was it that Darmu Ruu man there?"

Sheera Ruu smiled again as she answered, "Yes." Though she looked a bit embarrassed, she also seemed incredibly happy.

"I knew it. When I saw the two of you at the house of Daleim's dance party, I was sure that you would eventually be joined together. You suit one another well, and make a lovely couple."

"Thank you for saying so, Eulifia," Sheera Ruu said with a calm smile.

Next to her, Darmu Ruu respectfully lowered his gaze for a moment. Odifia remembered seeing him at the dance party too. He had been wearing banquet attire from the castle town at the time, and his hair had been combed so that it was neat and tidy, but today he looked wild and intense, like a different person entirely.

That was probably normal for hunters of the forest's edge. Odifia had seen a number of other hunters before, and they generally all had the same sort of mysterious intensity about them that soldiers did.

But right now, Toor Deen was more important. After giving a slight bow when she sat down, she had only spoken to the girl next to her so far.

Actually, it was more like Toor Deen had been timidly gazing downward while that girl had been trying to cheer her up. The young chef wasn't even looking at Odifia, which was making her feel more and more sad.

"You are the daughter of that chef named Mikel, are you not? I've heard so much about you," Eulifia called out to the girl who was sitting a few seats away from her.

The young girl smiled and replied, "Yes. I am Myme, the daughter of Mikel of Turan. I will take care to show proper respect to your noble personages, so please allow me to dine alongside you."

"Today is not an official event, so there is no need to be so stiff and formal. You and your father are staying at the settlement at the forest's edge now, correct?"

"That's right. My father has recovered a fair bit from his injury, but we have been permitted to continue to stay until the law and order situation in the Turan lands improves."

"Ah, the tightening of discipline in the militia, correct? My husband is involved in that as well, so I hope things get better in the Turan lands as soon as possible," Eulifia said before glancing over at her daughter. "Odifia, did you not wish to thank Toor Deen?"

"Yes," Odifia replied with a nod, but she couldn't quite get the words to come out.

While Odifia was struggling with that, Toor Deen glanced over at her. "I-It's been a long time, Odifia. Have my treats been arriving without any problems?"

"Yes."

"I'm glad to hear that," Toor Deen said with a sigh of relief. Odifia was just about to say something in return, but that was when the chef Varkas entered the room.

"My apologies for the wait. It is now the lower fifth hour, and so we shall bring out the dishes."

Toor Deen's eyes instantly turned toward him. Odifia felt terribly disappointed, but she couldn't interrupt the start of the meal.

After that, the dishes came in one after another. Varkas was known as either the best or second best chef in all of Genos, but honestly, Odifia wasn't all that fond of the food he made. The man was known for being more skilled at using herbs than anyone in the region. His unusual dishes had certainly surprised Odifia plenty of times, but she often felt his cooking was too spicy or bitter.

"The tongues of children are so sensitive that it is easy for flavors to seem overly strong to them. Varkas cooks for adults, so his dishes may be a little too intense for you, Odifia," Eulifia had said at some point. Odifia knew that the chefs at the castle all changed how they prepared food a bit depending on if they were cooking for her or for the adults, and those adjusted dishes always tasted better to her.

But then there was the food prepared by that chef Asuta from the forest's edge. He didn't use as many herbs as Varkas, and Odifia usually found his cooking to be very delicious.

And of course, there was also Toor Deen. Odifia thought that the desserts Asuta and that Rimee Ruu girl made were tasty too, but there was no question in her mind that Toor Deen's were the best of all. Eulifia had said that the treats made by the chefs in the castle were just as good, but Odifia totally disagreed.

Whenever Odifia took a bite of Toor Deen's treats, she felt happiness fill her up from the very bottom of her heart. In her view, all of the desserts prepared by the chefs from the forest's edge were better than those made by the chefs at the castle, but even among their people, Toor Deen was special.

"Odifia, make sure to eat it properly," Eulifia whispered. As Odifia slurped up some of the strange food that was apparently called shaska, she nodded back.

The shaska already seemed pretty spicy, but the easterners seated next to her had added all of the extra seasoning that had been provided to theirs. If she had made hers that spicy, Odifia didn't think she would be able to swallow a single bite of it.

Somehow, though, she had managed to eat all of the food that had been served to her so far. Odifia's portions were half the size of what was given to the adults, and the appetizer and soup dishes hadn't been all that strong. And since she had pushed in front of

other people so that she could attend, if she failed to eat all the food she was served, she felt that she wouldn't be carrying out her duty.

Each time a new dish was brought out, Toor Deen's eyes started sparkling as she discussed them with Myme. The dishes must have all been incredibly delicious to her. The only times when she looked truly enthusiastic and excited were when good food was placed in front of her, which made sense. She *was* a chef, after all.

Odifia was just thinking about how she wanted to eat all the food as fast as possible so she could take her time speaking with Toor Deen when the fourth dish, the vegetable one, was brought out.

"My, this is an especially mysterious dish, isn't it?" Eulifia remarked. Odifia was of a similar opinion, but in a negative way instead. It was a heavily sour dish, which she had as much trouble with as bitterness and spiciness.

Odifia also wasn't fond of mamaria vinegar. If it had lots of sugar added to it to make it nice and sweet, she could at least manage to get it down, but this dish used not only mamaria vinegar, but also some other unfamiliar source of sourness.

There was some sweetness there too, sure, but the sourness got in the way. The sweetness blended together with the sourness, and the end result was thoroughly unpleasant. Though she knew she was being rude to Varkas by thinking so, she just couldn't see this one as delicious at all, no matter how hard she tried.

"This is amazing! How do you even go about making such a mysterious flavor?!" Odifia heard Toor Deen ask, catching her off guard. Everyone seated at their table turned to look at the young chef at once, causing her to say, "M-My apologies," and hang her head. After that point, Toor Deen only spoke with Myme, as if she was trying to escape from everyone else's gazes.

Seeing her like that, Odifia steadily grew more and more sad. She was still young, so she didn't feel like she was able to interject herself into their conversation. She couldn't share in the excitement and joy Toor Deen felt. To Toor Deen and Myme, even this dish that was so difficult for her to eat tasted good.

On top of that, Odifia was a noble from the castle town while Toor Deen was a chef from the forest's edge, which meant their

attitudes toward food were totally different. That was only natural, though, since Odifia's only involvement with food was to eat it, while Toor Deen prepared food as well.

Even so, Odifia wasn't able to stop herself from feeling sad. She had come to know Toor Deen by way of her delicious sweets. That was what tied the two of them together, and that was why not being able to share in the same feelings when it came to food felt so incredibly unfortunate to her.

"I suppose this one definitely won't be to your tastes. You do not need to force yourself to eat your whole helping, all right?" Eulifia whispered once again.

However, Odifia shook her head and shoved more of the strange-tasting food into her mouth. If she left any of it uneaten, she felt like the wall between her and Toor Deen would only grow higher. She hardly chewed each bite at all, though, before washing it down with tea. It was so awful it made her tear up, but she somehow managed to clear her plate.

When Odifia looked up again, she noticed Darmu Ruu drinking wine with a sour look on his face. All of the men at the table had chosen to drink wine rather than tea. Sheera Ruu was chatting away restlessly with a girl named Reina Ruu, while Toor Deen was talking with Myme. And between them, Darmu Ruu was sitting as silently as Odifia was.

"Was it not to your tastes either, Darmu Ruu?" Eulifia asked. The moment one of the guests fell silent, she would always try to draw them back into the conversation.

With the sour look still on his face, Darmu Ruu turned toward her. "If they had at least served some meat alongside it, I wouldn't have had nearly as much difficulty. But this dish was pretty tricky to get down."

"You people of the forest's edge have a custom of not leaving any food uneaten, correct? Could you not have shared it with your wife?"

"Dealing with a dish you dislike by foisting it on someone else is childish," Darmu Ruu grumbled, earning an amused smile from Eulifia.

Next, Odifia's mother turned toward the easterners and the noble

from foreign affairs. The women from the forest's edge were all fixated on the food, so the men had become rather quiet. Once Eulifia started speaking to them, though, that silence was driven away, creating a fun and exciting atmosphere. She was always thinking of others first and foremost like that.

The people who gossiped and called her selfish really didn't know anything about her. Odifia truly believed that no one was more kind and thoughtful than her mother, and she was always wondering if she would be able to think about other people in the same way when she was an adult too.

"My, yet another wonderful dish," Eulifia cheerfully commented.

The main meat dish had finally been served. This one was also a bit too spicy, but Odifia was able to eat it without much trouble.

The dish contained karon, kimyuus, and fish meat, the last of which was something she hadn't eaten too often. Still, she could see how the adults would find it delicious. The kimyuus chest meat was the most to Odifia's taste.

All of the chefs were giving the dish a lot of praise. Toor Deen and the other girls were all looking both joyful and surprised as they bit into the three types of meat. Though they had likely been holding themselves back before so as to not be rude, it was very clear just how excited they truly were now.

Even Darmu Ruu looked satisfied as he ate this dish, and though it wasn't possible to read the emotions of the easterners, when they did occasionally state their impressions, they were always quite positive. For the adults, the dish had to be incredibly delicious. Toor Deen's eyes were also positively sparkling as she talked with Myme.

Out of the entire group, Odifia must have been the only one feeling terribly depressed. It was hard to believe she had been so excited about coming here. Maybe she never should have come in the first place. But she kind of hated herself for thinking that way.

Even when dessert was delivered at the end, Odifia's feelings remained unchanged. The dish was certainly delicious, but it didn't have the sort of taste that she was seeking. Her belly was full but her heart felt empty, as if a chilly wind was blowing through it.

"Now that all of the dishes have been served, I would like to

introduce you to my apprentices."

With that statement from Varkas, his apprentices were summoned into the room. A conversation followed between the guests and Varkas's team for a while, but Odifia didn't hear any of it. At the very end, though, she just barely managed to catch Polarth loudly proclaiming, "Now then, why don't we also get to know one another better while enjoying some post-dinner wine? We've already made arrangements with the guards at the gate, so could we ask you to enjoy another hour with us here, dear guests from the forest's edge?"

The tableware was all taken away, and fresh tea was laid out in front of her. However, Odifia didn't feel like reaching out for it.

If she just sat in her chair silently like a stone for another hour, would this meal that made her feel so empty finally come to an end? As she was thinking that, though, Eulifia shook her shoulder.

"Is something the matter, Odifia? Toor Deen has been calling out to you for a while now."

"Huh?" Odifia grunted vacantly.

When she looked up, she found Toor Deen looking at her with a very worried expression.

"A-Are you all right? You've looked really down for a while now," Toor Deen asked.

"I'm fine."

With dinner over, everyone had started talking more loudly. In order to hear Toor Deen's words, she needed to lean forward over the table.

"So, about that discussion from before..."

"From before?"

"Yes, you know..."

Laughter from the other table drowned out Toor Deen's voice. Now that they were drunk, Polarth and Torst had started chatting more freely. Since they were at opposite ends of their table, they were speaking loudly enough that their voices reached all the way over to the other side of the room.

Wanting to hear what Toor Deen was saying properly, Odifia leaned forward even farther. As she did, the easterner seated beside

her suddenly stood up.

"Would it, be rude, to move to, different seats?"

"Hmm? Why do you ask?" Eulifia questioned.

The easterner nodded and replied, "It has, grown loud, so it is now, difficult for, these girls, to converse. Could we, exchange seats?"

"That is a very gracious offer. What do you say to that, Toor Deen?" Eulifia inquired.

The young chef's chair clattered as she stood, and then she shot Myme an apologetic look.

"U-Um, Myme, I'm terribly sorry, but..."

"Please don't worry about me. You've been looking worried about Lady Odifia for a long time now," Myme replied with a big grin, then she looked over at the easterner. "If you don't mind, I would love to hear about Sym. I've really been wanting to learn more about things like shaska, gyama, and herbs."

"Yes, certainly."

With that, the easterner circled around to the other side of the table, moving at a calm pace. After giving a quick bow to him, Toor Deen moved to sit next to Odifia in turn. The old woman waiting the table then casually swapped their tea and wine.

"Pardon me. Now we can finally have some time to chat, right?" Toor Deen said immediately after taking her seat. "Um, are you really feeling okay? I noticed that partway through dinner you started looking really down."

"Partway through dinner?"

"Yes. Around when the vegetable dish was brought out, I believe. You even looked like you were crying at one point."

Toor Deen was shooting Odifia a terribly worried look. It was a gaze filled with kindness that Odifia knew well. And when she saw it, her heart started beating faster in a slightly different way than before.

"I wanted to call out to you many times, but I'm not good at speaking loudly... I wish that our seats had been closer."

"I do as well."

"When we were talking before, you got cut off by the start of

dinner, which has been bothering me this whole time. I'm sorry that I didn't greet you properly," Toor Deen said, and then she finally broke out in a smile. "It really has been a while. The last time we met was around the end of the rainy season, so it's been over two months now, hasn't it? Have you been doing okay, Odifia?"

As Odifia felt a lump forming in her throat, all she could say in response was "Yes."

"That's good," Toor Deen replied, her smile growing brighter. "Um, thank you so much for all the gifts you've sent. I wore the hair accessory you gave me at our last banquet... A lot of people praised it."

"My gifts didn't cause trouble for you?"

"Trouble...? No, I was surprised and I felt awkward about accepting them, but they made me very happy." Toor Deen was still only around eleven or so years old, and yet her smile looked so mature somehow. She was very timid and had difficulty looking people in the eyes, but occasionally she seemed remarkably mature. "But as I said before, I don't need anything besides the payment. Just having you buy my treats is enough to make me very happy."

"It makes you happy? It isn't trouble?"

"That's right. I mean, it's obvious how excited you get about the things I make."

Odifia's chest, which had been feeling so empty, started filling up with warmth. Toor Deen's smile and words had caused her sadness to melt away, almost like magic.

Toor Deen had been concerned about her too. Her feelings had gotten across to the young chef just like they did with her family, even though her expressions didn't change. When she realized that, the blood flowing through her veins seemed to carry the joy she felt all the way to the tips of her fingers and toes.

"Well then, about what we were discussing before..."

"Yes. I couldn't hear what you said then, Toor Deen."

"I understand. It was really noisy then, after all," Toor Deen said with a smile. "It was about tea parties. Until the people from that capital place leave Genos, we won't be able to come here to work as chefs. It's really unfortunate, isn't it?"

“Unfortunate?”

“Yeah. You know, Asuta just taught me how to make a new kind of dessert recently. But when you’re making it, one of the steps is to pour something called cream all over the top, so it would be difficult to prepare it at the forest’s edge and then send it to town.”

“Right.”

“It’s a kind of decorated cake, and I’d like to have you try it as soon as possible, so I’m really looking forward to the day when I can come cook for a tea party again.”

That was when Odifia hit her limit. She leaped from her chair with all the force she could muster, reaching out as far as she could to hug Toor Deen around the neck.



"I-Is something the matter, Odifia?" Toor Deen asked in a fluster with her mouth right next to Odifia's ear. However, the young noblewoman didn't respond, except by rubbing against Toor Deen's warm cheek with her own.

"Oh my, there you go acting like a little child again," she could hear Eulifia say with a laugh behind her. But no matter what her mother or anyone else said, Odifia had no intention of pulling back from the older girl's warmth.

"A-Are you all right? Is something wrong?" Toor Deen asked worriedly.

Odifia could feel a warm touch now on her head and back, which had to be from Toor Deen hugging her. She was so happy, it was possible that it was even showing on her face for once. She didn't know if she was smiling or crying, but she felt incredibly emotional either way. It was the most intense feeling that she had ever experienced in her entire life. However, Odifia's face was buried in Toor Deen's shoulder, so no one would be able to tell whether she was expressing her joy or not. But she didn't mind that. Odifia was simply happy to have her arms wrapped around Toor Deen. At the moment, she didn't care about anything else.

"I love you, Toor Deen," Odifia said, causing the young chef to giggle.

"Thank you. I love you too, Odifia."

Toor Deen's warm hand gently patted Odifia on the back, and the pleasant sensation made the little girl hug the young chef even tighter.

Group Performance: The Past and the Future

1

Raielfam Sudra cried out in his sleep, suffering from a nightmare. It was the kind of awful dream that could cause even a hunter like him to feel as if his soul was being eaten by worms, making him want to scream out in anguish. All of the countless people he had seen perish over the course of his life were surrounding him with deathly pale faces.

He saw his mother and father among them.

His older brother and younger sister were there as well.

The heads of branch houses and subordinate clans also appeared.

Even the criminal he had killed with his own hands was there.

And...the young children that he had lost.

Forgive me... Please, forgive me... I didn't want to lose any of you... Raielfam Sudra pleaded, tears flowing from his eyes.

However, not a single one of them resented the man. They just looked at him with sad, regretful gazes, and that caused Raielfam Sudra more grief and despair than anything else possibly could have.

I will come join you soon... So please, forgive me... Forgive me for failing to save you...

And with that, Raielfam Sudra awoke.

He found himself unable to shake off the lingering terror for some time. He was sweaty all over. His heart was pounding intensely against his ribs, and he could feel the veins on his temples throbbing.

But eventually, his flickering vision managed to focus, and he saw the familiar beams and underside of the roof above him. Raielfam

Sudra gave a heavy sigh.

Just a dream, huh?

After wiping the cold sweat from his brow with the palm of his hand, he turned to look to his side at the other half of the bedding he was lying in. However, no one was there.

An unspeakable sense of unease washed over Raielfam Sudra as he shot to his feet.

He stumbled over to the door of his bedroom and opened it with trembling fingers. As the room beyond came into view, a gentle voice greeted him. "My, are you finally awake? I was starting to think that I might need to wake you up myself." Raielfam Sudra's wife Li Sudra was seated there in the middle of the main hall, weaving a basket. The man felt relieved from the bottom of his heart to see her, breathing another deep sigh.

"What's the matter? You look as if you're feeling unwell," she continued.

"It's nothing. Is it just you here, Li?"

"Yes. Everyone else is out drying pico leaves and chopping firewood. They're right outside of the house, so there's nothing to worry about."

Raielfam Sudra knelt down next to his wife and gently grabbed her hand.

Li Sudra's eyes narrowed and she smiled. "What is it, really? Both I and the child inside me are doing just fine."

"I know... I really do."

Raielfam Sudra placed his other hand atop his wife's stomach. Her once slender stomach had swelled up to an almost unbelievable degree. Though this was the third time that she had been pregnant, it was easily the biggest her belly had ever become.

"It will be another half a month, or perhaps twenty days, until our child inside of me is born. I can hardly wait."

"Agreed."

Taking care not to use too much strength, Raielfam Sudra stroked his wife's stomach. And as he did, she picked a cloth scrap up off the floor and used it to wipe his cheek.

"You worked up quite a sweat, didn't you? Don't you think you

should go wash up soon?" Li Sudra said with a relaxed smile. This was the first time that she had ever looked so thoroughly relaxed while she was pregnant. Up until now, behind her joy over being with child, there had always been an undercurrent of worry within her about whether their baby would survive long enough to grow up.

Li Sudra's calm smile wiped away the last remnants of the nightmare that had been lingering in Raielfam Sudra's heart. He rose to his feet after giving his wife's hand one more tight squeeze.

"All right, I'll head over to the Lanto River. Make sure not to push yourself, okay, Li?"

"Yes, I know."

After giving her a big nod, Raielfam Sudra exited the house, allowing his normal everyday routine to begin.

A little later on, Raielfam Sudra headed to the Suun settlement alongside three other men. The Sudra had made arrangements with the other clans so that they could use a wagon for the trip whenever they went there. This was no problem, since they only went once every five or six days at the most.

As they rode the wagon north, they each ate a meal considerately prepared for them by the women, which consisted of grilled meat and vegetables between pieces of baked poitan.

"This is even better than usual, isn't it?" one of the men said quietly. And indeed, it was exceptionally delicious. The meat and vegetables had been cooked to a nice color and were all moist and tender inside. Plus, the woman had added some herbs for extra flavor. If the men hadn't been about to go out and hunt, they would have quite happily asked for more until they were completely full.

"You know, they made these using those oven things the guest at the Ruu settlement taught us how to build," the youngest of the group, Cheem Sudra, chimed in.

The man who had spoken up first turned toward him with a grin. "Sounds like you know a lot about this stuff. Did your wife tell you that?"

"So what if she did? Is there something wrong with that?"

"No. I'm just jealous of how close you two are."

Cheem Sudra furrowed his brow and looked annoyed for a moment, but then he simply popped the rest of his meal into his mouth, which seemed to make his anger abate a bit.

After listening to the exchange between the two of them, Raielfam Sudra moved from where he was sitting to a spot closer to the driver's seat.

"I'm mostly done eating, so I'll take over the driving for the rest of the trip. You fill your stomach as well in the meantime."

The totos continued to run forward as the former driver headed back into the wagon and Raielfam Sudra took over the reins. Then he retrieved some jerky from his hip pocket.

Even if they were able to eat proper meals during the day too, it was important for them not to completely do away with their old habit of eating jerky... Asuta of the Fa clan, who had introduced delicious food to the forest's edge, had told Raielfam Sudra that. The reason he had given was that hunters needed to maintain strong teeth and jaws so that they would always be able to chew even the toughest meat.

There had been plenty of other cases where Asuta had given a little extra advice when unveiling new dishes. "You should avoid using too much salt, sugar, or tau oil, dishes that contain lots of fat should be accompanied by plenty of vegetables or sour stuff, it's important to watch out for spoilage when eating giba innards..." He really did go on and on, like a mother warning her child.

Asuta's always taking care to make sure his presence doesn't harm the forest's edge in any way, Raielfam Sudra thought as he took another bite of jerky. It was the same kind of jerky that they had always made, not the giba bacon that was sold in the castle town. But it had been made with bloodlet meat and prepared with proper knowledge of how to use herbs, which was enough to make it a good bit tastier.

"By the way, clan head, about the dried meats..." Cheem Sudra called out from the back. "Not this kind of jerky, but the bacon and sausage that gets sold to the castle town. The Gaaz clan took up that job, didn't they?"

"Yes, since the Fou are selling fresh meat at the market now. The

Ruu believe that it wouldn't be proper to have one clan handle all that work, and I'd say they're right."

"I'm glad to hear it. It seems like it would be too much work for the women from the Fou, Ran, and Sudra to handle on their own."

"Oh? Are you worried about your wife?"

Naturally, that statement had come from the man from before, not Raielfam Sudra. He was to take a wife from the Ran eventually, but that had only been decided on after the festival of the hunt, so perhaps he was jealous of how quickly Cheem Sudra had gotten married. Still, in a way, his teasing was a sign of what peaceful and healthy lives the Sudra clan now lived.

Not that long ago, they had all been devoid of any hope that they would ever be able to get married or have children, and had simply been waiting for the end to come. But then they had suddenly found themselves no longer needing to worry about starvation, and they had formed blood ties with the Fou as well, so those options were once again available to them. It was hard to imagine anything that could make them happier than that.

And it's all thanks to the Fa clan. I am unbelievably grateful to both Asuta and Ai Fa, Raielfam Sudra thought to himself as they arrived at the Suun settlement. After circling the wagon around the massive old ritual hall, he spotted a crowd in front of the main house. The other hunters had already gathered.

"Our apologies for the wait," Raielfam Sudra called out from the driver's seat, causing a massive figure to turn toward him.

"It isn't as if you all are late. Looking at the sun, it still doesn't seem to have hit its peak."

He was a Jeen hunter who had come from the northern settlement. Like the hunters of the Zaza clan, the Jeen wore giba cloaks with hoods that covered their heads, so there was no mistaking them. As he got down from the driver's seat and freed the totos from the wagon, Raielfam Sudra glanced around at the hunters gathered there.

"There seem to be a lot of you here today. Or am I just imagining things?"

"You aren't. We brought along two hunters from the Havira and

two from the Dana today. I hope you are okay with that; I know this is rather sudden."

As the Jeen hunter said that, four hunters stepped forward. The Havira and Dana were subordinate clans of the Zaza. However, unlike the hunters of the north, they didn't wear pelts or skulls over their heads, and their builds seemed to be all over the place, with some of them being tall and skinny and others short and stout.

"I don't mind at all, though I would still like to know the reason. I believe we should have plenty of hunters here between the Jeen, Suun, and Sudra."

"It isn't a matter of numbers. They wish to learn how to use hunting dogs as well. We've been working on that at the northern settlement, but we only have a single hunting dog, so our progress is slow."

"Ah, I see." The Ruu clan lent one of the hunting dogs they had purchased to each of the parent clans. The Zaza, however, had six subordinate clans, so it made sense that they would be having difficulty. "In that case, I would like to extend this opportunity to the Deen and Liddo hunters as well. The Liddo clan head in particular has seemed terribly eager to try using hunting dogs."

"Very well. But first, we shall begin with the Havira and Dana who we have here today."

With that, a Suun hunter stepped forward from the rear of the crowd with their incredibly precious hunting dog.

"We are terribly sorry for taking charge of a hunting dog when other subordinate clans do not have one. Should we hand this dog over to the Zaza or Sauti, since they have so many subordinate clans beneath them?"

"There's no need to get so carried away there. That dog ultimately belongs to the Ruu clan, so it's up to them to determine where it ends up," the Jeen hunter said.

"But as fellow leading clans, if the Zaza and Sauti raise an objection..."

"If they had an issue with how the Ruu clan is doing things, they would have said so at the start. Since they didn't say a word, that means the other leading clan heads are in agreement with Donda

Ruu," the Jeen hunter continued, glaring at the Suun hunter out of the corner of his eye. "Besides, the fact that a hunting dog was placed in your care is the only reason we have been able to train with one so frequently. If you go and bring that kind of thing up on your own and the Sauti decide to take this dog for themselves, we'll be the ones who suffer for it."

"I see," the Suun hunter said, his eyes narrowing as he smiled. He was the oldest son of what was now the main Suun house, and was still inexperienced as a hunter, but over the past few months, his demeanor seemed to have grown noticeably more dignified. "You may be right. I suppose this has allowed all of you from the Jeen and the Sudra to have a chance to work with this dog as well, even if it's only once every few days."

"Right," Raielfam Sudra interjected. "Our parent clan, the Fou, were also allotted a hunting dog, but with just the one, we do not get many opportunities to interact with the animal, so I appreciate this opportunity as well."

The Suun hunter nodded at him with a friendly look on his face. "Understood. Well then, what shall we do today? Will we be splitting into two groups?"

"No, with this many of us, it would be more appropriate to go with three groups," the Jeen hunter said. "Also, I would like to have the Havira and Dana in different groups, so they can each have some time with the dog separately."

"In that case, we'll have to divide the dog's time between the groups... Shall we meet up somewhere when the sun is halfway set?"

"Yes, I suppose that would be the only option. If only we had two hunting dogs here... Honestly, I would like to have three," the Jeen hunter muttered in displeasure, causing Raielfam Sudra to look up at him, the man being over a head taller than the short hunter.

"It sounds like you've come to recognize the value of hunting dogs at the northern settlement as well."

"Hmm? Of course we do. If we only had the coins, we would gladly purchase several of them."

"I see," Raielfam Sudra replied. A single hunting dog cost sixty-

five white coins, so even if the northern clans did indeed catch as many giba as the Ruu, it would not be easy for them to scrape together such a sum.

However, the Fou clan had already made arrangements with the Ruu to purchase hunting dogs of their own. For the past several months, the Fou and their subordinate clans had been assisting the Fa with their work, and selling meat meant for cooking. And now that they were selling jerky, sausage, and even fresh meat in town, they likely had more coins than anyone other than the Fa and Ruu.

Preparing fresh meat and selling it in town earned them twenty-four white coins every ten days. In just one month, that would add up to more than enough to purchase a hunting dog. And they had a fair amount of money saved up by this point, so it was only natural that they would ask to purchase some dogs for themselves this soon.

But until the next clan head meeting concludes, we won't know if things are going to remain as they are, or if the Zaza, Beim, and Ravitz are going to overturn some or all of the changes that have happened. Insisting that the Fa are correct in their actions here and now will do nothing but earn me animosity, though, Raielfam Sudra thought, and so he held his tongue. At any rate, there were less than two months until the clan head meeting. He decided that it would be best not to stir things up before then.

"Well then, shall we get going? Since the Sudra only have four members here, you should split up into groups of two as always."

"Understood. Cheem, come with me."

Since he had taken a bride, Cheem Sudra was now the head of a branch house, but Raielfam Sudra had no intention of changing how he referred to the boy at this point. Having overcome so much hardship, his eight clan members would remain family until their souls returned to the forest.

The hunters from the five clans split up into three groups as planned. Raielfam and Cheem Sudra's group also included two hunters from the Jeen, two from the Havira, and three from the Suun, plus the hunting dog. The nine hunters spread out and advanced into the forest, with the Suun hunter and the dog being

front and center. The two Sudra hunters took up the rightmost position in the group, which put them far enough away that they could barely see the lead Suun hunter in the middle.

The fruits of the forest are still plentiful here. This really is an abundant area.

The Sudra hunting grounds were quite meager. With only four hunters to their name, it had always been a struggle to find and take down the few giba that appeared there... Or at least, that was how things had been until they had formed ties with the Fa several months ago.

It's still hard to believe that the Suun hunters were actually as weak as we used to be. Learning that they're all essentially hunters in training was quite a shock, Raielfam Sudra thought to himself right before the hunter at the head of the group stopped and raised his right arm. Glancing in his direction, Raielfam Sudra saw the hunting dog heading to the right, toward where the Sudra were. It would seem that it had not taken long for the dog's sharp ears and nose to detect a giba.

Raielfam Sudra stopped as well, waiting for the hunters stationed to the left to advance in a curve to encircle their target. But then, the dog kicked off and started running. The giba had moved before they could get into formation.

The Jeen hunter pointed off to the right in the direction the giba was moving, indicating that they were to corner the beast over there. There weren't any pitfall traps set up in the area, so they would have to use their blades and bows to take the giba down.

Raielfam and Cheem Sudra took off in the direction that the Jeen hunter had pointed toward. They were closer to the giba than the other hunters, and they were also the swiftest runners in the group, so it would be their task to bring down the beast. Raielfam Sudra read the terrain as they ran, searching for an ideal spot for them to lie in wait.

Eventually, he found a clearing surrounded by dense forest, and he blew a grass whistle. Cheem Sudra leaped into the thicket, while Raielfam Sudra scaled a tree and settled down on a suitable branch, nocking an arrow and blowing the grass whistle in his mouth once

more.

For a while after that, he didn't sense anything, until finally, he heard the hunting dog howl.

As he estimated the direction that the sound had come from, Raielfam Sudra pulled his bow taut, and before long, a massive giba leaped into the clearing, driven by the dog's barking.

At that very moment, Raielfam Sudra let his arrow fly, and Cheem Sudra did the same from a different direction.

The clan head's projectile struck the giba in the neck, while the younger hunter's hit it in the base of its back leg. The beast's body spasmed, and it fell to the ground.

After shooting two more arrows into its unguarded neck, Raielfam gave another brief signal with the grass whistle before hopping down from the tree. Once on the ground, he hung his bow over his shoulder and drew his blade. The giba was writhing about on the ground in pain. Though it no longer seemed to have the strength to stand, it showed no signs that it was about to breathe its last either. The beast was rather large—it probably weighed more than Raielfam and Cheem Sudra put together.

"We can't get near it like this. Should we fire more arrows into it?" Cheem Sudra asked as he stepped out of the thicket.

However, Raielfam Sudra shook his head and answered, "No. The Jeen hunters are here, so there is no need to waste arrows. But it may use the last of its strength to attack us, so keep your guard up."

"Understood."

The pair kept their blades at the ready as they waited for their fellow hunters to appear.

Before long, the foliage rustled, and the hunting dog peeked its head out.

"Ooh, you got it? No, wait, you haven't finished it off yet, huh?"

Seven hunters soon appeared from behind the dog. And as he looked down at the massive, raging giba, Raielfam Sudra nodded and said, "Correct. To finish it on our own, we would need to fire arrows in it until it stopped flailing, but that would ruin both the meat and the pelt, so we'd like to leave striking the final blow to you."

“Very well,” a Jeen hunter replied, and they approached the giba without the slightest fear. There was nothing more frightening than an injured giba, but it wasn’t pride that made them unafraid. It was confidence.

The giba let out a tremendous bellow and turned to face the Jeen hunters. Then it used the last of its strength to leap at them, only for one of the hunters to swing a sword down on it from head-on.

The sound of a skull shattering filled the air, and the Jeen hunters swiftly turned to the side as they moved to avoid the beast. The giba coated in blackish-brown fur collapsed to the ground face-first, its back twitching.

With that, the three hunters from the Suun hurriedly stepped forward and rolled the beast’s massive body onto its side. After quickly slashing its throat, they tied its rear legs together with straw rope. Then they tossed the other end of that rope over the branch where Raielfam Sudra had been hiding and hoisted the giba’s massive body up together.

Blood came gushing out of the beast’s throat. Aside from the neck and right hind leg where it had been shot with arrows, the meat and pelt from the beast would be in fine condition.

“If we hang it from this high of a branch, the mundt won’t try to snatch it. It would take too long to return to the settlement each and every time, so let’s keep on circling around the hunting grounds instead.”

Raielfam Sudra was in agreement with that statement from the Jeen hunter.

Then the Havira hunters stepped forward, having simply been watching the proceedings up until that point.

“The way you operate is very impressive. I never would’ve guessed that this is a gathering of hunters from different clans.”

“Well, this group has been working together ever since the gold month,” a Jeen hunter bluntly replied. “And our specialties are so varied it’s almost funny. Considering how to most efficiently use our strengths helped us to determine our roles.”

“No doubt. I was shocked by how fast the Sudra hunters moved. And those arrows... One severed the tendons in its rear leg, while

the other struck a vital point in its neck. The other two arrows also pierced deeply. They may well have been enough to take the giba's life all on their own," the slender young Havira hunter remarked as he stared at Raielfam and Cheem Sudra with a look of admiration. "I've always known that the northern hunters were strong, but the skill you displayed here was shocking... And you Sudra are the smallest of all the clans aside from the Fa, are you not?"

"Indeed. We accepted a bride from the Fou the other day, but there are still only ten of us in total."

"Until you formed ties with the Fou, you didn't have any branch houses or subordinate clans, correct? It's amazing that you managed to become so strong under those conditions," the Havira hunter said with an amused smile before turning his gaze toward the Jeen hunters. "If they possessed such strength, shouldn't the Zaza have welcomed them as a subordinate clan? It seems like a real shame, especially considering the fact that they're located close to the Deen and Liddo."

"The Sudra approved of the Fa clan's actions before anyone else at the last clan head meeting... And I am certain neither side will yield until the path forward is determined at the next meeting. There's no way we could have formed blood ties with them under these circumstances," the Jeen hunter grumbled with a sour look on his face.

"I see," the Havira hunter replied with a shrug. "Well, whether it's the Fa or the Sudra, I feel ashamed for having looked down on clans with few members. You truly are fine hunters."

"We're not all that special. And we certainly don't measure up to the Fa," Raielfam Sudra calmly replied. Those were his earnest, unexaggerated feelings. There really wasn't anything unique about the Sudra. They had simply managed to claw their way back from the brink thanks to the Fa clan. Raielfam Sudra would never think poorly of his clan members, but he considered himself to be a small, insignificant man. No matter what anyone else might say, that was what he firmly believed.

2

Raielfam Sudra had originally been the second son of the main Sudra house, and the youngest son at that. He had no younger brothers, and his younger sister's soul had returned to the forest at a young age due to illness.

However, his older brother was a truly remarkable hunter. The eldest son had been raised with great care, in order to protect the bloodline of the main house. And the expectations placed on him were even greater still because the second son, Raielfam Sudra, was such a small, weak boy.

During the times when they weren't able to hunt enough giba and were suffering from starvation, the eldest son alone was given as much food as possible. That never changed as the brothers aged. Perhaps because he wasn't given enough food to eat, Raielfam Sudra didn't grow much at all as he aged, while the expectations placed on his older brother's shoulders most certainly did.

Soon after turning fifteen, his older brother married the most beautiful woman among their relatives, the oldest daughter of the main house of their subordinate Meema clan. They were the same age, and she was tall with voluptuous proportions. She had also been raised with great care by her family, with the fate of her bloodline placed on her shoulders.

The Sudra and their subordinate clans had repeatedly suffered from misfortune, so at that point, the Meema were the only clan left under them. But the two clans shined with strength and beauty, and everyone believed that they would still be able to carve a path to a proper future.

However, there was still more misfortune on the horizon for the Sudra.

Even after a few years passed since they had gotten married, the oldest Meema daughter still hadn't given birth to a child.

During the first year, no one was particularly concerned about that. But once two years had passed, the worried whispers started. Eventually, after three and then four years had gone by, the eldest son lost his composure, abusively criticizing his wife for not granting

him a child. He started using up their scant resources without permission, getting drunk on fruit wine, and acting violent. The clan head at that time, their father, became angry and reprimanded him, but an even greater tragedy soon overshadowed all of that.

In the fifth year, the souls of the father and eldest son both returned to the forest on the same day. They were attacked by a starving giba while they were out hunting, and lost their lives all too soon. Raielfam Sudra survived, as he had been hunting with members of a branch house elsewhere, and when he heard the news, he was left speechless for some time.

His mother had passed away several years prior, so the only members of the main house who were still alive were Raielfam Sudra and his older brother's wife. It also wasn't long before the woman grew sick and perished, as if trying to follow after her husband. In no time at all, Raielfam Sudra had become the sole member of the main Sudra house.

He was seventeen years old then. And yet, he hadn't grown taller at all since turning thirteen, and was smaller than most women. On top of that, he had gloomy sunken eyes, a smooshed nose, and wrinkles across his face. Particularly cruel folks would mock him for having a face that looked less human than those of the savages of Mount Morga, and even at that age, he had been unable to find a bride. And yet, Raielfam Sudra found himself called to lead his people as the head of the main house.

To make matters even worse, their subordinates, the Meema clan, had started to feel animosity toward the Sudra. They had placed all of their hopes on their eldest daughter, but when she had married into the Sudra clan, she had been abused by her husband.

After a great deal of worrying, Raielfam Sudra came to a conclusion. He had all of his relatives gather in front of the main house and declared to them, "As my father's and brother's souls have returned to the forest, it has fallen to me to lead the Sudra and Meema from here on out. I would imagine many of you are displeased by that, but we cannot overturn the customs of the forest's edge just because I am such a sad specimen. I wish for us to bury our regrets inside, and attempt to live properly as children of

the forest of Morga."

Not a single person appeared to be happy as they listened to him speak. The members of the branch houses looked as if they had been plunged into the depths of despair, while the Meema glared at him with open hostility in their eyes. But as they were all watching him, Raielfam Sudra continued on, "I would like to make a promise here and now. I will not take a bride in the future, nor will I have children. After me, the branch family head who is most closely related to me should become the head of the main house. However, since the individual that duty would fall to has suffered a severe injury and his child is still young, I will continue to lead you until that child can be raised into a fine hunter."

Everyone present looked surprised. Surely, that had to have been the most foolish thing any person of the forest's edge had ever said. But that was the most proper path forward that Raielfam Sudra had been able to see.

"I would also like to apologize for the mistakes made by my father and brother. My father placed all of his expectations on my older brother, and gave him more to eat than anyone else. The Meema clan head judged that to be the proper path and did the same for his daughter. Due to that mistake, my brother and his wife suffered greatly for a long time, and inflicted that same suffering upon our relatives. Just because you see your eldest child as the most precious member of your family, that does not mean it is proper to ignore the other members of your clan."

As his relatives stood there frozen in shock, Raielfam Sudra continued to passionately argue. "It is the custom of the forest's edge to value an older child over a younger one, a main house over a branch one, and a parent clan over a subordinate one. That may well be correct, but it is not proper to take that too far. Especially seeing as we have so few people to our name. For us, there is no point in dividing things up into main houses and branch houses and the like. While I am clan head, I believe that we should not let ourselves be bound too tightly by that custom and should instead treat all of our relatives as precious members of our family. And if I am straying from the proper path by doing this, then I am certain

the forest shall judge me and take my soul, just as it took the souls of my father and brother.”

That was everything that Raielfam Sudra wished to convey.

And so, at the young age of seventeen, he ended up leading his people.

Even after that point, the path that the Sudra and Meema found themselves upon remained harsh. Many infants had their souls returned to the forest at a young age, and their numbers slowly but steadily crept downward. They were unable to form blood ties with other clans, and the leading Suun clan even ridiculed them and called them weaklings. Each and every day, it felt as if they were being forced to eat mud.

Ten years passed like that, until the eldest son of the branch house, the one who was expected to become the next clan head, grew old enough to be sent out into the forest. And yet, in less than half a year, he perished. He had been an only child.

“In that case, a child from the next closest branch house shall be the clan head after me. Until that child becomes a fine hunter, I shall continue to watch over the Sudra,” Raielfam Sudra declared.

At that point, he was nearly thirty years old, but as he had promised, he had not taken a bride. Perhaps as a result of that, his relatives had all followed Raielfam Sudra’s words and were loving to one another.

But no matter how properly they lived, that didn’t bring them any coins. It was difficult for them to hunt enough giba with their lacking strength, and so they suffered from constant poverty. When their swords broke, they hunted giba with just their bows, and when they fell ill, they were unable to purchase medicine in town. At times, they even had difficulty purchasing aria, poitan, and salt. They somehow managed to fill their stomachs by eating giba torso meat, but they were undeniably growing weaker and weaker.

Another seven years passed, and around when the once-seventeen-year-old Raielfam Sudra reached the point where he had spent half of his life as clan head, the youth set to become the next clan head perished out in the forest.

“Lamenting won’t get us anywhere... We’ll just have to have the

next closest by blood serve as the next clan head," Raielfam Sudra declared to all of his relatives, who were once again gathered in front of the main house. He felt like he had to be the most heartbroken of them all, but he refused to let that weakness show. "We have no male children left, but your house still has a young eldest daughter, does it not?" he asked one of the family heads.

"Yes," a young woman said, stepping forward. She was slender and tall, and also quite beautiful.

"Then the man that you take as your husband shall become our next clan head. Your child shall inherit the role of head of the main house, so choose your husband with that in mind and give birth to a strong child."

"Understood. I already have a man I wish to marry." There were only so many young unmarried folks, so that wasn't especially strange.

"In that case, you can go ahead and marry that man as soon as possible. You are already fifteen, are you not?"

"Yes. I turned fifteen last month."

"Then all the more reason to make the request here and now. I cannot imagine anyone refusing to marry a woman like you."

"I am glad to hear you say that, but I am not so certain," the girl said, breaking out in a gentle smile. "I am Li Sudra, eldest daughter of a Sudra branch house, and I wish to marry you, Raielfam Sudra of the main house. Will you grant this wish?"

"What?" Raielfam Sudra asked, his eyes shooting open wide. "What are you saying? Were you not listening to me at all?"

"I was, and I know that you swore not to take a bride before I was even born. But I have no desire to marry anyone aside from you."

"Ridiculous," Raielfam Sudra muttered, at a loss for words.

A man around Raielfam Sudra's age stepped forward—Li Sudra's father. "I have been discussing this matter with Li since her birthday. She has remained firm in her decision, so would you be willing to accept?"

"N-Now you're giving voice to this nonsense too? You haven't forgotten my words from seventeen years ago, have you?"

"Of course I haven't. But now that we've come this far, I'm sure that not a single one of our relatives sees you as a 'sad specimen' at this point." The man then looked around the crowd gathered there. "I ask all of you who fall under the Sudra and Meema: Would any of you be opposed to our clan head Raielfam Sudra taking a wife and having children? And if one of their children can be raised to be the next clan head, would any of you be dissatisfied?"

Not a single person objected.

Looking satisfied with that result, Li Sudra's father turned back toward Raielfam Sudra.

"And that's how it is. For the last seventeen years, you have continued to demonstrate your strength as clan head. Your father and brother strayed from the proper path, but you have not. All of us acknowledge that."

"Ah, but..."

"Though the two of us are related by blood, it is only through our grandfathers, who were brothers. It is a shame that our bloodline has been whittled down this much, but the connection between us is distant enough that it should be no issue at all for you to marry my daughter."

Raielfam Sudra didn't know what to say to that.

"Now the only thing left to do is to sort out your feelings. If you feel that Li would make a proper wife, then please, marry her."

Feeling terribly bewildered, Raielfam Sudra turned to face Li Sudra. "You truly wish to marry someone like me?"

"Yes, of course."

"But I am terribly ugly."

"Your face doesn't matter. You are the greatest hunter of our bloodline, are you not?"

"But I'm smaller than you are."

"There are many men out there who are shorter than me. And nobody in either the Sudra or the Meema is especially tall."

"But...I'm thirty-four years old."

Li Sudra brought her hands together as if praying. "Raielfam Sudra, your soul is what drew me to you. If I cannot marry you, then there is no point in me having been born into this world.

Please, won't you take me as your bride?"

And so, Raielfam Sudra and Li Sudra ended up getting married. He took a girl nineteen years younger and more than half a head taller than him as a bride, and she was smart and beautiful to boot.

He felt blessed. For a while, Raielfam Sudra had trouble believing that what was happening was actually real. And he was even more shocked and overjoyed by the fact that all of their relatives had given the pairing their blessing.

Raielfam Sudra had been serving as the leader of all of his precious family members, but he hadn't placed himself among them. His intention had been to try to make up for at least some of the suffering brought about by his father and brother, and then to entrust the future of his people to the next clan head before dying alone. However, his plans had been cut short rather decisively by the love of his relatives.

And yet, the Sudra clan's suffering was still not at an end.

They held one another dear and trusted that they were walking the proper path, and yet the Sudra were still steadily marching toward their own destruction.

The number of people in their clan continued to decrease. Li Sudra became pregnant twice, but both children had their souls returned to the forest at a young age. The Sudra were constantly short on food and couldn't provide enough milk to help the children grow, so their lives had been snuffed out by Amusehorn's Breath.

The sadness of losing them continued to eat away at Raielfam Sudra's heart. Everyone had celebrated when the children had been born, but they had both perished before they could grow up. Their deaths had been the only two times when Raielfam Sudra had cried and wailed out loud in his life. Li Sudra had also shed silent tears, her face haggard.

Four years had passed since Raielfam Sudra's marriage to Li Sudra. It had been twenty-one years since he had become the head of their clan, and he was now thirty-eight years old. The number of people in the Meema clan had decreased so much that they had cast aside their name and merged with the Sudra. There had only been six members of the Meema in the end, and half of them had been

less than thirteen years old. And the Sudra clan itself had been reduced to just twelve people, including their branch houses.

"At this point, all we can do is wait for ruin to come for us. We should consider this to be the end of not only the Meema name, but the Sudra as well," Raielfam Sudra said to his seventeen relatives, who were gathered before him.

The man who had previously been the head of the Meema shot him an intense glare. "Clan head Raielfam, are you saying we should cast aside the Sudra name and join another clan?"

"What other path is left to us? As things stand, there is no chance that we will be able to give our children any sort of future."

"But no clan other than either the Suun or the Ruu would be able to accept eighteen new members... Those two clans value strength so highly that I cannot imagine them welcoming us into their midst, and even if they did, we would surely not be treated well. And if we merge with another small clan, we could end up more impoverished than we are now."

"I know that, of course. But we cannot simply accept our destruction without trying anything."

"Can't we? I think I would prefer that to casting aside our pride," the man said as he started to tear up. "I cannot imagine a finer clan head than you. Even now that we have given up the Meema name, I wish to remain a member of the Sudra until my soul returns to the forest."

"But..."

"As you told us, I see everyone here as if they were my own parents or children. No matter how poor we may become, I am happy, and I am proud of my current self. I do not wish to throw away that pride and joy just so I can live a little longer."

Their other relatives nodded along with intense determination in their eyes, and so, Raielfam Sudra made his decision as well.

"Understood. As long as I remain clan head, I promise to lead you as I always have. If I happen to perish in the forest, then the next clan head can search for the path that they believe is best for our people."

Three more years passed after that, and their number dwindled

down to just nine. And yet, Raielfam Sudra was still alive, and still the head of his clan. Was the Sudra clan facing destruction because he had so stubbornly kept living all this time? That was something he thought about every single day.

Though four of the nine were still young and unwed, they were unable to seek out partners. Believing that they could not properly raise children when they were in such poverty, none of them were even trying to get married.

Even Raielfam Sudra himself had not tried to have a child in the last several years. After losing their previous children so young, he and his wife felt as if they would be crushed by despair if they were to lose another.

The Sudra were quietly walking down a path that was leading to their demise. With only four hunters left in their clan, they were barely scraping by. At this point, it was clear that they would only be able to survive for a couple more years. With deep love for their few remaining clan members and pride in their hearts, their souls would soon return to the mother forest.

They all understood and accepted that, but then, that very year, they met Asuta of the Fa clan.

3

"We caught twelve today, huh? I suppose that's tolerable," a Jeen hunter stated as the group returned to the Suun settlement in the evening.

When he heard that, one of the Dana hunters went wide-eyed in shock. "Twelve giba is just *tolerable*? Our clan couldn't even dream of taking down this many in a single day."

"Well, since you and the others joined us today, we had a pretty large team, so yes, this result is merely adequate."

"But we and the Suun hunters only contributed about as much as hunters in training would have. All of you from the Jeen and Sudra are truly impressive, even more so than the hunting dog," the Dana hunter said, and then he got lost deep in thought. "Actually...do you

get such impressive results because you're all so good at using the hunting dog, the Suun included? You Jeen and Sudra hunters are incredibly skilled, but it seemed like it was the strength of that dog that allowed us to hunt so many giba without facing any serious danger."

"That's right. A hunting dog can show its true strength when paired with skilled hunters, and that's how we're able to achieve so much," the Jeen hunter replied, bending down his massive frame to pat the dog on its flat head. "There are still a lot of different opinions regarding the Fa clan's actions. But there isn't a single hunter among us who would refuse to make use of these hunting dogs. I would like to get ahold of more of them, no matter what it takes."

"Yeah. Even when we split up today, we clearly had too many hunters for one dog. With one hunting dog for every five hunters or so, we would be safer than ever before, and able to hunt so many more giba." The Dana and Havira hunters all heartily nodded along. Then they all glanced at Raielfam Sudra. "And you Sudra hunters. During the next hunt, other men from our clans will be joining you, so we likely won't meet again for some time...but I would very much like to share a drink with you someday."

"Agreed. We'll be looking forward to that day as well."

The Dana and Havira hunters had been subordinates of the Suun not that long ago, and had previously despised the Sudra. However, back then, they had only ever seen one another at the clan head meetings. It was the sentiment that they were expressing today that represented their true feelings, now that they had gone into the forest together. That was what Raielfam Sudra believed.

"Our next visit to the Suun settlement will be five days from now. I wish you good health until then," the blunt Jeen hunter said. After returning the farewell, Raielfam Sudra boarded the wagon his clan had borrowed.

On the way back, Cheem Sudra sat in the driver's seat. Inside the wagon, there were a large number of wooden boxes piled up. Since the Sudra were more interested in the meat than anything else, they had been given a larger portion of it in exchange for letting the others take all of the horns, tusks, and pelts. Half of the giba had

been bloodlet properly and their meat was suitable for being sold.

"The Suun clan isn't allowed to sell meat directly to the Fa clan, right? It was the previous clan head, Zuuro Suun, who was opposed to the Fa's actions, so that's pretty unfortunate," the one young man stated, and Raielfam Sudra shrugged in response.

"They all acknowledged Zuuro Suun as their clan head, so there's no helping that. And if they need new blades or medicine, they can use the reward money from the castle town for that. They can even hunt on their own at this point, so they shouldn't be wanting for anything."

"Yes, they're a lot better off than we were up until last year," the older man interjected. He was around the same age as Raielfam Sudra, who was now forty-two. They had lived through the same bad times and had seen the same things. He and the younger man were father and son, and had formerly been part of the Meema. "But for the last ten years, they were forced to live under even worse conditions than we were. We were poorer than any other clan and faced countless tragedies, but we cared for our clan members and lived with pride, so we must have been much happier than they were, given how they were ordered to cast aside their pride and pillage the fruits of the forest," the man said, his eyes narrowing as he looked nostalgic. "I am so glad that you were our clan head, Raielfam Sudra, and not Zuuro Suun. And I'm sure that the souls of our relatives who have returned to the forest are relieved that things have turned out like this."

"But that is all because we encountered the Fa clan."

"Yet you were the one to form a proper bond with the Fa, clan head Raielfam. Without you, the Sudra would never have been able to take hold of the happiness we now enjoy."

That's not true, Raielfam Sudra thought to himself. He had only been able to bring that happiness to eight of his clan members. When he thought about the souls who had been lost over the course of the more than twenty years he had served as clan head, his heart ached. *But that is precisely why I must show those who remain the proper path forward. Otherwise, there will be no point to one as pathetic as me having become clan head.*

After that, the young man and Cheem Sudra up in the driver's seat chatted casually with one another. Naturally, the main topic of discussion was the fast-approaching festival of the hunt and the planned marriage with the Ran. And since a Sudra woman was also supposed to marry into the Fou soon as well, they had plenty of things to discuss.

Their surroundings were starting to grow dark as they approached the Sudra settlement, at which point Cheem Sudra said, "Hey, there seems to be a bit of a commotion around our house. Are those...Fou women?"

"Hmm? Did they come to pick up meat to be sold in town?"

"No, this doesn't look like anything so routine."

A sense of unease filled Raielfam Sudra's chest, and his heart started beating faster. He didn't know why, but for some reason the imagery from that morning's nightmare flashed through his mind.

As he leaned forward out of the wagon next to the driver's seat, he saw women heading in and out of the path to the Sudra settlement. This was clearly some sort of emergency.

"Hey, what in the world is going on?!" Cheem Sudra called out to a woman as she was stepping out onto the main path, leaving to head somewhere else.

The Fou women turned their way, her face pale. "Ah, so you've returned from the Suun settlement? Please, hurry back home."

"We will, but what's going on?"

"Well, you see...Li Sudra has gone into labor."

"What?!" Raielfam Sudra exclaimed, seriously astounded. "That can't be... There was supposed to be half a month or even twenty days left until our child was to be born. So why...?"

"We don't know. But the Fou and Ran women have gathered in order to look after Li Sudra."

Raielfam Sudra leaped down from the wagon and took off running toward the house.

There was a crowd gathered out front. Most of them were women, but Baadu Fou and the Ran clan head were also there.

"Baadu Fou, what in the world is going on?!" Raielfam Sudra asked, practically tackling the clan head as he grabbed ahold of the

tall man.

Baadu Fou stared down at him with a tense expression. "Apparently, Li Sudra went into labor shortly after you departed for the Suun settlement. My wife and all the women who have experience with birthing children have gathered to assist her."

And then, anguished panting sounded out from inside the house, almost like a drawn-out scream. Raielfam Sudra had never heard his wife make such sounds. As he tried to head toward the entrance to his home, though, Baadu Fou firmly grasped his shoulder.

"It is customary that men are not to approach until the child is born. You should stay here and pray to the forest for your child to be born safely."

"But Li has never suffered this much from giving birth before! She was just fine this morning, so why is this happening?!"

"I do not know either."

"She hasn't been suffering from starvation this time! Li's stomach is larger than it has ever been, and the child inside of her was moving about healthily! So why...?" As Raielfam Sudra clung to Baadu Fou's chest, he shouted out passionately, "The other women said that the birth should go just fine too! Why?! Is the mother forest going to steal a third child away from me?!"

"Calm yourself, Raielfam Sudra. The forest would never abandon us; we are its children."

"But we have been abandoned by the forest again and again!"

Raielfam Sudra's knees started trembling. An incredibly strong feeling of anxiety and fear enveloped his small figure. He could sense the dead surrounding him and giving him regretful looks.

"Raielfam Sudra!" a young man's voice shouted out. Still clinging to Baadu Fou's chest, the clan head slowly turned in that direction. And when he did, he saw a pale young man and a woman with a sword hop down from a wagon and come running over. "We just heard from one of the Fou woman. Li Sudra went into labor sooner than expected, right?"

It was none other than Asuta and Ai Fa of the Fa clan. Ai Fa's blue eyes were shining intensely, and Asuta's brow was furrowed. He looked terribly worried. "I'm sure Li Sudra will be fine," he said. "I

know it's difficult, but please try your best to hang in there, Raielfam Sudra."

Asuta's hand was now covering one of Raielfam Sudra's own, which was still grasping Baadu Fou's chest. His fingers were slender like those of a woman, and very warm. And so, Raielfam Sudra let go of Baadu Fou and clasped his friend's hands instead.

"Thanks to you, Asuta, Li and the child inside of her have been healthy. I believed I would finally be able to greet my child without worry, so why is something like this happening?"

"I don't know much about childbirth myself. Is it rare for a child to be born half a month early?" Asuta asked someone else.

One of the women who was standing around replied, "It is unusual, but by no means unheard of. From what I'm told, I myself was born ten days sooner than expected."

"I see. Then I'm sure Li Sudra will be just fine too. With this many people praying for things to go well, I'm sure the mother forest will show mercy."

Raielfam Sudra half absentmindedly glanced around. Baadu Fou and the Ran clan head, the Fou and Ran women, Ai Fa, Toor Deen, Yun Sudra, Cheem Sudra, and the others who had been in the wagon were all gathered around them with serious looks on their faces.

"My apologies, clan head. We were examining new ingredients at the Ruu settlement today, so I was late getting back home," Yun Sudra said, stepping forward with tears in her eyes. Apparently, she had been riding in the same wagon as Asuta. "I'm certain Li and your child will be fine. We'll finally have a healthy baby born to the Sudra clan. Let's choose to believe in that."

"Yes... Yes, I know..." Raielfam Sudra said, letting go of Asuta's hands and turning back toward Baadu Fou. "My apologies for losing control... I am grateful for the assistance of the Fou and Ran."

"We are relatives, and also fellow people of the forest's edge. Let us pray together for the safety of Li Sudra and your child," Baadu Fou said.

Raielfam Sudra gave a powerless nod, then sat down right beside the entrance to his home. From the other side of the door, he could

hear Li Sudra's endless pained cries. He had never heard her suffering so much, even during childbirth.

Why...? Our child has grown bigger than either of our previous ones, so has that increased the pain that Li is experiencing?

As a man, Raielfam Sudra knew that he would not be able to arrive at a clear answer to that question, no matter how hard he thought about it. And yet, despite forcing himself to accept that, the unease he felt seemed as if it would crush his heart. He had to steel himself so that he wouldn't fall down onto his hands and knees.

Mother forest, please grant my wife and child mercy! You can take my life here and now! If I lose the two of them...I won't be able to survive it!

As he closed his eyes shut, terrifying images assaulted him. There was a swarm of the dead around him, just like in his nightmare. Raielfam Sudra could never bear the thought of Li Sudra and their latest child being added to those ranks.

His father and elder brother stood there, looking filled with regret. His mother's and younger sister's eyebrows were dropping sadly. The two young children he had lost, his brother's wife, the members of the branch houses, and the Meema... All of those he had lost over the past twenty years stood there surrounding Raielfam Sudra, pale and flickering.

Within the crowd, only one person was not a relative of his. It was the criminal who Raielfam Sudra had struck down. That middle-aged Suun hunter with gray hair and vacant eyes. Upon seeing the man, Raielfam Sudra's mind focused in on him with eerie clarity.

It couldn't be... Is this your curse...? I took the life of a fellow comrade from the forest's edge, even if he was a criminal, so is this the judgment that I face...? Raielfam Sudra began grinding his teeth. *But if I did not kill you, Asuta would have died! I could not possibly leave him to such a fate! If I have sinned, though, then kill me, not my wife and child!*

A light filled the dead hunter's eyes. It was the same calm gaze he had looked at Asuta and Ai Fa with as he had been on the verge of death, breathing his last as they had watched over him. Raielfam Sudra had seen it himself over Asuta's shoulder. The man had been

howling like a mad beast mere moments before, but in his final instant he had shown them a gentle, terribly human expression. And when he had seen that, a terrible sense of guilt had filled Raielfam Sudra.

Did... Did I kill someone I should not have? Is someone as sinful as myself not even permitted to pray for the happiness of my wife and child?

Raielfam Sudra felt as if he was being dragged down into the depths of despair. But then, the dead hunter suddenly smiled. He seemed to be trying to say something... But just then, beyond the darkness, a crying baby's voice rang out like a flashing spark.

"Raielfam Sudra, your child has been born!" a voice called out as someone grabbed his shoulder and shook it vigorously. As he looked up in a bit of a daze, he found Baadu Fou staring down at him with delight.

The baby's cry was reverberating in his head. The sound seemed to echo so unnaturally, he couldn't help but wonder if it was real or not.

Asuta and Ai Fa were also there, leaning over Raielfam Sudra. There was a look of anticipation and worry on their faces.

And then, the door was opened from the inside.

"Come this way, Raielfam Sudra. You should enter alone first, as the father."

That was Baadu Fou's wife.

With Baadu Fou holding his hand to support him, Raielfam Sudra shakily rose to his feet. With the door open, the baby's crying sounded stranger still.

Feeling that something was wrong, that this wasn't normal, Raielfam Sudra passed through the entrance as if in a trance. There in the center of the main hall, a large mat had been spread out on the ground. It had been prepared for this very day, and Li Sudra was sitting on top of it. She was covered by a large sheet from the waist down, and a Ran woman was supporting her back.

In her hands, she held a bundle. The moment he saw that, the doubts and fears that had been welling up inside of Raielfam Sudra melted away.

Li Sudra was holding two small infants.

"It is rare for twins to be born, but your wife managed to deliver them both without any issues. This is why Li Sudra's stomach grew so big," Baadu Fou's wife said.

There seemed to be a number of other women there in the room, but Raielfam Sudra wasn't able to properly perceive them.

"Go ahead and hold them. Your children are waiting for their father."

His hands felt cold. Apparently, someone had cleaned them with water at some point.

Raielfam Sudra stepped forward, feeling as if he were floating through the air, and then knelt down beside his beloved wife. Li Sudra looked utterly exhausted, but she was also smiling more happily than he had ever seen her before.

"We've been waiting for you. Clan head, these are our children."

The two newborns were clad in white and crying heartily. The sounds were overlapping with one another, which was why they had seemed so strange to Raielfam Sudra before.

With trembling fingers, he reached out, and with assistance from Baadu Fou's wife, he cradled one of the infants in his arms.

The baby was so incredibly small. Perhaps even smaller than the infants that had been born to them in the past. But the baby's wrinkly face was noticeably less pale than those of their other children, and nice and plump as well.

"This is the first time any of our children have cried so heartily. They may be small, but I am sure they will grow big soon enough," Li Sudra whispered, passing the other infant to him. Sure enough, their other child was also wrinkly, round, and a healthy crier. "The one on your right is the elder sister, and on the left you have the younger brother. I believe the brother and sister from the main Zaza house are also twins, aren't they? I hope our children grow up to be people as fine as they are."

The twins kept on crying in Raielfam Sudra's hands. They were so small, yet they felt heavier than anything he could imagine. Their incredibly adorable little figures suddenly started to grow blurry. Tears had started flowing from his eyes.

Mother forest...I offer my deepest gratitude for your kindness.

Raielfam Sudra's tearstained face then turned toward the entrance.

"Asuta, Ai Fa, come look. These... These are my children."

"Congratulations, Raielfam and Li Sudra."

Asuta and Ai Fa were now standing in the entrance. Baadu Fou must have urged them to follow behind Raielfam Sudra, which he felt deeply grateful for.

"Asuta, Ai Fa, I wish for you to hold these children as well."

"Huh? But we...well, we don't really know how to hold babies properly," Asuta said.

"Please. Without your aid, they never would have been born."

"I-I really don't think that's true..."

Asuta and Ai Fa both looked hesitant, but the women guided them inside. After their hands were cleansed, Raielfam Sudra handed them the infants.

Asuta accepted the boy, and Ai Fa the girl. The babies kept on crying as loudly as ever all the while, causing Ai Fa's eyebrows to droop as she looked at a loss.

"They cry so loudly. The two of them will undoubtedly grow up healthy if this is how they are now."

"Yes, and this is all thanks to the two of you. We were only able to grasp the hope and joy we now have because we formed a bond with the Fa clan."

"Can we go ahead and hand them back, then? I feel a chill running up my spine when I think about what would happen if I dropped her," Ai Fa said. Then she turned toward Asuta, and her expression changed to one of astonishment. "Once again, I have to ask why you're crying. As a man, how weak can your spirit possibly be?"

"Hey, there's no helping it," Asuta said with an emotional smile as he cried as intensely as Raielfam Sudra was. "Raielfam Sudra, Li Sudra, seriously, congratulations. I want to give you and these two children my blessing with all my heart."

"Yes, thank you very much," Li Sudra said. "Asuta and Ai Fa, as our clan head said, the happiness we feel today is all thanks to the

two of you."

"No, not at all. This is the end result of how the Sudra have continued to walk the proper path forward instead of giving in to the difficulties you've faced," Asuta replied, his tears still constantly flowing.

As he looked at the young man, Raielfam Sudra started crying again as well. "And I wish to make sure that the Sudra will continue down the proper path from here on out alongside the Fa. I have no idea when I may perish out in the forest, but I hope that the two of you will continue to watch over these children."

"What are you saying? You told me before that you won't die until you see them grow into proper adults, right? You need to keep living for a long time yet so you can watch over them yourself, Raielfam Sudra," Asuta said with a terribly warm smile as he held that small infant in his arms. "And you should watch over them as they get married and have your grandchildren too. I'm sure you'll feel as much joy as you do now if you live to see all of that happen."

"Indeed. The Ruu clan elder is still doing well at the age of eighty-six. You have led the Sudra with incredible strength, so I believe you have earned the right to experience that happiness," Ai Fa added with a gentle look on her face.

As he snuggled up close to Li Sudra, Raielfam Sudra nodded and said, "Perhaps you are right. It is all down to the will of the forest, and yet...I hope to keep on living alongside these children, my precious family, and you who I call friends as we walk down the proper path forward together."

"Absolutely. Here's to many years to come," Asuta said as he and Ai Fa handed the infants back. Li Sudra took their daughter while Raielfam Sudra cradled their son.

Feeling unbelievable joy wash over him, Raielfam Sudra offered up a prayer to the dead.

I shall never forget you all, until the very moment my soul returns to the forest. But until then, I will live my life alongside these children. Please, watch over us.

Naturally, no one replied. But even so, Raielfam Sudra no longer suffered from worries and terror.

The two young children kept on crying loudly, surrounded by the loving gazes of the people who cared for them.

Afterword

Thank you so much for picking up this book, the twenty-ninth volume of *Cooking with Wild Game*.

In this volume, Asuta celebrates the one-year anniversary of his arrival at the forest's edge. It took three whole years to reach this part originally, and it has been over seven years since this series started being published. I wish to offer my deepest thanks to all of you readers who have followed me this long.

The next volume will be number thirty. I personally consider this story to be divided into the Conspiracy Arc—which encompassed the events involving the Suun clan and the house of Turan, and lasted from volume one to volume thirteen—and the Development arc—which stretched from volume fourteen to volume twenty-nine. Asuta's birthday acts as something of a dividing line, so the next volume kicks off a new Upheaval Arc.

Naturally, delicious food and interactions between people will remain at the core of the series, but the story will shift greatly in other ways moving forward, and we will probe deeper into the world of the Amusehorn continent. I hope that you will continue to follow me on this journey for a long time yet.

This is a bit of an aside, but I wrote the contents of this volume around the time of the third anniversary of the web version, so I held a character popularity poll and sent out a survey to find out which characters people wanted to see as the stars of the Group Performance stories. This is the same kind of poll that was published in the afterwords of volumes thirteen and twenty-two. And I happen to have a little space to spare here, so I would like to show you the results.

-Popularity Poll
First: Ai Fa

Second: Ludo Ruu
Third: Toor Deen
Fourth: Asuta
Fifth: Raielfam Sudra
Sixth (Tied): Shumiral
Sixth (Tied): Dan Rutim
Eighth: Rimee Ruu
Ninth: Gazraan Rutim
Tenth: Sheera Ruu

-Group Performance Votes
First: Odifia
Second: Shumiral
Third (Tied): Toor Deen
Third (Tied): Raielfam Sudra

So there you have it.

Ai Fa and Ludo Ruu managed to take first and second three years in a row, but after two years in third, Dan Rutim lost that spot to Toor Deen. It's also amusing how Asuta took fourth three years in a row.

As for the Group Performances, this volume's "The Girl from the Castle and the Girl from the Forest's Edge" stars Odifia, while "The Past and the Future" centers on Raielfam Sudra, and Shumiral took the lead in last volume's "Two People on a Rainy Day." As for stories centered on Toor Deen, I believe I shall continue to provide those here and there.

Looking at the results above, you can see that Toor Deen and Odifia grew a lot more popular in this period, as did Raielfam Sudra. The adorable little girls are one thing, but I'm quite grateful that a wrinkly guy like Raielfam Sudra was able to earn so much love.

I'm rather fond of Raielfam Sudra myself, so I very much enjoyed getting to write that Group Performance story. Among all the countless episodes I've written, it still leaves an especially strong impression upon me, and I hope that all of you will feel the same way.

Furthermore, despite the massive number of characters who appear throughout the story, there really aren't many who are disliked. It makes me very happy to see your affection for both the characters who made it into the rankings and those who didn't.

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!

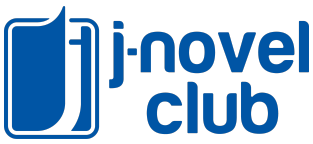
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