
5
Author: Fuurou
Artist: Yuki Nekozuki
So You Want to Live the SLOW LIFE?
A Guide to Life in the Beastly Wilds

Table of Contents

Copyright
Character Page
Warehouse Shelves
More Plum Work
One Ordinary Evening
A Peaceful Routine Life
Kon’s Marriage Interview
???? ????
The Criminal Law System of the Wilds
Stories from Days Gone by
The Arrival of Summer
Ten Days Later
Afterword
Other Series

So You Want to Live the Slow Life? A Guide to Life in the Beastly Wilds, Volume 5
Fuurou

Translation by Zihan Gao

Illustration by Yuki Nekozuki
Title Design by Arbash Mughal
Editing by Charis Messier
Proofreading by A.M. Perrone

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So You Want to Live the Slow Life? A Guide to Life in the Beastly Wilds, Volume 5

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Warehouse Shelves

AFTER we polished off our umeboshi pulp pizza, I saw Techi off as she headed back to work. Then, once I was done brushing my teeth and doing the dishes, with Kon by my side, I made my way to the warehouse next to the house. I'd been adding an assortment of food into the warehouse fridge and freezer units periodically—well, more like whenever something came up—and accordingly, the area should have gotten somewhat dirty, so we were going to work on that.

Since the warehouse, fridge, and freezer units were used for food storage, hygiene was of the essence. With Kon as my trusty assistant, I carefully worked through the warehouse so that I wouldn't miss even a tiny spot. After dealing with visible debris, I also disinfected exposed surfaces with an alcohol spray as the finishing touch.

Rinse, repeat, recycle.

After roughly two entire hours, we finally finished most of what I'd set out to do, and I let out a sigh of satisfaction and relief. But the next moment, Kon, who'd advanced into an area with rows of shelves that were at a slight distance from the fridge area, let out an "Ah!" of surprise. He darted over to the shelves with his tiny feet.

Looks like the cat is finally out of the bag, I thought as I chased after him. Kon charged ahead like a miniature rocket until he reached the deepest part of the shelves area—a block alongside the warehouse wall. He nimbly scaled up the shelf ledges before coming to a stop next to four preserve jars and staring unblinkingly at them.

"I know what these are!" he cried, pointing at those jars. "I can smell them! They're confit, right?! *Right?!*"

I gazed at the preserve jars, which each had labels listing their date of preparation, the ingredients used, as well as a general flavor profile. "Yep. Got it in one. They're confits. I don't know whether it's accurate, but I read that confits become even tastier after you age them, so I decided to try it out. And well, I've got such a magnificent warehouse in my backyard—I figured I might as well use it, so I lined them on the shelf."

When Gramps had been alive, the shelves in the warehouse had been jam-packed with preserve jars and pots. All of them had hidden some kind of delicious treat within, creating an awe-inspiring, diverse collection of preserves like a treasure trove. Even now, the spectacular sight was etched in my memory.

One day, I wanted to revive that stunning scene. That said, I hadn't made much progress on the empty shelves so far because the preserves I'd made either didn't have too long of a shelf life or weren't at a standard I was satisfied with—until I'd made the confits a while ago. The confits had turned out to be a huge success that excelled in both taste and preservation, and it had been a beautiful day when they'd become the very first preserves to line up on the shelves.

"Let's see. Ohhh!" Kon scanned the labels on the jars. "You made them on the same day, but you changed up the seasoning a bit for each one, huh? There's different herbs, there's different amounts of salt… Ah, there's even one with soy sauce!" He then turned around to face me and gave me a big, sunny grin.

Kon had likely witnessed that spectacular scene and enjoyed Gramps's little treasures as well. I didn't know whether his eagerness to see the shelves return to their former glory was just as profound as mine, but he must have wished for it somewhere within his heart, which probably led to such a brilliant smile.

I returned with a smile of my own as I said, "I think the next preserves to line the shelves are umeboshi. After that, hmm… Fruits preserved in syrup sounds like a nice idea."

Hearing that, his smile widened even more. But then, the next moment, he tilted his head adorably and asked, "You're not gonna put up any jam?"

I hummed in thought. "The thing is, I've never made jam for storage at room temperature, at least not yet. It's apparently not too complicated—I only have to use more sugar, sterilize the bottles properly, and make a vacuum seal." I shrugged. "But I usually store my homemade jam in the fridge, so it's a bit intimidating to suddenly start doing something else. That's why I'm thinking of experimenting a little when I have time by buying tiny preserve jars and filling them

with only a smidgen of jam. If I make a giant batch right off the bat and it grows moldy, it'd be really wasteful."

"I see!" Kon chirped. "So there'll be confits, umeboshi, fruits in syrup, plus jam on the shelves! Sounds like it'd be colorful and pretty." Then, he frowned slightly. "But that's not a lot. Most of the shelves will still be empty."

"Ah, well… Yeah. If I succeed and make jam that can be stored here, I suppose making lots and lots of jam with all kinds of fruits is an option, but I'll still reach a limit eventually. Plus, making food that I haven't got plans of eating isn't really the best thing to do…" I mulled over it. "I could put up the amount of jam that I'm going to eat within the year and renew the selection annually. But in that case, the best I can do is fill one row, and that's me being optimistic."

I continued, "Likewise, I could make a collection of confits with different types of meat, but I'd run into the same problems… Sheesh, how in the world did Gramps manage to fill up these big shelves to the brim?"

Kon and I did a turn, looking over the shelves that lined up within the warehouse. The structure of the warehouse was something like this: one section was a plain storage area, while another section was dedicated to the fridge and freezer units. Walls separated these two sections, and the current area we were in was somewhat like an aisle sandwiched between two walls. On both sides of this aisle were rows of shelves, and each shelf generally had three tiers—top, middle, and bottom. *Okay, so if I want to fill all these shelves with jars and pots… How many dozens of jars and pots will I need? Maybe even hundreds?*

Simply purchasing these vessels would already be challenging enough, not to mention making the preserves that would fill them. Stocking up all these shelves wasn't going to be a one-year or two-year project—it would take way longer than that, perhaps five years or even ten years.

Crossing my arms, I began contemplating the problem seriously. "If I simply wanted to occupy the space itself, it'd be a piece of cake, but the problem is that I've got to think about shelf

lives too. Let's see, what I want are preserves that can be stored in room temperature like this warehouse… They have to be simple enough for an amateur to make, and if possible, I'd prefer the preservation process to actually contribute to the food somehow, like how confits become more flavorful as you age it…" I sighed. "Finding recipes that fit the bill isn't going to be easy."

As I spoke, I sifted through my memories and recalled the types of preserves I'd eaten with Gramps during my childhood. If I remembered correctly, most of it had been tsukemono—Japanese pickles. Specifically, *Shiozuke*, preserves pickled in salt, *misozuke*, food preserved in miso, or *nukazuke*, food pickled in rice bran and brine.

Nukazuke… I've honestly been reluctant about testing it since managing the rice bran mixture sounds quite demanding, but if I'm determined to pack these shelves until they're full, it's something I've got to tackle one way or another.

What else did we eat? Jam, fruits in syrup, and pure syrup… Hmm… I'm pretty sure we've enjoyed a big variety of things, but the details just aren't coming to me. I sighed.

During the Great Disaster, we should have only eaten preserves for a significantly long time, and we'd polished off the majority of the preserves decorating these shelves. But for some reason, my mind was drawing a complete blank when I tried to pull up the details in the memories from the time. Instead, one question after another flashed through my mind. What kind of food had been placed on these shelves? What had Gramps been doing in this place? What kind of preserves had he made?

I was deep in thought as I walked down the aisle sandwiched between shelves, reaching out to gently caress the shelves and sniffing the cocktail of scents that lingered on them.

Though I was making sure to clean them regularly, the many years of use meant that they had absorbed a diverse assortment of scents in every nook and cranny. I could detect the faint hints of seasoning such as salt and miso. Possibly mimicking me, Kon hopped all over the shelves and had whiffs wherever he went.

The two of us continued our scent tour as we walked forward until we reached a certain shelf near the warehouse entrance. A distinct, pungent odor stung my nose. Realization dawned upon us immediately, and we exchanged knowing glances.

It was both an astringent and familiar scent—a distinct smell I had to put up with whether I wanted to or not after I'd become a working adult. Indeed, it was the smell of alcohol.

Both of us let out an "Ahh" of realization in sync.

"Come to think of it, Gramps had a fondness for alcohol," I muttered. "I see, so he lined up his homemade drinks here."

"Grampa Tommi was almost drinking every single day, so that makes sense." Kon nodded. "The smell on him was super strong at night."

My adventures at Gramps's house were during my childhood, and Kon was a child even now. I'd never tasted the alcohol on the shelves personally, and Gramps had never given me the details about what kind of drinks they were. However, considering the potent and widespread smell of alcohol, I had a good guess about how extensive his collection had been.

For a while after that, Kon and I were enveloped by that scent as we shared nostalgic stories about Gramps, talking animatedly as we reminisced upon those wonderful days.

TODAY, I'd made a new discovery: Gramps had made alcoholic drinks as a hobby. But I highly doubted he'd made his drinks completely from scratch. If you wanted to make delectable alcoholic drinks, you needed the proper equipment, and the process—such as fermentation—was demanding too. Even if he'd made his own drinks, they probably hadn't been anything too complicated, such as making fruit liqueur by pickling fruits in alcohol, with *ume* liqueur being a prime example.

Since this was the Beastly Wilds, an autonomous region, he could disregard the Japanese Liquor Tax Act—which prohibited certain types of homemade alcoholic drinks unless you had a license

—to a certain extent, messing about without the necessary expertise would only lead to problems such as sabotaging his own health. Furthermore, since he hadn't left behind the necessary tools or facilities, it was evident that he hadn't gone down that rabbit hole.

Knowing that, Gramps must have crammed the shelves in this immediate area—actually, the shelves in a rather large area—with fruit liqueur and the like. *Seriously, I can't even imagine how many types of alcohol he made and collected.*

When it comes to fruit liqueur, the most famous ones in Japan are probably ume liqueur, yuzu liqueur, and lemon liqueur. But of course, that's only the tip of the iceberg—you can use lingonberry, apples, pineapples, strawberries, apricots, sumomo plums, Chinese quinces, mulberries, hardy kiwi, Japanese rowan berries, cherries, goji berries, and so on… Huh, now that I think about it, you're more than spoiled for choice.

Other than that, there are a few variants that you can't quite call fruit liqueur. Examples of some other things you can preserve in alcohol are: sesame seeds, black soybeans, Japanese pepper, ginger, shiitake mushrooms, mint, aloe vera leaves, and garlic.

I knew Gramps well enough to conclude that he'd likely binged on these types of liqueur, using the fact that they were apparently beneficial for your health as an excuse.

A voice pulled me back to reality from my lengthy thought process. "Are you gonna make *alco-hall* too, Mikura?" Kon, who'd sat cutely on one shelf, asked me.

"Well…" I muttered as I fell deep into thought again. After a moment of silence, I found my answer. "Nah, I don't think I will. I *am* a casual drinker, and I don't dislike alcohol or anything, but I don't love it enough to make it for myself. If everyone wants to have some, I don't mind dabbling in some ume liqueur. That said, when I consider Techi's preferences and the drinking tendencies of the rest of the beastfolk, I kind of feel like they'll prefer the beer that's available in the supermarket. Especially since they *love* meat."

Kon hummed. "Oh, you're meant to pair meat with beer? I see… You're not gonna make them…" He sounded somewhat

disappointed. "I've never had any, but ume liqueur smells really sweet, and I liked the scent."

I nodded. "Yeah, it's a sweet alcoholic drink, so the smell would probably have a sweet hint if you've got a good nose. Ah, actually, I think I mentioned I'm planning on making some plum syrup. Mixing the right amount with some sparkling water will make a squash that tastes somewhat like ume liqueur. In the old days, this kind of plum squash was even available in stores. It was a delicious drink that even had sugary sweet pickled plums suspended inside."

Kon's eyes lit up. "Sweet plums? Like jam? And you put that inside your squash? Whoa… I'm a bit curious what it tastes like." He looked up at me with large, innocent eyes.

The last time I'd mentioned plum syrup to him, he hadn't been all that interested. In fact, he'd mentioned that jam was his jam, leaving all thoughts of syrup behind him. But now, plum syrup had belatedly caught his eye—he hadn't managed to escape from its clutches after all.

I couldn't suppress a smile as I replied, "Don't you worry, I'll make sure to get to work on plum syrup one of these days. Once I'm finished, we could make squash for everyone to enjoy, savor it as sweet plum jelly, or even turn it into plum sherbet. I read somewhere that plum syrup is also good for refreshing yourself during the sweltering summer heat, so you might end up having it almost every single day once summer arrives."

Hearing that, Kon stopped looking at me with his pleading puppy-dog eyes, instead lifting his head and beaming brightly at me with elation. He then leaped down from the shelf, landed nimbly on his paws, then raced off into the distance. He made a beeline back to my house, as if ushering me to follow him.

Kon's attitude clearly conveyed his silent message: *Let's get started right away!* I couldn't suppress a chuckle, and I ran after him with a big smile. I got back home, washed my hands, then went into the kitchen.

Wasting no time, I reached out to the reusable shopping bag I'd left lying on the counter and fished out the bag of unripe green plums I'd sneakily purchased in advance. During this season, no

amount of plums in your inventory was enough—the more you had, the more little delicacies and preserves you could make from them. Even if you bought an enormous pile, none of it would go to waste, so I'd purchased some on my seafood shopping trip.

The first step in any recipe is to wash your ingredients. Wash and hull the plums. Thoroughly wipe moisture away with a tea towel. Once the unripe plums are ready, prepare the jars for your syrup.

While I was sterilizing the jar with alcohol, Kon called out to me. "Huh? You aren't going to soak them this time?"

My hands worked on autopilot as I replied, "Nope, not for syrup. I've read that there's no harm in doing it, but most of the recipes for plum syrup don't mention any soaking steps from what I've read. The soaking is to remove the astringent flavor, but leaving it in can be a nice addition too, depending on what you're making. When it isn't strictly necessary, I try to avoid removing the natural flavors when I can."

I continued as I finished meticulously sterilizing the jar, "So this time, I'm only going to wash the plums clean and hull them. I'll set aside the damaged ones for jam and use all the rest. Oh, and making plum syrup is a breeze, I think you could try it out too, Kon."

Tilt the jar at an angle and gently roll the plums inside. Of course, you're free to drop them directly from above, but your plums might deform or discolor as they knock against the glass. Personally, I also don't want to stick my hands into the sterilized jars because that'll contaminate it again, which led to this particular habit.

Once you've got a good number of plums in your jar, hold it upright again and gently guide the plums to form a horizontal layer. Make sure there aren't any gaps. Next, roll in rock candy until you form a layer of rock candy on top of the plum layer. Pile another layer of plums above that. Rinse and repeat to create alternating layers of plums and rock candy. When your jar is full or your plums run out, shut the lid tightly.

The moment I finished sealing the jar, I began tidying up. Seeing that, Kon blinked in confusion. "Huh? That's it?"

As I cleaned, I nodded. "Yep, it's that simple. After this, I only have to tilt and rotate the bottle two or three times every day so that the sweet liquid that forms doesn't get all clumped in one place. During this step, make sure you've got an even spread of the liquid throughout the bottle. After roughly ten days, you'll have your syrup in the bottle. From there, you let it sit in a cool, dark place and wait until it ages." I paused. "Approximately a month and a half later, your delectable syrup will be ready for you to enjoy."

Kon's eyes widened. "*A month and a half*?! We've got to wait that long?! Aw, plums take way too long for everything! First umeboshi, now this!"

I chuckled merrily. "I mean, I get where you're coming from, but sometimes, patience is necessary if you want the tastiest food possible. Well, I suppose if you're really desperate to have it right away, you *could* choose to enjoy it early at the ten-day mark—at the point when the syrup hasn't fully aged yet.

Remembering something, I added, "Ah, when your syrup's fully aged after a month and a half, make sure to scoop out the plums with a ladle or a spoon and store them in a separate container. Leaving them inside the syrup for too long can sometimes give the syrup an unpleasant and harsh hint, which will kind of ruin it."

Once I finished my lecture, Kon approached the jar filled with plums and rock candy. He stared at the contents unblinkingly. His gaze was intense. And then, he looked through the glass, drilling a hole into me with his intent stare. His features, warped and magnified by the angle of the glass, protested that he definitely couldn't wait an entire month and two weeks—ten days was the limit.



I burst out laughing in spite of myself at his expression and relented. “Okay, if you insist. Let’s enjoy a teeny tiny bit ten days later as a ‘taste test,’ how about that?”

More Plum Work

KON was still extremely eager for plum syrup, and I tried to persuade him in every way possible to wait out the initial ten days, though I wasn't having much luck. And that was when Kon's ears perked up.

Some kind of sound must have gotten his attention, because he began looking over in the direction of the warehouse. My interest was piqued as well, and I walked over to discover that someone was standing at the entrance. He stood in front of the dazzling sunlight and crossed his arms firmly, looking as if he was trying to show off. Though I couldn't make out his face since he was standing with his back against the bright backdrop, judging by his trousers and his silhouette, it was clearly Rei.

I called out to him. "What are you doing in a place like that?"

"Heh," he let out a clipped chuckle before raising his right hand and showing me the small preserve jar he held.

After inspecting the color of the liquid within, I blinked in surprise. "Wait, is that plum syrup by any chance? How could you have such good timing every time?"

Rei puffed out his chest with pride until he was practically facing the sky and cackled meaningfully. As he approached me, he said, "After our plum shopping trip, I ended up organizing the shelf with plum products in my *pâtisserie* and discovered this little guy—one unopened jar of plum syrup I made last year. I might have completely forgotten about it somehow. It's over a year old, so there's no way I could use it in the desserts for my shop, but it'd be a waste to chuck it out too. And I figured, hey, why not give it to the guy who loves preserves? That's why I'm here."

As he spoke, he gingerly handed the jar over to Kon, who accepted it carefully with both hands. The boy's eyes were practically glowing as he gazed at the almost transparent liquid with the faintest hint of honey gold, a color left behind by the unripe plums.

Rei then explained, "I sealed it properly after removing the plums, so there shouldn't be any bitterness or harshness. Plus, it's only been a single year, which means it shouldn't have lost too much flavor." He shrugged. "I can't use it in my shop, but it should be perfectly good for enjoying at home. Feel free to use it as you please. And, uh, actually I'm craving some sweet, sweet plum soda right now, so would you mind making a glass or two for me?"

Grinning, I nodded. "Right away."

I returned to the kitchen, washed my hands once again, and donned the apron. I was ready to get to work in the kitchen.

Plum squash and plum soda are effortless recipes. Chill water or sparkling water in the fridge, or add ice. Add an amount of plum syrup to taste. Give it a stir, and now, you've got a tasty drink. If you've got plums preserved in syrup—the plums you take out at the ten-day mark—you could throw that in as well, though it's optional.

In my case, I had sparkling water ready in the fridge, which I poured into three cups. For aesthetic purposes, I also added two or three ice cubes to each. After a taste test of the plum syrup, I poured a suitable amount into each cup before slowly mixing them with a swizzle stick.

My report for my taste test was as follows: the syrup was incredible, as you would expect from a professional *pâtissier.* He'd likely used high-quality rock candy, because the sweetness was silky and mellow. I concluded that if I added it to sparkling water to make plum soda, there would be no astringent or jarring taste at all, resulting in a refreshing drink that you could finish in one go.

You can add a twist to your recipe, of course, such as making it a sour cocktail by adding a small amount of salted plum juice or vinegar, mixing in a bit of grated ginger to give it a ginger ale-like flavor, or even mixing in tomato juice to make a gazpacho-style cocktail. But for this time, I think simple is best. Let's go with a normal plum soda.

When I was done, I put the cups on a tray and carried it over into the living room. There, the excited Kon was sitting on his knees restlessly, while Rei looked like he was right at home, sitting leisurely with his legs spread wide apart. I gently put down the tray in front

of them before settling down on my own seat and taking my own cup into my hands.

I took a sip. *Yum.* The taste was what I'd anticipated—a beautiful blend of sweet and sour, coupled with the refreshing taste of cool carbonated water. It was both homely and sophisticated at the same time.

Kon was next. When he took a sip, he gasped. "Whoa! It's not as sour as I thought! This is good! It's *really* good!"

Last but not least, Rei tried his drink. "Yeah, I was right. It's only been one year, so it hasn't lost any flavor. Not bad at all."

I addressed Kon first. "You use more sugar in plum syrup than in jam, which gives it a nice balance between sweet and sour that's easier to enjoy. But well, also because it's got more sugar, you'll be in trouble if you don't dilute it first. When you drink this on a hot day or when you're sweaty from exercise, it practically washes away your fatigue, and you feel like you can take on the world again." I paused, turning to Rei. "By the way, Rei, I think plum syrup should stay good even after two or three years."

"Huuuh!" Kon exclaimed. "I can't wait until it starts getting hot in summer!"

Smiling, Rei replied, "I mean, yeah, that's probably the case for taste. Still, my personal policy is that if I'm making something for my customers, I want to use the freshest syrup possible, preferably the stuff I made in the same year. There's no scientific research backing it up, but there's a saying that the physical condition of both people and animals adjusts depending on the weather that year. Your entire body changes to accommodate it. To add to that, some people also say that the fruits and vegetables grown in the same climate within the same year are better for your bodies.

Shrugging, he continued, "I don't know how much truth there is in these statements, but I feel like they make a bit of sense in my mind? And knowing that, I kind of want to take that into consideration when I can, even if it might not mean anything."

Rei's fixation probably stemmed from his professionalism and pride as a *pâtissier.* In that case, it would be tactless of me to continue explaining my side of the argument, so I held my tongue.

After a moment of silence, I looked over at the kitchen and spoke up. "That's interesting… Hmm, with how tasty your syrup is, I feel like we can enjoy it in a lot of other types of drinks and food. It will definitely be nice as a sherbet or in gelatin desserts… Oh, mixing it with yogurt could be delicious too. Other than that… A *shiratama* dango fruit punch would be a lovely combination to experiment with. If we use summer fruits like watermelons, it should become a light and refreshing dessert that's perfect in the heat."

At one point, I wasn't quite talking to anyone specific, but more voicing my honest thought process out aloud. However, after hearing my ramble, both Kon and Rei gained a glint in their eyes. Kon's glint was a ravenous one of a glutton. Meanwhile, Rei's glint was an interested one of a professional in the field, as if to say, "I never realized those were options!" They both stared intently at me, as if they were silently requesting me to make some on the spot.

I felt a wry smile creeping onto my lips. *Uh, Rei, you're the pro out of the two of us, so I think you should be the chef instead. Oh well.*

Either way, no matter which they wanted me to make, I didn't have the supplies nor the time right now. And so, I placated them with this reply. "Maybe next time. I don't mind taking requests when I've got the time and ingredients."

REI left with the words, "Don't say a vague time like next time, let's get right to the fun tomorrow!"

Once he returned home, Kon and I both made our way to the kitchen, racking our brains for ideas about what we should do with the leftover plum syrup for tomorrow. What I wanted to eat most—what I wanted to *make* most—was jello, but plum jello without plum pulp or plums inside had no soul in my opinion. Ideally, you'd want the delectable plums that had gotten soft and sweet after being preserved in syrup—the type you'd soak in plum liqueur. Without it, plum jello wouldn't be plum jello, and I was extremely reluctant about making it.

For a while, I wrestled with this conundrum in my head and eventually decided that I'd make jello after my homemade syrup and plums were ready.

Which meant that fruit punch was my next best option, but honestly, it was such a simple recipe that I didn't even need preparations ahead of time. Cut fruits, pour on sparkling water, and drizzle on plum syrup to preference. Done. If I wanted to add shiratama dango, I would have to prepare that, but it was also something you'd want to make just before you eat it. Making it now in preparation for our plum syrup party tomorrow wouldn't make sense.

Even with plum syrup and yogurt, you only had to mix the two. There honestly wasn't much to do. *So…*

"In that case, I guess the only thing I can think of is *noshi ume*…" I muttered out loud subconsciously as I thought long and hard about our options.

Kon didn't miss it. He was sitting in his usual chair as he tilted his head and asked, "What's noshi ume?"

I blinked. "Hm? You don't know it? Well, noshi ume is a kind of traditional Japanese confectionery, and it's like…" I searched for the right words. "Thin and flat slices of plum jello? Well, technically it's not jello, but it's something similar… Oh, I got it, you can think of it as a plum syrup version of yōkan. Normally, yōkan is made with red bean paste, agar, and sugar, but you replace the red bean with the syrup for noshi ume."

It seemed that he still couldn't picture the confectionery after hearing my description, because Kon inclined his head even more in confusion. In fact, he was inclining his head so far that I was afraid he'd topple over.

I scratched my head sheepishly. "Ah, yeah, it can be a bit hard to imagine. Well, it's probably faster if you see it for yourself, so I'll give it a go."

Wasting no time, I dived into the preparations immediately.

Noshi ume is a relatively simple recipe. Of course, if you want something that's as beautiful and mouthwatering as the ones you see in a store, you'll need the skills of a professional. But if all you

want is relatively good taste and appearance, the bar isn't all that high.

First, prepare agar powder to thicken your mixture. You have the option of starting from agar sticks, but it's relatively complicated to use because you have to rehydrate it, simmer it, and skim the scum. Using the agar powder readily available on the market will save you a lot of trouble, which is what I do.

Fill a pot with water and heat until it boils. Add agar powder and mix well. Do note that you have to mix very well during this step—you could even use a whisk.

I was the type of person who likes taking the easy path whenever I could, so I used a whisk to beat the mixture furiously in one go.

Add a small amount of sugar and mix well until it dissolves. Pour in the plum syrup. Turn to low heat and simmer. You'll want to simmer your mixture slowly and steadily for roughly ten minutes. Simmering brings out the distinct flavors of agar and the nice, chewy texture. Adjust the heat so that you don't evaporate too much water during this process.

Fetch another pot and slowly heat mizuame*—a Japanese sweetener made from starch—over low heat. Pour the plum syrup agar mixture into the melted mizuame. Stir thoroughly with a wooden spatula. Pour the resulting mixture into a mold—you'll want a confectionery mold with cuboid shapes, the type you'd use for yōkan. Chill the mixture in the fridge. Once it hardens, your sweet and sour noshi ume is ready to eat.*

You can also add a few touches to spice things up a bit. For example, when you pour the plum syrup into the sugary agar mixture, you can add in small plums or plum pulp. The sweetness in plain noshi ume can be slightly overpowering because you add sugar and mizuame, so the addition of plums will help balance it out for those who don't like your confectionery to be too sweet. I think agar and plum pulp have good chemistry together, because the plum also heightens the flavor with a wonderful aroma and gives it more complexity, so if you have the time and resources, this is a very nice optional step.

Though it is *a question of taste at the end of the day, so you should do whichever makes you happy. In fact, you could even make two batches of noshi ume—one with shredded plum and one without. Which is what I'm going to do this time.*

For those who want to cut down on the sweetness even more, you can opt to forgo the sugar you add to the agar in the beginning, or you can use less mizuame by adding a tiny bit of water to it.

My mind was going on a tangent, but my hands were still busy working. I was in the middle of pouring noshi ume with plum pulp into the second mold. Once I was finished, I placed it into the fridge as well.

There was still enough plum syrup left to make another small batch, but I had to save some for making fruit punch and yogurt tomorrow, so I decided to stop here.

I nodded to myself as I started cleanup. "All right, that's all for today. We just wait for the mixture to chill and harden, then cut them into thin slices. By the way, dusting some sugar on top of it after it's ready can add more texture, though it will become sweeter if you do."

Kon was swallowing his drool audibly as he cried, "Mikura, Mikura! That smelled amaaazing! It must be SO tasty! How long do I have to wait until it's ready?!"

I didn't think the smell of simmering agar was that appetizing, but it appeared that Kon felt differently. Possibly because of the sweet-and-sour aroma that had followed, he simply couldn't stop drooling, his stomach completely invested in this new confectionery.

Unfortunately, I had some cruel news for him. "Well, it'll probably take around two or three hours."

The beastchild was so shaken that he swallowed all the drool in his mouth and gaped at me with horror. He looked as if I told him the apocalypse was going to happen.

Slightly taken aback by his expression, I stammered, "U-Uh, that's the problem with things like jello and agar. They need time to harden. And hang on, we're supposed to eat this tomorrow, remember? We only ended up holding a plum syrup tasting party tomorrow because you and Rei were so insistent." I sighed. "It only

takes a couple of hours or so, so it'll be ready today, but what are we going to do for the party if you polish it off now?"

The horror on Kon's expression transformed into despair and profound grief. I'd never seen such a face on him before. His eyes grew moist with tears, but he still swallowed his complaints, not wanting to be selfish.

I could only raise a white flag of surrender in my heart. Hanging my head in defeat, I muttered, "W-Well, I guess you can have a few slices. Just a few slices should be fine. You've still got to wait for three hours though, just so you know. If you're too hasty, it's going to be all mushy, and it won't taste good. Bear with me for now, okay? Until then, let's look for things we can do in the meantime, like chores or some kind of entertainment. When you're focusing, a couple of hours goes by in the blink of an eye."

Though that was what I said, I knew that to children, several hours seemed like a much longer time than in the eyes of an adult. On top of that, he was waiting for a delectable dessert to be ready, which meant that it would feel excruciatingly slow. *That was a cruel statement to make,* I thought with chagrin. But waiting was our only option, so this was a trial Kon had to overcome.

A while after that, Kon and I kept our distance from the kitchen so that the fridge—and in extension, the noshi ume—was out of sight and out of mind.



AFTER three hours of cooling in the fridge, I was ready for the next step.

Remove mold from fridge. Run a knife along the edges of your noshi ume blocks to separate it from the mold. Turn the mold upside down on a chopping board and allow the noshi ume blocks to slide out smoothly.

The noshi ume blocks were translucent honey gold, the color of the plum syrup I'd used. Plum pulp was scattered throughout the blocks like petals fluttering in the twilight. It was a stunningly beautiful dessert.

"Wooow!" Kon exclaimed. "It's super pretty! So this is noshi ume, huh?!"

Smiling, I replied, "Technically, yes, but there's one more step necessary before it's official."

Taking the knife into my hand, I positioned the knife's edge ever-so-gently on the noshi ume block and pulled it backward in one quick and smooth motion. I sliced the noshi ume block as thinly as possible so that it would look like the noshi ume available in stores.

I didn't speak. I was even holding my breath as I fully concentrated on moving the knife.

Steadily, I worked through the noshi ume blocks, distributing them into the thinnest slices possible. After cutting up my last block, the noshi ume was officially ready to eat.

Letting out an exhale of relief, I began arranging the noshi ume slices onto a plate I'd prepared in advance. "The original noshi ume was made from agar jelly with added plum pulp. You rolled the jelly out and flattened it, and the Japanese word for that motion is '*nosu*,' which gave it its name noshi ume, 'rolled out plums.' From there, people have made all kinds of improvements to its taste and recipe, which led to the currently most popular recipe for making them, the one I used. Because of this history, even though I haven't rolled out my agar jelly, this still counts as noshi ume."

With some slices, I stacked them up on top of each other, while with others, I gingerly folded them up into small rolls. "Once you have your noshi ume, the next step is to arrange them prettily on a plate. You could wrap them in dried bamboo peels, which stops them from drying out and also makes it easier to pick them up. Other than that, you could also liven them up with food coloring and have noshi ume in different colors. Red, green, yellow, and so on. Wouldn't it be enchanting if you had all kinds of color on your plate?"

Kon, who was watching over me from his dedicated seat on the counter, nodded repeatedly throughout my lecture.

I continued, "If I want to do this properly, I should wrap them in bamboo peels so that we can pick them up and eat them like that, but that's honestly something I don't have on hand right now. I

guess we'll use forks or spoons instead." I paused, holding out Kon's plate to him once I finished arranging his portion. "All right, here you go, this is yours. I'll also set aside some for myself and Techi… They probably won't dry out too much after one day. I guess I'll pack the rest in plastic containers in preparation for our party."

Beaming from ear to ear, Kon accepted the plate reverently with both hands while saying, "Thank you!" Even though both of his hands were occupied, he skillfully parkoured down from the counter with awe-inspiring reflexes before darting into the living room.

After seeing him off, I put away some noshi ume in food containers and covered Techi's portion with plastic wrap before storing them in the fridge. Then, I promptly finished tidying up before I fetched cold barley tea from the fridge. With tea, two cups, and my own plate all on a tray, I made my way to the living room.

I immediately discovered that Kon had given into temptation—he was already eating his noshi ume. I spotted him unhurriedly carrying spoonfuls of his straight into his tiny mouth so that he could thoroughly savor the taste of the thin, invigorating, and fruity plum dessert.

A tiny chuckle slipped out as I looked at him, and I was smiling as I settled down at my usual seat. Once I poured barley tea into our two cups, I also scooped up some of my slice and brought it into my mouth slowly, fully enjoying its taste and aroma.

It was sweet, as you would expect, since I'd used all kinds of sweeteners such as plum syrup, mizuame, and sugar. At the same time, it wasn't overly rich or overpowering; it left an aftertaste that was even more refreshing and light than yōkan. The subtle flavors and sourness of plum were simply exquisite. The plum pulp fulfilled its part perfectly, for whenever I chanced upon it as I bit down on the translucent jelly, a sudden and intense burst of sourness and saltiness would pierce through the strong sweetness. It added nice variety and distinct character to the dessert.

I nodded to myself with satisfaction. "Looks like it turned out rather well. There are a lot of things I could improve on compared to the refined and sophisticated ones by the professionals in fancy Japanese confectionery shops, but I think I did a pretty good job for

an amateur." I paused. "What do you think, Kon? What's your rating for this noshi ume?"

"It's YUMMY!" he exclaimed. "I think I might like it even more than yōkan! Oh, and I think you could also cut down on the sweetness even more! It's already sweet enough with the plum syrup!" He then proceeded to reach out toward his second slice with his spoon. This time, he didn't savor it bit by bit, instead choosing to take a big mouthful.

As I watched him, I decided to give him a few more facts. "By the way, there are plenty of noshi ume variations sold on the market, such as the type that pops in your mouth like soda, or noshi ume with other fruits… Though at that point, I don't think it counts as noshi ume anymore since plum's in the name. If you head all the way to their place of origin, the Yamagata Prefecture, you can even find shockingly cheap bags full of noshi ume."

I added, "There's a similar confectionery called *nagare ume*, plum agar jelly shaped like noodles inside plum syrup, with an addition of a small plum preserved in syrup. You basically slurp up the agar jelly noodles together with the syrup. Both nagare ume and noshi ume are refreshing desserts on a hot day and are apparently nutritious too. You might end up having plenty of them when the summer heat settles in soon."

Kon, who'd stuffed his cheeks full of noshi ume, munched on his chewy dessert. As he chewed, he must have gotten to a part with more sour plum pulp, because his mouth puckered up, and he squeezed his eyes shut.

After swallowing his mouthful, he replied, "Sounds like there are lots and lots of plum syrup sweets out there! I thought plum syrup would be sour because I was picturing umeboshi, but something sweet and sour like this is nice too! You mentioned you can use umeboshi in all kinds of cooking, and it's the same for plum jam… Huuuh, plums are more awesome than I thought. Plums are amazing…" Kon suddenly paused and tilted his head. "…nuts? Fruits? Huh? Vegetables? Hmm? Which one is it?"

Grinning, I enlightened him. "The correct answer is fruits. Plums—or specifically in this case, ume—are so sour that they might

not seem like fruits, but if it grows on a tree, most of the time, it's a fruit. You can just think of Japanese ume as a friend of fruits like apricots, peaches, and western plums. Other than that, I think nectarines also fall in the same general category?"

I recalled my last few grocery trips. "Recently, fruits like these have been showing up in stores more and more… We are probably getting to the right season to enjoy this big happy family soon. The heat of the summer isn't fun, so we've got to nibble on refreshing fruits like these, recharge with energy-packed meals that give you a boost, and enjoy umeboshi that sweeps your fatigue away."

Hearing that, Kon nodded profoundly, as if to say, "Interesting, I see…" Then, he scooped up his last slice of noshi ume with his spoon and skillfully slid it into his mouth in one smooth motion.

One Ordinary Evening

ONCE we polished off the noshi ume, I reminded Kon that the big plum syrup tasting party was tomorrow. He returned home with an enthusiastic spring in his step, almost as if he were hopping up and down along the path. Switching places with him, Techi chose that moment to come back from work. After she finished changing and washing her hands, we enjoyed dinner together.

Now, it was our leisurely lounging time after the meal. I left the TV on in the background, tuning in and out to its sounds while the two of us spent a relaxing moment in the living room. I was facing the low table as I sat cross-legged, listing up our expenses today on my phone's accounting app. That was when Techi lightly patted my legs, issuing a silent command to change positions. Dutifully, I uncrossed my legs before sitting down on my knees. She lay down on my lap with satisfaction.

She'd taken the initiative to come over and use my lap as a pillow, so I wondered whether she wanted my attention. I looked at her and tried to reach out, but immediately, she glowered at me and bared her teeth as a threat. The answer was clearly no, so I could only ignore her presence for now and focus on getting our accounts sorted.

The local autonomous government was responsible for paying Techi's wages, but it was a relatively humble amount. Her main income came from the autumn harvest. Meanwhile, my current income was a big, fat *zero*—I had to wait until the autumn harvest as well. Because of that, most of the numbers I entered into the household account sheet were in the negative.

Our expenses included utilities such as electricity, gas, water, our phone line, our Internet, our mobile bills… Then our food expenses, food expenses, more food expenses, and would you believe it, even more food expenses. Techi and Kon required a high-calorie diet, while my hobby was making preserves. Naturally, that meant our expenses to do with food added up to a shocking amount. *But uh, well, it's not like we can lower the standard of our*

meals after everything that has happened, so I'll just think of them as necessary expenses.

I *would* have to reconsider our options if our household was still operating at a net loss after selling and exporting our harvest—our chestnuts and walnuts—but my savings combined with Techi's savings added up to quite a substantial amount, so I didn't have to be too anxious for now. Furthermore, based on what Také had told me, the renovation costs weren't going to be all that expensive. And it wasn't like I was using fancy ingredients for every single meal. *Yeah… We're probably okay for now. …I think.*

Such thoughts ran through my mind as I worked through the sheet, but that was when something twitched and moved near the bottom of my vision. I glanced down, and the mystery items that were twitching repeatedly turned out to be Techi's ears. *Maybe she wants to talk with me about something?* Thinking that, I looked at her face, but her expression turned sour yet again. Raising the white flag of surrender in my mind, I returned to sorting out our expenses.

Upon entering the last entry for the day, I gathered all the receipts I'd spread out on the low table and stacked them up into one neat pile. Fastening them with a paperclip, I then put them away in a confectionery tin that had been repurposed as a receipt box. Even after I finished my work for the day, Techi refused to move from her spot on my lap.

Hesitantly, I called out to her. "Uh… Techi? I've already finished entering data into our account book, sooo…"

For some reason unknown to me, Techi let out a sigh. She picked herself off the ground reluctantly, as if to say, "You're such a handful," before she settled on her usual seat.

I inclined my head quizzically. "Erm, just wondering, but what were you trying to do just now?"

She shook her head with exasperation once again. "With how our work lives are, I haven't got any chances to see you look cool and focused while you're busy with your job. I was hoping this was my chance, but you were more organizing than working. And well…

Aren't lovers and married couples meant to cuddle and use each other's laps as pillows?"

That response took me by surprise, and for a moment, I was speechless. I hummed in thought before I finally said, "My expression when I'm working, huh? I mean, back at my old workplace, I was basically wearing my obligatory salaryman smile most of the time. If you want to see that, I can pull it up whenever you want, but I don't think it's anything fun to look at."

I paused to sort my thoughts. "As for lap pillows… Um, my impression of them is something gentler and more peaceful? At the very least, I don't think there should be any threats involved when someone reaches out during a standard lap pillow experience…"

She raised an eyebrow. "I know about your salaryman smile thing, but it's not like you plaster it on your face twenty-four-seven, right? I'm talking about your expression when you're doing paperwork or typing away at your computer." She paused and looked away with seeming nonchalance. "As for the lap pillow thing, I guess I'll work on that from now on."

"When I do paperwork…" I gave it some thought. "I did the majority of my work on computers, whether it be paperwork or ordering materials and stock, but I honestly can't imagine what kind of face I was making. Most of my coworkers were either narrowing their eyes with focus or frowning grimly." I shrugged. "I don't think I'll get many chances to look like that in the relaxed atmosphere of the Beastly Wilds."

"Frowning grimly, hm?" She seemed to have an idea. "Should I take you along to the chestnut orchard when the flowers are in bloom? Maybe that stench'll give you something to frown about."

I shook my head profusely. "No, please spare me from unnecessary suffering, Techi. My nose isn't as sharp as you guys', but I think the odor will still do a number on it. And if my nose is out of commission for a while, you'll have to brace yourself for the taste of our meals to go all over the place. With stuff like taste and flavor, I need my nose to be working if I want to get it right."

Hearing that, Techi's eyes widened like saucers, and she trembled with shock. The scenario of our meals becoming a chaotic

lottery of flavors must have been extremely effective, because she didn't make any further comments. With a slightly disgruntled pout, she folded her floor cushion and lay down, propping up her elbows on it and resting her face on her hands. For a while after that, she was rather docile as she quietly watched the TV.

We shared such trifling conversations and quiet almost every day after our marriage, and I wasn't against it all. In fact, it had become a daily sweet and precious moment with Techi that I'd grown to cherish.

That said, we were still at the stage where we were getting to know each other better—at times, I feel that there was a small distance between us. But well, that was something I—no, *we* had to work on from now on. Our relationship was dependent on how *we* were going to nurture it.

Time trickled by peacefully. When I started preparing the bath by turning on the bathroom water heater, Techi headed off to fetch her towel, her nightwear, and other bathing necessities. Soon, the water heater wall panel played a melody, signaling that the water was ready.

Hearing that, Techi clamped her hand around my arm firmly and dragged me all the way to the bathroom, as if silently declaring that she wasn't going to take no for an answer. This had also become one of our routines—or perhaps calling it our cue was more accurate.

It was the end of the day, but the night had only just begun.



THE next morning, I went on a grocery shopping trip with Kon after breakfast to purchase the ingredients necessary for our plum syrup dessert party in the afternoon. Our first stop was the fresh produce section, where I stocked up on all kinds of fruits. Oranges, grapefruits, watermelons, pineapples, kiwi fruits, and strawberries went into my shopping cart.

I knew everyone's appetite well enough—I made sure to buy plenty so that there was enough to go around. Kon walked up to me with a cantaloupe in his hands, and after seeing his eyes bright with hope and excitement, I relented and placed only a single cantaloupe into our cart.

"Whoooa, you're buying so many fruits today! They all look so yummy…" He stared at our pile of fruits dreamily. "You mentioned that you were gonna pour plum juice over these and turn them into fruit punch, right?"

As I marched on into the baking supplies section, I replied, "Sure did. Well, it's technically not plum juice. I think you're supposed to call it plum squash or plum soda? In any case, it's plum syrup diluted in sparkling water. You can use plum jam instead of plum syrup too. You mix the plum product well with the water, giving it the pleasant sourness and aromatic taste of plums, then pour it over fruits.

I paused. "But there's one small problem: some fruits are also sour to a certain extent. So, to balance it out a bit and give it a more mellow taste, we'll want to add this in too." I took off a bag of *shiratamako*—refined rice flour—from the shelf. It's an ingredient used in all kinds of Japanese recipes, but especially in Japanese confectionery such as dango and *daifuku*.

Kon must have recognized it, because his eyes lit up even more, and he gave me a merry smile. "Ohhh! Shiratamako! I love shiratama dango too! Mommy makes sweet red bean soup with shiratama dango all the time! Oh, and she also deep fries them! Or put them in hot pot dishes! They're yummy like that too!"

I gaped at him. “Wait, deep-fried shiratama dango?!” But after I thought about it for a moment, I got over my initial shock. “Weeell… I suppose shiratama dango are somewhat similar to mochi, and deep-fried mochi—*agemochi*—aren’t bad at all. As for putting them in hot pot stews… Yeah, that sounds like it could work.”

“Right?!” Kon chirped. “I think she also puts them in miso soup and *zōni* soup! They’re so tasty and chewy that they become the best part!”

Zōni soup is a soup where you usually add mochi, so using shiratama dango as substitutes makes sense. There are all kinds of different regional variations, but they typically consist of mochi and vegetables in a clear broth. They are often served as one dish of the *osechi*, ceremonial foods we enjoy during New Year.

I quirked up the corners of my lips with a small smile. “I should have expected nothing less from Mrs. Sanmaya, a Japanese chef through and through. Sounds like she’s been making all kinds of Japanese food with them. In my case, I kind of have this notion in my mind that shiratama dango equal dessert, so I’ve only used it in sweet stuff. You know, like sweet red bean soup you just mentioned, *oshiruko*, or add them to fruit punch. The smooth and chewy texture, combined with a hint of gentle sweetness, is a perfect match with the acidity of the fruits. And of course, shiratama dango also goes well with ume plums—it embraces the intense sourness and softens it just the right amount.”

“Huuuh! That’s so INTERESTING!” Kon exclaimed loudly. “I know that all the foods you make are yummy, Mikura, but it sounds even yummier now that you’ve explained them! Wooow, I can’t wait to have that fruit punch!”

And off he went, dashing down the aisle. For a moment, I thought he was going to sprint all the way to the cashier, but he suddenly skidded to a stop midway like a braking car.

Turning around, he stared at me inquisitively. “By the way, Mommy tried making jam, but it didn’t go well for her… Do you think there’s anything we can do?”

Oh, even a skilled chef like Mrs. Sanmaya has failures? I blinked in surprise. “What kind of problems did she run into? For example, if

she ended up burning it a bit… It'd be hard to salvage that jam because it's already got that burnt taste."

"Um, let's see, the jam kinda…" He fumbled for the right word. "The jam got all stiff!"

"Ahhh, I see now." I nodded. "I suppose you have a few options with jam that's too hard. You could use it as-is in stews or dissolve it in water to make squash, but I think your best bet is probably adding some water and simmering it again. Basically, what happened was that you evaporated too much moisture. Fruits have different water content and some even have a composition that makes them easier to harden when simmered, so it's a pretty common occurrence. As long as you didn't burn your jam, you can definitely save it. Other than that… Using an enamel pot might make a difference too."

Kon blinked. "*Anna-mole* pot? Is it the white one you use, Mikura? What's different when it's white?"

"It's not really the color that matters, it's more how it was made," I explained. "To make a long story short, heavy cookware like enamel pots and copper pots have low thermal conductivity. They're good for simmering things because they heat up evenly instead of suddenly, which means that it won't burn your food as easily. Their lids also trap the moisture inside the pot, making sure that it doesn't lose too much water in the process. This means you can finish your jam before all the water evaporates and before you end up burning it."

I added, "The issue with copper pots is that depending on the composition of your fruit, you might end up with strange flavors or odors in your jam, so cast-iron enamel pots are definitely more reliable in this case. You can use an enamel pot with a glass lid and keep it on as much as you can so that you don't evaporate too much water at once. When it's lidded, you can look inside and check on the jam's consistency, then give it a stir with a wooden spatula so that it doesn't burn. You can repeat that cycle until it's ready."

Kon inclined his head right then left. He repeatedly tilted his head back and forth, trying his very best to memorize what I just

said. Clearly, he wanted to remember and understand my words so that he could relay them to his mother properly.

He was such a good boy—smiling, I continued, "Don't worry. I'll note down what I said later and give it to you, and you can just pass it on to your mom. Enamel pots can also be used for stews and soups, so if you've got one already, your mom can just use that from now on. I think it's a worthwhile investment to think about if you don't. …Ah, I'll also note down a few brands I recommend just in case."

I hummed in thought. "If you're willing to invest a small fortune in a good one, I think there's a good brand from France called Sta… Stab? Or something like that? Their pico…coco something is an excellent pot from what I remember. Its shape is apparently designed so that it won't let moisture escape, and it'll shine in many recipes other than jam. You can honestly always trust France when it comes to food."

Hearing that, Kon squeezed his eyes shut and flashed me his signature close-eyed smile. After nodding as hard as he could, he exclaimed in an energetic voice, "Thank you!" Then, he bolted like a little ball of energy, aiming straight at the checkout corner. Using the ledges as his platforms, he climbed onto a free checkout counter and looked up at the staff standing by. "Hey there! Did you know we're gonna make lots and lots of sweets with plum syrup today?! Mikura said we'll throw a party and eat them together!"

The cashier, whose ears—*likely feline?*—swayed in reaction, didn't look annoyed in the least as they returned a warm smile. Until I arrived at the counter, they kept Kon company and indulged the giddy beastchild.



I washed my hands after our return from our grocery shopping trip and put on my apron. Likewise, Kon was geared up in his special coverall apron. With him as my trusty assistant, we began making desserts with plum syrup.

I decided to start with making shiratama dango.

Pour shiratamako into a mixing bowl. Add water in small increments while stirring slowly and thoroughly. Scoop up a suitable amount of the resulting mixture into your hands and roll it in your palms until it becomes a round, bite-sized shiratama dango. When you have a perfect sphere, press hard into the middle of the dango with your fingertip. This will make it easier to cook the dango all the way through.

Repeat this process until you've depleted all your shiratamako mixture. During this step, put your squashed shiratama dango into a pot of boiling water you've prepared in advance as you go. When cooked, they'll bob to the surface of the water. Scoop the cooked shiratama dango with a slotted ladle and transfer it into a bowl of water. Once all the shiratama dango are cooked, you can move on to the next step.

Wash your selection of fruits. Peel them meticulously one by one and cut into bite-sized chunks.

This was a rather strenuous process because one of my fruits was a watermelon, but once the fruits were cut up, the remaining steps were simple. And so, I braced myself for the toughest part and worked tirelessly with utmost effort, borrowing the help of Kon's tiny hands whenever possible. When I was done, I piled our fruit chunks into a large bowl and covered it with plastic wrap. All that was left to do for the shiratama dango fruit punch was to add plum soda and shiratama dango to these fruits.

Next up was plum sherbet.

For sherbert, put your ingredients into a container like a bowl and chill it in the freezer before taking out and mixing thoroughly. Then, you chill it again before taking it out to give it a thorough stir. You have two options: either stir it periodically so that it doesn't freeze into one big clump, or you can use some kind of tool to grind the large clump of ice at the very end.

I'd stored my plum sherbet mixture in the freezer when I'd woken up this morning and had mixed it after breakfast, mixed it before I went away to brush my teeth and to go out shopping, and was mixing it now that I'd come back. Thanks to my frequent stirring, the ice had become a sherbert-like paste consistency, so my

job with this menu was done for now. I left it to rest in the freezer until all our participants assembled.

As for plum syrup and yogurt, it was extremely simple. You only had to transfer plum syrup and yogurt into some kind of container—even a preserve jar would do—and mix it. As for noshi ume, we had our stock from yesterday. For plum soda and plum sour cocktails, the preparations were equally effortless. In one preserve bottle, I poured plum syrup and sparkling water. In another, I poured plum syrup, sparkling water, and a selection of fruity vinegars, such as apple cider vinegar.

Peeling all the fruits and cutting them up had been somewhat exhausting, but even so, preparing this dessert party was much simpler than my usual endeavors. In fact, I felt like it was too simple, because I'd finished cooking in the blink of an eye.

I waited for Techi to wake up and for Rei to show up.

Techi had been awake for breakfast with a healthy appetite, but after washing her face and doing her morning rituals, it appeared that she'd fallen asleep almost immediately after our departure for the supermarket. Even now, she was still sleeping in. Rei should be here any moment now, but he was still nowhere in sight. I could only patiently wait for those two to make their way here.

But that was when Kon, who'd been restless and fidgety on the kitchen counter, began to take action—his patience must have run out. He started by taking off his coverall apron and folding it up neatly. Then, he fetched a glass bowl and spoon from the cabinet and held them in both hands as he stared unblinkingly at me. His eyes were pleading and shining with stunning hope and anticipation—how could I ever say no to him?

In order, I carried the bowl of fruits, the bowl of shiratama dango, and the preserve bottle of plum soda onto the low table in the living room. I sat down at my designated seat and lifted the serving ladle before calling out to Kon, who'd was also at his seat and gingerly holding up his glass bowl with both hands.

"Now then, my first customer, Mr. Kon. We have oranges, grapefruits, watermelons, pineapples, kiwi fruits, strawberries, and a

cantaloupe. Which one would you like to have, sir?" I asked dramatically.

A radiant smile bloomed on Kon's face. He peered into the mixing bowl, then confirmed the size of the smaller bowl in his hands, then glanced at the mixing bowl again. Though he knew he was being reckless, he must have fallen into temptation, because he chirped cheerily, "Everything, please!"

Giving him a big nod, I went on to arrange one or two pieces of every type of fruit onto his bowl, followed by two shiratama dango. For the finishing touch, I gently poured on the plum soda.

There was already the tantalizing aroma of fruits shrouding us, and now, the sharp, bright aroma of plums was added to the mix. The soda popped and fizzed noisily. Fruits of every color glimmered under the light like jewels.

It was as if there was an entire miniature world within the glass bowl, and Kon stared at it intently. He gingerly placed it on the tabletop, held up his spoon resolutely as if he were going into battle, and yelled "THANKS FOR THE FOOD!" in a voice that was much more powerful than all his other greetings before his meals. Almost immediately, he went after the shiratama dango fruit punch with plum soda.

Fruit freshly bought from the supermarket was, as you'd expect, scrumptious. It seemed that the freshly made shiratama dango also came out with a good texture, judging by the joy on his face as he chewed. The ratio of syrup to sparkling water must be just right as well, because Kon took turns scooping up fruit and soda separately into his mouth, moving his jaw fervently all the while. His chipmunk ears twitched adorably, and his tail leisurely flicked back and forth. He moved his spoon tirelessly, and his glass bowl was empty in the blink of an eye.

Seeing that, I held up my ladle again, and a radiant smile lit up his face. After I served him his second portion, I made my way to the kitchen fridge while he was busy tackling his dessert. I fetched the sherbet and scooped some into a separate bowl before putting the rest of the sherbet back into the freezer. With a small bowl of sherbet in hand, I walked back to Kon and offered it to him. He

started on his new dessert almost immediately, looking utterly captivated by the texture and taste.

The private plum syrup party between Kon and I proceeded smoothly. Until finally, Techi came into the living room with eyes drooping with drowsiness, and Rei arrived with the whirring of his delivery van. The two of them opened their eyes wide at the same time, as if they couldn't believe what they were seeing.

Both of them raised their voices and exclaimed in unison, "Hey, you could have waited for us!"

Kon and I gave them a look, as if to say, "We *did* wait. We gave you more than plenty of time."

Almost like the interruption never happened, I resumed moving my ladle while Kon wielded his spoon.

Seeing that, Techi and Rei frantically dived into action. They rushed over to the bathroom—Techi had to wash her face while Rei had to wash his hands. Then, they zoomed over to the kitchen, grabbed their own spoons and bowls, and returned to the living room with great vigor, though it wasn't to the point of sprinting.

I proceeded to serve fruit punch to Techi and Rei, then onto my own bowl that Kon had prepared for me. In no time at all, the fruit punch—which I should have made a generous amount of—was sold out. After my job as the chef was done, I took my time to savor the fruit punch left in my own bowl.

Shiratama dango fruit punch is perfection as it is—you don't have to pair it with anything or arrange the recipe at all. Fruit and soda may sound like a rustic combination, but these two have excellent chemistry with each other, and the soda elevates the elegant taste of fruit by many levels. As if that isn't enough, you even have the smooth and chewy shiratama dango thrown in, giving it an addictive texture and a faint hint of sweetness. It is a sinful dessert indeed.

Furthermore, there's even the stimuli and spice of sparkling water in the paradise of flavors and textures, so it never gets dull. Before you know it, you'd be scooping up every last drop in your bowl.

And no, I'm not finished, because we mustn't forget the main star of the show: plum syrup. It adds a touch of sourness that's just right, enticing your appetite, and you simply can't put down your spoon.

The next thing I knew, I'd finished everything in my bowl. Unhurriedly, I stood up to prepare the second item on the menu for my three ravenous companions, who'd polished off their food many times faster than I had.

Next up was plum syrup sherbet. I fetched the bowl of sherbet from the freezer and carried it into the living room. This one was simple to serve—I only had to scoop it. After I arranged the sherbet onto everyone else's waiting bowls, I neatly scraped up the last of the dessert clinging to the bowl and transferred it to my own bowl.

I enjoyed the sherbet at my own pace. It tasted like the embodiment of refreshment and invigoration, and the intense coolness against my tongue was a wonderful spice. Sherbet had a unique texture where it practically melted on your tongue, which was also extremely satisfying.

In the middle of my tasting session, Rei grinned impishly and called out to me. "Heh, I knew it. We've got two cold dishes in a row. I figured that might be the case because of how most desserts tend to be, but if this trend's gonna continue, our stomachs will freeze over." He stood up dramatically. "Which is why I've prepared just the thing to have after sherbet for all of you."

Rei proceeded to walk over to his delivery van and carried a multitiered food box back with him. He put it down in the living room —was what I thought would happen, but he went past the living room and into the kitchen before baking the contents in our toaster oven. Not a moment later, the distinct aroma of grilling mochi wafted over.

Huh. He's a pâtissier*, but he made mochi?* I blinked in surprise. Soon, Rei returned to the living room with plates of freshly roasted mochi and four pairs of chopsticks.

As he came closer, I realized that there must be some kind of mystery filling inside the mochi. The mochi were round and substantially thick, and judging by the earthy sweet smell I was

picking up, they had sweet bean paste within. Furthermore, within the aroma was the faint hint of plums.

Intrigued, the moment I accepted my plate and chopsticks, I split open my mochi. Melted white bean paste oozed out delectably. But this was no ordinary white bean paste—it had a tint of buttery yellow, signaling that Rei had mixed in plum syrup. The aroma was heavenly.

Our resident *pâtissier* explained his dish. "A long time ago, I somehow got the wrong idea about a mochi variation in a certain region and made it the wrong way, and I decided to recreate my results. So there is this mochi out there called *umegae* mochi, which is like, literally 'plums and twig mochi,' right? I was completely convinced it had plums and was thinking, 'Huh, what in the world are plum mochi like? How would you make such a combination tasty?' So I got curious and did all kinds of experiments."

He sighed and continued, "But sadly, it was only after all these trials that I researched more about the confectionery and learned that the 'ume' part is kind of superficial. There're no plums in them whatsoever. The mochi you see before you are the result of that catastrophic tragedy. It's pretty much mochi with white bean paste filling, but I've added plum syrup and plum pulp into the white bean paste, giving it a pleasant, sour tang. To give it a fuller body in taste, I've also mixed in crushed walnuts—the fine ones Tomiyasu farmed." He shrugged. "So…yeah. Enjoy it while it's hot and soothe your stomach a bit."

After making this speech, Rei made a trip to the kitchen once again and began boiling some water. He grabbed a small teapot and made preparations to brew tea.

Mochi fresh out of the oven and steaming hot tea was a wonderful combination for soothing our stomachs indeed. Thinking that, I carried one piece of mochi into my mouth.

Just like he'd described, the aroma and sour tang of plums, combined with the elegant sweetness of white bean paste, unfolded on my tongue. I bit into my mochi and felt the crunch of walnut fragments dispersed in the filling, as well as their rich, nutty flavor.

Wow. This is an unusual combination I've never come across before, but it sure is tasty.

For mochi with bean paste filling, its sweetness is what defines it. The classic mochi that everyone appreciates and loves would attack your taste buds like a small sugary bomb. Because of that, Rei's mochi was quite a curveball, for what defined it were its sourness and rich body of flavors. It was still delicious, of course, but I would describe it as more of a unique kind of appeal compared to the tried-and-true approach.

When I swallowed my mouthful, I felt a pleasant warmth spread in my chilly stomach. Both my mouth and my tummy felt refreshed, possibly due to the wondrous powers of plums.

Rei called out from the kitchen. "I dunno whether there's any scientific evidence, but it's been said for generations that ume plums are good for our digestive systems. You've warmed your stomach and ingested some plums, so you should feel much better now."

He returned with a tray of teacups for everyone present. "And here's some plum tea on top of that. In case you're wondering, no, it's not ume kombucha. What I've done is add some umeboshi to standard tea. Trust me, it's pretty good, if I say so myself. When I tried this out with high-quality gyokuro green tea, it was amazing. No, in fact, it was the taste of temptation itself. When I've got the chance, I'll make some for you guys too."

We each thanked him before accepting our teacups and slowly sipping on the warm plum tea. I gulped down more and more before letting out a contented sigh. And then, gradually, I noticed a growing glint in Techi and Kon's eyes. It was the powerful, hungry look of a predator. Did they feel they were ready to take on a new dessert because their stomachs warmed up again? Or were they craving some sweet dessert because they had two consecutive sour items on their menu? This glint only grew more and more prominent with time.

Uh… I flinched slightly. *I'm happy that you've got something to look forward to, but I honestly haven't prepared anything that impressive…*

Though I was daunted by their expectations, it wasn't like I could back out now. I stood up to retrieve the last few items on our menu: yogurt with plum syrup, noshi ume, plum soda, and plum sour cocktail. The moment I arranged them on the low table, Techi, Kon, and Rei reached out at once. Literally in no time at all, the desserts I'd prepared vanished without a trace.

Looks like I underestimated the appetite of beastfolk. I should've prepared more for everyone, I thought. But then, Rei stood up with a knowing smirk again and marched back to his delivery van.

It appeared that he still had more specialty desserts up his sleeve prepared for this party. Meanwhile, I was completely out of ammunition, so as I gazed at him, I prayed from the bottom of my heart that he'd brought something that could satisfy Techi and Kon.

Soon, Rei made his valiant return. What he brought with him were dried fruits for making fruit tea, as well as Western cookies akin to biscotti with nuts.

Biscotti are essentially Italian biscuits with fruits and nuts. But compared to what you'd imagine when you hear the word "biscuit," they are lighter, crunchier, and harder. Apparently, Italians often eat them during breakfast. Based on what I'd read, Italian breakfasts generally consist of sweet food, and sweet biscotti with dried fruits or nuts are an especially popular option because you can enjoy all kinds of different flavors.

I stared down at the paper box of biscotti and a glass pot that displayed an assortment of colorful dried fruits on the low table. "Well now… You've brought along even more sweet stuff."

When Rei had boiled water to make tea earlier, he'd set some aside inside a vacuum water pot. He was busy carrying it over from the kitchen as he replied, "What else did you expect at a dessert party? I made sure to use plum syrup as an accent in everything, so I'm even following the theme. Plus, sweet equal calories, so combinations of food like these are important to us beastfolk. You're a human though, so you can only have a little bit of each because you've probably already had enough sugar for the day. It's easier for humans to get diabetes than beastfolk or something, right? The

safest option for you might be having just a taste and stopping there."

That was news to me. "Oh, it's rare for beastfolk to get diabetes? To add to that, it's also tougher for you guys to put on weight… I think I might be a little jealous."

Rei gave me a wry smile. "It means that our food expenses rack up like crazy though, so I can't say it's that enviable. Ah, hang on, enough about sugar levels! I specifically chose stuff with dried fruits because of your hobby, Mikura, so talk about that instead! Making dried fruits in a humid country like Japan might be a challenge, but if you use a fridge dehydrator skillfully, it's doable. They store for a long time, and they become even more delicious if you sprinkle sugar over them. They're one of the most prominent preserves around the world!"

Just as I was about to reply, Kon beat me to the punch. He said in a spirited, overjoyed voice, "I know! I've heard that before! Mikura made some biscuits with dry fruits some time ago! They were downright amazing, so I can't wait to have these too!"

Right, I did make some biscuits with dry fruits for him before, now that he mentions it. I was pulling up the memory in my head when Rei let out a small chuckle and puffed out his chest with pride. "Yeah, I heard all about that from Techi. I'm sure you can tell that I made them on purpose *because* I heard about the biscuits, right? I came to show you what a pro can achieve."

Then, he sighed and shook his head slightly. "On that topic, it's been somewhat rough for me lately. Mikura made all kinds of stuff for the kids to try, and sweets have been all the craze for them, so business was booming for a while… But it didn't last, sadly. In fact, our sales are actually kind of going down these days. 'Cause, y'know, Mikura is an amateur, but he can still make such high-quality stuff, so more and more families are searching up recipes on the Internet and making their own desserts, which hurts my business… So I felt like I've got to prove that the work of a pro is on a whole other level to everyone. You can think of it as me throwing down the gauntlet."

Rei proceeded to pour hot water into the pot with the dried fruits. After hearing his speech, I could only smile with slight exasperation in response. I reached into the paper box and picked up one piece of biscotti—it appeared that he'd made a large block before cutting it into smaller pieces for easier consumption—and carried it to my mouth.

The recipe for biscotti involves baking it twice, which means that one of its defining traits is the complete lack of moisture. Thanks to that, they have a long shelf life, and you could store them for a long time. You could say that they are a type of preserve, in fact.

Because it's extremely dry and thoroughly baked, the texture is hard and crunchy instead of crumbly and crunchy, and it's simply irresistible. With the addition of crispy crunchy nuts and soft chewy dried fruits, biscotti becomes a snack with a lot of variety in texture, flavor, and subtle undertones. It's rather versatile, pairing well with classic drinks like coffee and tea, desserts like ice cream and gelato, and even wine.

While I reviewed my knowledge about biscotti in my head, my mouth was still busy chewing on the special biscotti by our resident professional *pâtissier*. He'd added a great variety of dried fruits, which asserted their flavors and depth dominantly. *Mmm, like he mentioned, this is on a whole other level—it's the taste of something you can only purchase at a store made by a professional. It would be almost impossible for an amateur to reproduce the same quality.*

I took one bite after another, but never once was I disappointed. All the dried fruits and nuts were exquisite, and I could taste it. Hidden behind the strong taste of these additions was the quieter plum syrup, which he'd likely brushed over the entire biscotti. The contrast of subtle and strong was very elegant.

I nodded to myself. "Yum. Anyone can tell you're a pro, Rei. It's amazing." As I spoke, I glanced at Kon.

The beastchild was clutching firmly onto a piece of biscotti with his tiny hands and gnawing at it single-mindedly. He wasn't smiling or wearing a face of satisfaction—with a serious expression, he moved his mouth at a stunning speed, making rapid rhythmical

crunching sounds as he enjoyed his biscotti. That one biscotti soon turned to two, then three, then four… One after another, they disappeared down his stomach.

Though Techi wasn't quite on the same level, she was absorbed in eating her biscotti as well. *Yeah, I should've expected nothing but the best from Rei, especially when he's cooking to impress.*

Rei scratched his cheek sheepishly. "Weeell, you could say that I wasn't playing fair in this case though. I bought fruits from fancy brands that are incredibly delicious as-is, and I even carefully selected the cream of the crop that's most suitable for making dried fruits. These are basically the best dried fruits you could ever get without holding back anything, which means I completely disregarded the costs involved. If I want to sell them, they'll be so expensive that I can only display them in fancy confectionery shops or in hotels.

"So… Yeah. They're more for showing off my skills and to promote my *pâtisserie.* If I want to actually profit off them, each small piece would probably have to cost around ¥500… Or maybe even up to ¥1000 or ¥2000. I haven't calculated all the expenses properly, so I can't be sure, but that sounds about right."

I gaped at him. *I'm snacking on such fancy biscotti without any reservation? That means I'm practically eating money!* I quietly shuddered.

I was still on my first piece, and Rei had finally started on his first piece after his speech. Conversely, I didn't know whether they'd been listening, but Techi and Kon didn't slow one bit, looking as if they might guzzle down ten or twenty pieces at the rate they were going.

Even if I ignored the costs, there was still the problem of sugar. Deciding to have self-restraint and only nibbling on one piece, I then reached out for the fruit tea. In the background, Techi and Kon were still going strong, taciturnly eating as if there was no tomorrow. Until the very end of the party, they never stopped snacking on Rei's biscotti.



ONCE we had our fill of biscotti, we leisurely enjoyed a fruit tea session and basked in our satisfaction after the party was over. That is, until Techi and Kon went out into the garden to fetch their staffs so that they could burn some calories through training. Seeing that, Rei stood up and made his way to the kitchen, but not before he turned around and secretively beckoned me over with his hand.

I slowly stood up from my seat and joined him in the kitchen. There, Rei watched over the garden carefully and whispered to me in a hushed voice, "Hey, there's something I figured I should only let you know… It's about our uncle."

Rei and Techi's uncle… I searched through my memories about him. *Ah, if I remember correctly, was that the man who was pestering Techi to get married as soon as possible? He doesn't have a proper job at the moment, is single…and badmouthed Techi, didn't he? Oh, that reminds me, I don't think he attended our wedding either?*

I pressed my lips together into a thin line. "Our uncle? Correct me if I'm mistaken, but I have a feeling I didn't see him at our wedding."

Rei nodded with an awkward smile and said, "Yep. We've got an uncle who didn't come to your wedding, didn't send you any congratulatory gifts, and only wants to tell you everything that's wrong with you and how you should live your life. Thing is, that guy's been voicing his objections about your wedding with Tokatechi recently. Yeah, I know, I don't get why he's complaining this late either.

"He goes on about all kinds of nonsense that your children won't be pureblooded beastfolk or something… A whole lot of rubbish, basically. I mean, beastfolk and humans have lived within the same island country for thousands of years. It's obvious to everyone and their dogs that we've definitely got some genetic mingling going on here. But that's what he keeps insisting. Knowing him though, he's just got so much spare time on his hands that he wants to find fault with someone, anyone, and is using that as an excuse to justify his whining."

Rei didn't look like he was happy with this relative, because he wasn't finished yet. In fact, he even dropped a bomb on me. "He hasn't even settled down with a life partner of his own, but he keeps poking his nose into Tokatechi's marriage… I guess he's just being petty because he couldn't use her marriage for his own convenience since you two foiled his plans, and he feels he's lost face. If everything had gone as he'd planned, he would have gotten some money from that elite he was trying to set her up with as a bonus, but even that's gone… And it sounds like he wasn't a happy camper."

I was both shocked and appalled by what I'd just heard. I could only flash him a wry smile as I replied, "That's, well… Hmm… I honestly don't know what to say, but he sounds like a rather difficult person."

There was a look of surprise on Rei's face. "Uh, that's what you say, but you seem kinda calm. Or like it doesn't bother you that much. Wait, did you already know about this?"

I shook my head. "No. Though I *did* hear that we have an eccentric uncle from Techi, the rest of the information is news to me. But well… I figured I didn't have to mind it too much since it's not anything too significant."

He gave me a scrutinizing look. "It's not anything too significant, hm? I gotta say you've secretly got nerves of steel. I've heard about your childhood, the events that led up to you deciding to inherit this house, and how you readily decided on marrying Tokatechi, who's a beastwoman… Feels like nothing can faze you."

"I mean…" I scratched my head awkwardly. "It's not like my life's been turned upside down. I wouldn't say I'm used to things of this scale, but I can deal with it. Back in my previous workplace, I had to associate with people who were more… Unhinged? Quirky? Let's just call them fun fellows."

Rei's eyes widened. "It was *that* crazy? Are all big corps on the other side of the border like that? It's to the point that you can develop mental fortitude like yours at such a young age?"

I gave it some thought. "Good question… Let's see… I guess you'd have conversations where units of over a hundred million yen were tossed around frequently. Or be assigned to work where if you

make an unfortunate mistake, tens of millions of yen would evaporate in seconds. And deal with people blinded by greed, watching like a hawk to get their hands on that kind of money. Even if you don't gain anything else from it, I suppose it's good training for your mental strength, yeah."

He shook his head. "Today I learned that my brother-in-law is way more frightening than I ever expected…" Then, he shrugged before reassuring me. "I know that I phrased things in a way that's kinda worrying, but trust me, it's not a problem at all. The problem, in fact, will solve itself even if you guys don't lift a finger. Above all, our parents are hopping mad about this, and their fury is propelling them to take all kinds of action, which should settle the issue before the word spreads to you guys… But I figured I'd let you know ahead of time just in case so that you can brace yourself."

"I see…" I said slowly. "Now I feel bad. It sounds like I caused a lot of trouble for Mom and Dad."

Crossing his arms, Rei interrupted me. "Stop right there, young man. It's obviously the opposite! *We're* the ones causing you unnecessary trouble. In the eyes of our parents, they're livid that he wants to ruin the happiness Tokatechi finally found. On top of that, he's practically trampling on the wishes of everyone who attended your wedding and gave you their heartfelt congratulations. I can't even describe how outraged they are.

"It should be fine to trust them with this…" He hesitated. "Well, I think so, at least. All our relatives that attended the ceremony are on their side as well. In fact…" He lowered his voice even more. "Some even started entertaining the thought of building a room for confining criminals or lunatics in a house somewhere and throwing him inside. You know, the type they used in the Edo period for imprisoning people for personal reasons. I already knew that making an enemy of people with old-fashioned thinking is a terrible idea, and through this experience, I've reaffirmed that they're terrifying as enemies…"

That caught my attention. "Um… Are you sure we don't have to interfere with that? If our relatives get arrested by the police under

charges of criminal confinement, wouldn't our uncle get all self-important about it and use it to his advantage?"

"Hm?" Rei swatted his hand casually. "Ahh, don't worry, it's totally fine. Privileges of an autonomous region and all. We can take some liberties with our interpretation of the law, and our judges can choose to be more flexible with our case, so it will work out somehow even if something like that *does* happen. Well, if we go as far as murder though, that's when you need to start getting worried."

I hesitated. "Just wondering… This is just a big if, but wouldn't that mean that if you or I messed up majorly somehow, the same thing will happen to us?"

He shrugged. "Pretty much. But that's how things work in the world. If you do bad things because your greed gets the better of you and you cause trouble for other people, you have to be prepared to pay an equally steep price. In the case of a mistake that isn't malicious or something you did because of someone else's deception, beastfolk wouldn't go this far. Most people would even take pity or show compassion. But in the case of that uncle of ours, he's acting out of pure spite and malice alone, sooo…"

Clearing his throat, he continued, "So yeah, that's the gist of it. Stay on your toes just in case. Oh, and make sure Tokatechi doesn't learn of this. Knowing her temper, the moment she learns about it, she might grab her staff and charge right into Uncle's house."

Color drained from Rei's face, and he shuddered. He peered at the garden gingerly, as if there was a dreadful monster lurking there.

I reassured him. "I'm sure that's not going to happen. When she picked up the call last time, Techi replied coolly and relatively politely. She's a determined person with a strong will, yes, but she isn't that kind of reckless. Even if she does have such plans, I'm sure that she'll discuss it with the two of us or our parents first."

Rei's gaze moved from the garden to me. His mouth was gaping with astonishment. After a moment's delay, a meaningful grin quirked up the corners of his lips as he let out hearty laughter. "Huuuh! I see, I see! It sounds like you already know Tokatechi better than I do! Gosh, you lovebirds are making me blush!" He gave

me a couple of friendly smacks on my shoulder before muttering, "Sheesh, I need a cup of coffee right now, or I'll get diabetes."

And then he walked off, boiling some water in a kettle to make some coffee for himself.

A Peaceful Routine Life

I returned to my mundane everyday life the day after the plum syrup party. As usual, I did the chores then lounged in the living room during my break.

Then, like every other day, Kon announced his arrival with his signature call. "Incomiiing!" Scampering up into the house, he made a beeline for the bathroom, washed his hands thoroughly, then darted into the living room to join me. He plopped down adorably next to me as I watched the TV. It just so happened that the ad for the latest game console started playing, and a question popped up in my mind.

I decided to voice it. "Huh… Come to think of it, Kon, you guys don't really play video games, do you? It feels like all of you mainly play outside."

Kon gave me a big nod before lifting his tiny hands and wriggling his small, chubby fingers. I wasn't exaggerating when I said his hands were tiny—I couldn't give you an exact age, but they probably were around the size of a human baby or toddler. Naturally, his fingers were also rather short.

I let out a small "*Ahhh*" of realization. It was probably a struggle for him to hold and use gaming controllers with these hands. Of course, it was only a struggle, not impossible, but it meant that his gaming experience wouldn't be that comfortable. *And that's why they don't play video games—or more like they* can't *play video games.*

Folding my arms, I nodded to myself. "That makes sense… If only there were controllers tailored for beastfolk."

"Hmmm…" Kon scrunched his eyebrows together and was in deep thought before he replied, "Not just controllers, but I hope they'll adjust the difficulty too. All the games are way too easy!"

I smiled wryly. "Oh, I see. Well, most of the games targeting children around your age would be relatively easy, yeah."

"Um, erm, no, not that." He shook his head. "The ones for adults are also easy. They're games made by humans, after all!"

"Huh?" I blinked in surprise and cocked my head. *The problem isn't the target age, but because it's made by humans? Does he mean… Let's see… Is he implying that games made for and by humans are too easy for beastfolk?* "Hang on… I know that beastfolk have impressive physical abilities, but do you also have amazing reflexes as well by any chance?"

He nodded readily. "Yeah. I heard it's really different."

My eyes widened. "That much? It's to the point that games are so easy that they're boring to you guys?"

After a moment of contemplation, Kon said, "Give me a moment!" before racing out of the house. Roughly ten minutes went by, and he sprinted back with something that looked like a pochette handbag in his arms. He washed his hands once again and dashed into the living room, pulling out a handheld game console from several generations ago out of his pochette.

I leaned in and watched as Kon proceeded to plug in the charger and switch on the handheld console. "So you've got game consoles around here, I see. It's quite an antique though."

He then placed the console onto the low table, flipped up the foldable screen, and pulled out the stylus pen inserted into the side of the console. He explained, "This type of console was really popular a while ago because you don't use a controller, but a pen that even we can hold. Above that, the console and the games are cheap because they are old, so all of us have one of these… But everyone got bored of them right away."

As he spoke, he tapped away lightly on the screen with his stylus and started up a game with practiced ease. It was one of those rhythm games—a game genre where you tapped buttons according to the music that was playing. If you chose to play the game with your touchscreen, you tapped or moved the circles that appeared with the melody using your stylus, and sometimes, you'd even draw spirals on the screen. Performing these actions at the right time would give you points.

Once the game started up, Kon loaded up a save that had a hundred percent completion rate displayed. He swiftly chose the

highest difficulty mode for the most challenging song and began one round.

He sat on his knees while facing the low table and held the stylus as if it were a calligraphy pen. Even though the game screen was moving at a considerable speed, demanding high player skill, Kon didn't falter or panic. I watched him as he played, and the movements of his stylus were eye-opening. He operated it impassively and accurately, and the expression on his face was almost comical in contrast to his incredible reflexes.

He received "PERFECT" for every single action, and his points racked up rapidly. Even when the song got to the climax and a nauseating number of circles began popping up, his playstyle never wavered, no matter what kind of unthinkable movements the game demanded of him.

From the very beginning to the very end, only the word PERFECT was displayed on his screen—he never made any mistakes. When the song and result screen ended, the point ranking was displayed on the screen. Everything from first to tenth place was the exact same perfect score without any mistakes.

He turned to look at me. "See? It's so easy that it gets boring. When I tried baseball games, I got a home run every time… Even with golf games, which became famous among us because it's said to be difficult at the start, I've gotten to the point that I either get hole-in-one or a chip-in… In the end, the only games we couldn't complete were things like shogi games."

He tilted his head, as if he'd remembered something. "Oh, but Daddy, Mommy, my grandpas and grandmas, and so on are still playing brain training games. Plus, adults can hold normal controllers, so they play a bunch of games that we can't play! Other than that, I think we can also enjoy things like card games?"

Kon closed the game, turned off the handheld console, and carefully stored it away inside the pochette.

I placed a hand on my chin. "Interesting… Difficulty levels tailored for beastfolk, huh? Hmm, maybe games with outrageous difficulties that are trending on the Internet would be just right for you guys? Ah, but games that are insanely difficult with no more

substance than that aren't that fun in my opinion, so I can't really recommend them. You want a challenge, not suffering. The best option is probably asking a game publisher to adjust the difficulty levels of famous games… Oh, a slight tangent, but if all the beastfolk start playing online multiplayer games, you guys might take the world by storm. With your reflexes and control you have over your hands, you'd never lose."

Kon cast down his eyes and shook his head softly. "Mikura, PvP games are only fun when you're playing with people who have the same conditions and are just as strong as you. It's okay to play them with other beastfolk, but if we do that in online games, it'd be boring and bad manners."

He spoke patiently and clearly, as if teaching a lesson to a child. Almost instinctively, I stammered, "S-Sorry about that."

With his eyes still looking down, Kon replied in a solemn voice, "It's all right. You only have to remember that next time."

We traded glances. And then, the two of us burst out into roaring laughter at the same time.

That interaction had been kind of silly, but it wasn't anything that hilarious. However, it tickled our funny bones for some bizarre reason. Partly because Kon was laughing with me, I simply couldn't stop laughing, and our guffawing went on for a while. Then, after we'd had our fill, we unhurriedly stood up with my suggestion of, "How about we have fun with something other than video games?"



DECIDING to put video games to one side for now, I dug out a board game, thinking it might be more enjoyable for Kon. But to my shock, Kon had mastery over the movements of the dice—though he wasn't a hundred percent accurate, most of the time, he could roll numbers he'd been aiming for. Using that skill, despite being a beginner, he was the winner at the end.

Morally speaking, such a playstyle wasn't very fair, but Kon had rolled the dice without even a hint of malice—he'd only done it subconsciously because he had the ability. *Wow.*

Once again, I was taught a keen lesson about how extraordinary beastfolk were. They had excellent kinetic vision, reflexes, physical ability, and even sharp noses. On top of that, they even had special characteristics unique to their specific race. It made sense that humans had lost to them in past wars. I could imagine that during the era of Aterui, mere humans hadn't even been able to put up a fight against beastfolk that had been led by their hero.

If so, how had the beastfolk ended up here, crammed into their comparatively small autonomous region?

I had a good guess—it was due to their high caloric needs. They had impressive physical prowess, and each one of them was practically a one-man army against humans. But because of that, every single beastfolk also needed to consume food equivalent to an army. The more they exerted themselves, the more food they had to eat to make up for the energy lost, which meant that they needed several times—maybe even several dozen times more food than a normal human. Fast metabolism also means that they even burn a lot of calories while resting.

During an age when agriculture, tools, and fertilizer hadn't been all that developed, food supplies had been unreliable. Trying to unify the entire country with an army of gluttons would be a pie in the sky. If they thoughtlessly tried to increase their population, it was evident that they'd eat up all the food and animals wherever they went.

For argument's sake, let's say that beastfolk managed to unite Japan under their flag and grew into a population that could rule over its entirety. You could imagine what would happen next—they'd eat up everything available and transform Japan into a barren wasteland.

The point is, the beastfolk society seems to have a natural restriction on their population due to their low energy efficiency, which likely resulted in this autonomous region. I'd never properly checked how big the Beastly Wilds was, but it shouldn't be too spacious. It was more of a city than a prefecture—around the size of an ordinance-designated city.

As for its food self-sufficiency rate, though I didn't have a proper number either, I suspected that it was rather low. Yes, there were fields scattered everywhere. If you went a little deeper into the Wilds, there were apparently even fruit tree orchards and terraced rice fields of significant scales. The large beasts and fish residing within the Beastly Wilds were also a substantial source of food for them.

However, if you were to head to the supermarket and take a good look at the shelves, you would notice that they were flooded with food you'd often see on the other side of the border—food manufactured in human factories. Furthermore, whether it be vegetables, meat, or even seafood, the majority of the fresh food products available were also imported from the other side. It shouldn't be an overstatement to say that Techi and the others were only able to eat to their hearts' content thanks to the supply of food from outside.

Perhaps they wouldn't have to rely on the outside world at all if they had an abundant number of Fusang trees and seeds, but even if they did have an infinite supply, it was daunting to depend too much on something you sorely lacked understanding about. Because if you didn't understand their inner mechanisms, what if one day, your supply suddenly got cut off? Your race would be on the brink of extinction in an instant.

Judging by that, I had a good guess about the sequence of events that led to the autonomous region. Due to their high caloric demands, beastfolk had lost their war against humans and were coerced into living in the Beastly Wilds. Their situation had been despairing, but for some reason, the Fusang trees were only left behind within their territory. Thanks to these wondrous plants, they managed to secure a certain amount of influence and the right of self-government—the Fusang trees had guaranteed them freedom.

The beastfolk I knew, whether they be adults or children, lived their lives cheerfully and happily every day. They were friendly to a human like me without any prejudice, but when you thought about their situation, that almost sounded like a miracle. Most humans wouldn't find the same compassion within them. In fact, I wouldn't

blame them for thinking the same way as Techi's uncle, who insisted that beastfolk should be with beastfolk and that there should only be their own race in their society.

But instead, Techi and the others had treated me with kindness—or at least fairness—and were willing to hang out with me every single day. Techi had even agreed to marry me… And the people I had to thank were probably my ancestors and Gramps.

I didn't know what had happened in the distant past, but what I did know was that my ancestors had ended up living here and cultivated the land, among other things. Gramps had inherited that position and had carefully protected his orchard while living in harmony with Techi and the kids. Without his diligence and sincerity, I wouldn't be here today—I could never thank him enough for everything he'd done.

I was going to live here for the rest of my life. Maybe it would be prudent for me to start giving more thought to my plans in the long term and the situation of the people around me, including what I was going to do about Techi's uncle. Though this might be wishful thinking, if possible, I also wanted to make friends with beastfolk who had the same kind of values as him.

This internal self-reflection session went on as I played a second round of the board game with Kon. He was busy rolling his dice and moving his piece on the board when he looked at me and gave me a bright, overjoyed smile.

I blinked. "Hm? Did something happen?"

His smile showed up out of nowhere, filled with an odd elation I couldn't decipher. When I voiced my question, Kon pointed behind me. Specifically, he was pointing through the sliding screens—which I'd left open to let in fresh air—and past the veranda. The only thing of note there was the shelf I'd set up for my potted plant.

I turned and looked over my shoulder. The Fusang sapling was there, enshrined in the plant pot.

My eyes widened.

Flowers. Flowers of every color—white, yellow, peach, scarlet, orange, violet—were blooming all over its few, tiny branches. In fact,

the branches were overpopulated to the point that you couldn’t even fit more even if you tried.



I was completely taken aback by the sight. *What in the world is going on?* "Huh…?" I whimpered weakly.

It was simply surreal. I could understand blooming flowers, but there should be a limit to how many flowers could naturally grow on a tree. *Is the sapling desperate and indulging in self-destructive tendencies? Or is it teasing me in some way?* I squinted at it. *Hmm… Maybe it has some kind of will of its own and bloomed all these flowers to try and send me a message… I can't tell, but that could be a possibility.*

I sighed. "There are so many things I can't make heads or tails of, especially that tree. It only leaves me with more questions every time it does something."

Kon, beaming from ear to ear, replied in a merry and ecstatic voice. "I dunno either, but that thing grows bigger or blooms flowers when you do good stuff, right, Mikura? Which means that those flowers are like medals proving that you did good things! I like these medals!" His smile broadened even more. "Hee hee hee…"

Then, he resumed moving his piece across the board. Seeing the joy that still bloomed profusely on his face, I smiled. *Well, if Kon's happy about it, I'm not complaining.*

Deciding I'd put it behind me, I shifted my gaze back onto the board game, where I was at an overwhelming disadvantage. Hoping that I could turn the tables somehow, I gripped my dice with determination and got into my battle stance. And then, I performed my ultimate throw on the board, clinging to that slim sliver of hope.



THE next day came around.

My match score in the board game yesterday had been a dismal record of defeats. While I did the chores, I mused that I should use a dice app when we had another board game session. Soon, Kon arrived—but his entrance was unusual today. Instead of running, he walked to the veranda. Instead of wearing a wide smile, he had a conflicted expression on his face as he tilted his head.

Usually, he was the one to address me first with his classic "Incoming!" line, but it was missing today. I took the initiative. "Welcome, Kon," I greeted him.

"Ah, hi Mikura! I'm here!" he exclaimed, climbing onto the veranda from the garden. He proceeded to the bathroom to wash his hands, then endearingly plopped down on his usual seat in the living room.

I frowned slightly with concern, sitting down across the low table from him with two cups of chilled barley tea I'd just taken out from the fridge. "Hey, is everything all right?"

"Thank you!" Kon exclaimed before reaching out for his cup and taking big gulps of his drink. "Um, there was something bothering me, and I've been thinking about it the whole time."

Raising an eyebrow, I asked, "Something bothering you? Go on, what is it?"

Kon tilted his head quizzically. "Before I left my house, Mommy was cleaning the freezer. She said that she's gotta stock up on all kinds of things from now on, like ice cream. And then, she found some ice cream from three years ago deep in the freezer that's been hiding behind other stuff. I got a huge surprise when Mommy opened it and ate it up right away. I mean, it's been there for three years… Is she going to be okay?"

Ahhh, so that's what happened. After Kon started hanging out with me, he'd learned about best-before dates. Ever since, he'd started paying attention to them during shopping or cleanup. In fact, searching for the best-before-date label had even become a small game of his. Therefore, in his eyes, he must be extremely bothered by how his mother had eaten ice cream that sounded like it was past its recommended consumption date.

I chose to enlighten him. "The thing is, Kon, ice cream doesn't actually have an expiry date. As long as they stay frozen properly, you can eat one from three years ago or even ten years ago."

This information must have piqued his interest, because his big and round eyes became even bigger. Curiosity burned within his orbs as he raised his voice. "Even ten years ago?! Ice cream lasts that long?!"

"Yep, it does." I nodded. "With meat and fish, you have something called freezer burn. If you leave them frozen in the freezer for a long time, they lose their flavor or texture, but the ingredients used in ice cream means there's a low chance for freezer burn to ruin it. Of course, it's a case-by-case thing, but in general, ice cream lasts relatively long."

"Ohhh! That's so interesting!" Then, he blinked, as if an idea occurred to him. "Huh? Would that make ice cream a preserve?"

I hummed in thought. "I suppose you could say that they preserve well in the freezer, but it's pretty rare for people to label them that. But I think it wouldn't be mistaken to call them preserves. I mentioned the issue with meat and fish earlier, which also happens to vegetables and fruits. If you put in the necessary effort and use the right measures though, you can make them last in the freezer. For example, storing them in the right freezer bags. Lately, you can find frozen food with long expiry dates everywhere on the market. There are also frozen vegetables and frozen fruits available in supermarkets and convenience stores. Have you seen them before?"

"Nope!" For some reason, Kon replied with overflowing confidence in his tone.

Grinning with amusement, I stood up and walked over to the kitchen fridge. From the freezer, I took out a store-bought bag of frozen strawberries. After fetching a small bowl and a spoon, I returned to Kon's side.

"This is an example of frozen fruit." I lifted the bag so that he had a good view of it. "You could choose to make them yourself instead of buying them, but it's said that with frozen fruits, it's more delicious to make them in commercial freezers with powerful refrigeration. So if possible, I'd recommend buying them. Of course, there are ways to make your frozen homemade fruits tasty as well. If you are particular about where your fruit was produced and whether they were frozen in season, homemade ones will turn out better."

Carefully, I handed the bag over to Kon. He gripped the chilly bag steadily before thoroughly reading all the text written on the

bag: the product name, the list of ingredients, the area of origin, the nutrition facts label, as well as the recommended storage instructions.

Frozen fruits were a different category from ice cream, so there was a clear best-before date printed on it. Naturally, Kon checked it and muttered, "Huuuh…" before placing his hands on the opening of the bag. He looked at me, as if to ask, "Can I open it?"

I smiled and nodded. He proceeded to open the package skillfully, all the way to the edge of the bag. Lifting the bag, he gently rolled the contents into the bowl. "Whoa! They look just like normal strawberries! But they're frozen stiff!" He sniffed a couple of times with confusion. "It…doesn't smell that nice though?"

Nodding again, I explained, "Yeah. When frozen, fruits don't have much of an aroma. And well, it's not just because it's frozen. Usually, the type of fruits they use to make frozen fruits are somewhat inferior in taste and rank compared to the delicious ones you find on display in a supermarket. It would be a waste to freeze them, after all—you'll want to eat the good and fresh ones as they are.

"Because of that, the most important part about frozen food is that they last long, which means that you can enjoy certain food even when it's not the right season. Taste and aroma come second. Of course, if you use good strawberries, your frozen fruit will also be tastier. But well… This is the compromise most people must make with frozen preserves, including frozen fruit."

I paused my lecture there, tapped on my phone, and searched up the photos of a few different types of frozen preserves. I showed them to Kon as I continued, "Freezing food is a convenient technique for periods like the New Year, when supermarkets are closed for the holidays. You can also purchase in bulk when certain ingredients are cheap, freeze them, and use them bit by bit whenever necessary. This helps you save money, so as you can see, frozen food has its merits. But unfortunately, it's completely different from the types of preserves I love—the appeal of frozen food isn't quite what I'm looking for.

"That said, I have to say it's a profound art that's so popular that people even write dedicated books about it." I shrugged and pulled up even more photos on the Internet. "Anyway, it's outside the scope of my interests, so I don't think I'd ever make them at home. I *would* buy them and have a small collection so that I can eat and cook with them whenever I want to though. Oh, and with frozen fruits, if you eat them half-frozen, they become a cold and refreshing dessert that can taste even better than fresh fruit in summer."

I picked up one strawberry from the bowl and plopped it into my mouth. I moved my jaw, biting firmly into the slightly thawed, frosty and hard fruit, thoroughly savoring its flavors and texture. The frozen strawberry must have looked appetizing, because Kon also picked up a thawing strawberry with his spoon and carried it into his mouth.

It wasn't all that sweet or sour. Neither was its fragrance delectable—in fact, it was kind of bland. However, it was cold, and the hard, chunky texture was fun to chew. In the sweltering summer that was right around the corner, nothing was more relieving than this coolness.

…I didn't know whether Kon thought that far, but he seemed to have taken a liking to his latest endeavor. He moved his mouth vigorously and beamed at me.

If you thought it was too tasteless, you could mix it with yogurt, use it in your homemade desserts, or even put a tiny one on your pancakes as decoration. As I stared absentmindedly at Kon's smile, I thought, *Once the heat starts settling in, I think I could pull up a few recipes with frozen fruits as an accent and entertain him with them.*

After we savored the cool texture and subtle taste of our frozen strawberries, Kon let out a big exhale. His tiny frame trembled slightly.

Oh. Maybe that amount of frozen strawberries was too much for his small body… Has the cold gotten to him? Concerned, I gingerly reached out a hand and touched his small hands and forehead, but they didn't feel particularly cold. In fact, possibly due

to his fur, they even felt hot to the touch. It seemed that the frozen strawberries had been a slight surprise to his body, which had been hotter than a normal human's, causing it to briefly shiver.

Breathing out a sigh of relief, I commented, "I thought the frozen strawberries were too cold for you, but your body temperature is so high that mere frozen treats can't put a damper on it at all. With such a high body temperature and a luscious coat of fur, I feel like you're going to struggle when it's midsummer." Since I was already touching his forehead, my hands moved up and patted his head lightly.

Kon closed his eyes contently, his ears twitching minutely as he replied, "It's not that bad since I'm going to change into my summer coat soon. But I guess it's a bit of a struggle, yeah. It's what I have to deal with every single year though, so I'm pretty much prepared."

He added, "When it's super-duper hot, Techi will set up a pool at the rest area near the orchard. We'll jump in to cool down, come out and work hard, then dive in again. We make sure to bring our water bottles, and even if we forget them, Techi will prep all kinds of things just in case, so we've never lost the battle against the summer heat before!"

That was news to me. "A pool, huh? That's smart. True, if you can dip in a pool from time to time, it should help a lot. A normal human would probably catch a cold because they'll get too cold in the wind, but I guess you guys are fine because you've got your fur to help you out? Techi even makes sure you are properly hydrated…" I nodded to myself. "Yep, Techi definitely goes in thoroughly prepared."

As if he'd been the one receiving the praise, Kon nodded happily. "When it's summer—well, more like just before summer, which is now, the bugs get all energetic. This is also the most important period of our work! The chestnuts and walnuts grow bigger and yummier as autumn creeps up, so that's when the bugs strike! We gotta swat all of them down! Some even secretly cut open holes inside the nuts and lay their eggs inside, so it's seriously hectic in summer. Sometimes, we even do day and night shifts to protect

the trees. Hmm, our busiest times are probably from summer to autumn."

"N-Night shift?!" I blurted. "Y-You go that far?! Working night shifts at your age?! Actually, is that even allowed?!"

"Yep, it's perfectly fine!" Kon beamed at me. "It's not like we do it every single day! Plus, it's also a chance for all of us to hang out and have fun until late at night, so it's super exciting! Daddy said that it's something like a field trip or a training camp, and that I should do my best!"

I breathed out a sigh of relief. "O-Oh, so that's how it is. It's not completely work, you see it more as recreation, huh? True, summer is iconic as a season for camps and festivals, so that would be kind of fun. Still… I see, I never knew all of you work so, so hard… In that case, maybe I should prepare something too, like refreshments or snacks."

I fell into a contemplative silence, and I was so absorbed that my hand, which had been stroking Kon's head, stilled. Seeing that, Kon moved away from my hand, shook his body vigorously from head to toe, then used his tiny paws to pat down his somewhat disheveled fur.

"If you want to bring refreshments, something cold would be awesome!" Kon chirped. "Like juice or ice cream! It can get somewhat chilly at night, but it's humid and boiling most of the day, so we'll get all sweaty when we work. Something that'll help us cool right down like the frozen strawberries just now would be perfect. Oh, it would be even better if you went ahead and made frozen fruits, Mikura! If you use good fruits and freeze them carefully, they'll become much tastier than the ones we had just now, right?"

I blinked and considered it. "Ah, hmm… Yeah, I guess I could. The freezer unit I've got in the warehouse is commercial grade—I can freeze fruits rapidly and preserve the flavors. It's not my personal hobby, but I'm very open to making some for you and your friends. I've made things like ice cream and sherbet before, and now, if we add frozen fruits to the menu… I think that should make a nice list of refreshments?"

"It would be very awesome!" Kon beamed, looking at me with innocent eyes shining with anticipation. "If you're the one making them, they'll be amaaazing!"

Frankly, the taste of frozen fruits was highly dependent on the taste of the fruit itself—you couldn't get something that was more delicious than the ingredients you used. Therefore, it didn't matter who was making them. But Kon had so much faith and hope in me—frozen fruits weren't my thing, but I could never say no to Kon.

There's a chance that as I search up recipes on the Internet, I might find methods to add taste to the frozen fruits. Who knows? Let's give this a shot!

I repeat, I didn't have much of an appreciation for making frozen fruits. That said, I often needed to use fridges and freezers when I made preserves. In fact, I had several jars of jam stored inside the fridge. When I make umeboshi, the fridge is also my good companion. Preserves and fridges are practically inseparable, but for some reason, I've never stepped into the field of frozen preserves until now.

Well, maybe not for some reason*. I know why. I was convinced that I'm not interested in them and that they don't fit my definition of preserves, so I haven't even done any research on them.* Better late than never, as they say. This was a good opportunity to learn about something new, and if I could make the kids happy, it was extremely worthwhile.

I was the owner of the orchard, and these children were even doing night shifts to protect my orchard. I owed them this much, at the very least.

The question was, what kind of fruits should I use? *Let's see… I still see strawberries in the supermarket, and blueberries are in season too. Both should be nice options. Then there're watermelons—hang on, are they even an option? They've got so much water in them that I don't think freezing them will yield good results… Other than that, maybe pineapples would work? Ah, I see a lot of frozen lychees and grapes on display, I could think about those… And of course, you've got to have Satsuma mandarins—they are a classic.*

No, Mikura, don't get carried away. I shook my head. *Grapes are obviously out of season, so I need to think more carefully about this. Hmm… Fruits in season, fruits in season… Oh yeah, that reminds me. There's a certain fruit that should be in season soon.*

A flash of inspiration struck me. It's a highly versatile fruit that is delectable fresh, delectable as jam, delectable in all kinds of recipes, and delectable as frozen fruit. Yes, you guessed it: cherries. If there was a ranking for fruits you'd buy on impulse whenever you chance upon them in a supermarket, cherries would definitely make it into the top three. Once you start eating them, you can't stop—they're fruits with a mysterious allure.

I was confident that the children would love frozen cherries. Furthermore, I could even use the extra to make desserts such as cherry pie. *Yeah, it's a great option.*

Nodding to myself with determination, I stood up. It was still all up in the air—I didn't know whether I was going to freeze cherries in the end. What was important right now was that thinking about cherries made me crave them like crazy, so I made the preparations to visit the supermarket and buy some right away.

"CHERRIES! When I have bright red cherries, they make my tummy very merry~!" Maestro Kon sang his song happily as he sat on my shoulders.

I was walking to the supermarket while giving the beastchild a ride on my shoulders. After I made some progress down the forest path, I called out to Kon, who was more chipper than usual. "I see you like cherries very much."

"Yep! I LOVE them!" he declared. "They're not super sweet, and their pits are big and annoying, but…I just crave them for some reason!"

Frankly, I didn't fully understand his opinion, but I could empathize with parts of it. Then, he began rocking his body left and right on my shoulders. So that he wouldn't fall, I held onto his tiny legs firmly before I said, "Well, I love them too, so I get you there.

They’re a yummy snack fresh, you can make jam and sherbet out of them, and you can even preserve them in syrup and alcohol. I guess they’re a bit like strawberries and plums in terms of what you can do with them. The only problem is that they’re a bit pricey.”

“Ohhh, I think Mommy said something like that too.” Kon nodded. “They’re tiny and you can hold onto the green part, so they are easy to eat and binge. Mommy often gets mad at me, telling me to *a-pree-shiate* them properly! Oh, and we also scatter the seeds in the garden because they might grow into sweet cherry trees!”

I smiled. “That reminds me, I think I did something similar when I was a child. And if I remember this right, I think there was a town out there where cherry pit spitting is a sport?”

We enjoyed casual banter as I continued walking. When we reached one area with residential houses lined up along the road, Kon’s body suddenly tensed up, even though there wasn’t anything of note I could see. He hugged my head and squeezed hard.

Did something happen? Concerned, I was just about to ask Kon when I also abruptly detected what had set Kon off.

An unpleasant presence was stalking us—without warning, it had gotten so close that even a human like me could sense it. With my hands clamped down on Kon’s legs, I whipped my head around.

Three people stood behind us. I hesitated to describe them as such, but their attire was somewhat dirty and grimy all over, representing the equally nasty characters they clothed. They stared at us with a foul look in their eyes.

And of course, they were beastfolk. They had canine ears, bear-like ears, and chipmunk ears respectively. *Wait… Could that man with chipmunk ears be…?*

The next moment, they clicked their tongues with displeasure and closed in on me.



I immediately turned on my heel and prepared to run for the hills. But then, I realized that there was an elderly man who stood in front of me. Seeing his bitter and chagrined expression, I stopped in spite of myself.

The elderly man was none other than Mr. Karashina, the president of the community association who usually watched beastfolk go by from his spot in the parking lot in front of his house. I couldn't get a read on his expression—was he angry at the situation, or did he see it as a nuisance? He slowly walked over and went past Kon and me, who were utterly perplexed.

As he approached the trio, he spoke up in a calm and mild voice. "Now look who we've got here. Three familiar fellows I've definitely seen around. Tell me, why aren't you busy at work at this time of day, hm? What's the party about? If you have nothing better to do with your time or have some business with me, I can indulge you and have a chat whenever you wish… But I suggest you get a proper job and do something with your life first. I don't mind referring you to a few places if you like. If you manage to become employed in a respectable factory, I'm sure that your relatives would be absolutely delighted."

Though his tone was mild, you could feel the fiery anger simmering underneath. Mr. Karashina had an aura to him that was polished and ripened with age, and you could feel the power hidden deep inside his spirit. The three men were rendered speechless, gritting their teeth as they quailed and took a few steps back.

It was evident that the three had planned to give me, a newcomer and a human, some kind of trouble. But they didn't have the courage nor the strength of character to face Mr. Karashina, their acquaintance and a man with many connections as the president of the community association. They didn't just retreat a few steps—they turned on their heels and ran as fast as their legs could carry them. They didn't leave any words behind, nor did they ever turn back.

After seeing them off, Mr. Karashina promptly reached into his trouser pocket and fished out his phone. His fingers moved with the

agility and speed that was mind-boggling at his age before he called someone.

"Yo, Hisa, it's been a while. I know this is sudden, but those three are trying to do something stupid… Yeah, *those* three. It seems like they've got some beef with Moriya, our newcomer… Exactly, the great-grandchild of Mr. Tomiyasu, that's him. Could you dispatch a few beastfolk? …Yeah, around his house and his orchard. I'll warn the guy himself just in case… Right, you'll prolly have to keep an eye out until those three idiots get a good earful from their parents."

He ended the call before fluidly tapping away at his phone again. Then, he put his phone away and took out something else from the same pocket while he was at it—a small and round keyholder of some sort. He turned to us and handed the keyholder to Kon.

This time, he addressed me. "Seems like a few morons have their eye on you, which won't be pleasant. But well, you can rest easy. As long as I'm the president of the community association, I won't let them succeed at any of their tomfoolery. It'll be a bit annoying for a while with grampas and grandmas who've got a lot of spare time hanging around your house and orchard, but think of it as a necessary expense or something."

Mr. Karashina then turned to Kon. "As for you, Kon, make sure to stick to this fellow and have that personal alarm ready at all times. Once you've got that ringing, no matter where you are in the Wilds, someone will come running to help. I'm sure that those idiots will run the moment you use it too."

Kon held the personal alarm firmly in his hand and nodded solemnly before clinging to my head.

It had all happened too quickly—I was still reeling from my shock in a daze, but when Kon's claws dug gently into my scalp, I found my composure again. Hurriedly, I bowed gratefully. "Th-Thank you very much for all your help, Mr. Karashina. It sounds like I've given you a lot of trouble…"

Mr. Karashina grimaced in response, looking somewhat sullen as he harrumphed. "Now stop right there. Spare me from formalities

like that. By all rights, I should have nipped things in the bud before it escalated to something like this—that's my job."

He paused before muttering begrudgingly, "I suppose you could come to thank me with boxes of sweets or something when everything's settled. Make sure to have plenty so that I can pass them on to the grandpas and grandmas who are helping you out. … Oh, and you were on your way to the supermarket, weren't you? Hurry up and get on with it then. Those morons probably don't have the willpower to do anything immediately after I gave them a warning, so finish what you've come to do before they find the motivation again."

Then, Mr. Karashina waved his hand in a shooing motion and said, "Scram."

Once again, I bowed. "I can't thank you enough, Mr. Karashina," I said before I resumed my journey to the supermarket at a brisk pace.

Midway, Kon, who was clinging to my head, whispered, "Grampa Karashina is SOOO cool!"

Nodding, I whispered back, "Right, he was really cool back there." You'd almost think we'd been onlookers with my carefree reply.



I made my way to the supermarket and purchased cherries as well as ingredients for dinner tonight with Kon, who'd started gripping onto my head with a lot more force after the incident. When I made my way back to my house, there were elderly beastfolk patrolling the vicinity—they must be the people Mr. Karashina had arranged. Before anything else, we headed to the bathroom and washed our hands.

After I meticulously washed my hands with soap, Kon, who was still clinging to my head, came down and washed his hands like usual. Then, he darted up my shoulders once more and glued himself to my head as if nothing had happened.

I definitely wouldn't call Kon featherlight. Having his weight on my shoulders for so long had caused a significant burden on my muscles, and everything from my neck to my shoulders was stiff and taut. But this was Kon's way of protecting me out of concern, and I didn't want to discourage him. *Oh well, that's just life.* I let out a small sigh of resignation as I went over to the kitchen to put away our groceries in the fridge.

Once that was done, I busied myself with making tea and tea confectionery for the elderly beastfolk who were kind enough to patrol the area. I boiled some water and transferred it into a vacuum water pot, then prepared a small teapot, teacups, and tea leaves. I fetched a large bowl and crammed it with every kind of sweets and snacks I could find. Moving everything onto a tray, I put it down on the veranda and called out to the grandpas and grandmas, "Please help yourself!"

Next, I moved back into the kitchen and began washing the cherries I'd bought today. Pouring cold water into a large bowl, I put in my cherries and washed them carefully so that I wouldn't damage the fleshy fruit.

"Oooh, are you already making something? What is it?" Kon asked curiously.

"Oh, I haven't searched up any recipes yet, so this is just for eating," I replied as I continued working on the cherries. "I'm going to wash some, arrange them in a bowl, then enjoy them at our own pace while I do some proper research. The actual cooking will start after that."

If I concluded after my research that all I had to do was to chuck them in the freezer, I could simply do that. But if there were any tips and tricks about making them better, I wanted to take proper notes and challenge my first attempt at frozen fruit.

I was bracing myself for failure because this was completely uncharted territory for me. Trying your hand at something new and succeeding without a hitch every time was rather rare in my opinion, so I was going to test with a small batch of cherries as an experiment.

I finished transferring the cherries into a bowl and carried it into the living room. With Kon still on my shoulders, I sat down at my usual seat. I reached out for the cherries—and sensed that Kon was starting to fidget restlessly on my head. He'd move his hips, as if he was trying to stand up, but he'd sit down again. His hands were moving all over the place as well.

Curling my lips with a small knowing smile, I dealt the finishing blow. "It would be terrible manners to eat on top of someone's head, so you've got to sit down properly, Kon."

Kon's body jolted, possibly out of shock. Then, I felt him raise both arms in surrender. With the agility of an acrobat, he scaled down my back and settled in his designated seat adorably.

But I wasn't going to go easy on him just because he was cute. I continued, "Not so fast. You touched my hair, so you've got to wash your hands one more time."

Being the good kid as ever, Kon didn't even protest or whine as he scampered to the bathroom, promptly washed his hands, then returned to his seat.

I smiled and pushed the bowl of cherries closer to him. "Perfect. You're such a good boy, Kon. I know that you were trying to protect me, and I'm really happy you care so much. But hair isn't the cleanest thing in the world, so let's do this in moderation."

"Got it, Mikura!" With a smile, Kon nodded. He reached out for the cherries, plucking one up by the stem and carrying it into his mouth. After chewing on the fleshy fruit, a brilliant smile lit up his face. I held out a small plate for him to spit out the pit. First, he placed the stem he was holding onto the plate, then carefully spat out the cherry core.

Without hesitation, he reached for the next cherry and soon spat out his second pit. He was smiling from ear to ear, looking more delighted than he usually was after a nice treat. The batch I'd bought must've made an impression on him, because he exclaimed, "The cherries today are really yummy!"

He made the cherries look so delicious that I couldn't resist the urge to reach for a cherry myself. Slowly and happily, we savored one cherry after another. These cherries weren't just sweet—they

held a hint of sourness, combined with the unique aroma and tantalizing flavors special to the fruit. Due to the large cores, the edible part was relatively small, but it was still so addictive that you couldn't help but reach for more.

As I enjoyed the exquisite cherries, I placed my phone on the table and began tapping away, searching for ways to process cherries and how to freeze them. When I came across a certain title, I froze. I looked at it again just to make sure my eyes hadn't been playing tricks on me, but I froze a second time.

Kon noticed that something was off. He rushed over to me with the pitter-patter of tiny feet and peered at my phone screen, wondering what had happened. Keen interest and fascination overtook his expression as he chirped, "Huuuh, I wonder what that tastes like!"

This is the gist of what we were reading:

Cherries can be frozen directly, but if you preserve them in the liquid before freezing them, they will preserve for longer and maintain their taste and texture. A liquid that's denser than water is recommended, such as juice. Ideally, you would want cherry juice, which would preserve your fruits even better.

If you don't have cherry juice available, your next best option is the concentrate of Calp-is, a fermented milk drink, which is thick and gooey. Transfer your cherries into a container such as an ice tray, pour in the concentrate, and allow it to solidify in the freezer. That's all you have to do.

I was shocked. *Preserved in juice, of all things?! And the second best choice is the concentrate of that slightly pricey drink?!* I would have never imagined that you could preserve food in such mediums.

I scrolled down. Apparently, freezing in dense liquids meant that the fruit wouldn't become all soggy and watery, and the flavors of the cherries wouldn't seep into the liquid either, meaning that you could preserve them in good condition.

I hadn't tried it myself, but the text on the website was practically oozing confidence, and the word "Recommended!" was written in a relatively large and glittery font. Judging by the comments on the post, most of the people who'd tried out the recipe had good things to say about it as well.

Placing a hand on my chin, I hummed thoughtfully. "Looks like this might be worth trying out? I mean, even if the flavors end up blending into each other in the worst-case scenario, it sounds like cherries and that concentrate mix well together. Above all else, the hardest part about this recipe is buying the ingredients, which is a big bonus. …Yeah, I like it. Let's test it out right away after we finish the cherries in this bowl."

When unopened, the specific concentrate in question could last a long time, and its refreshing taste was perfect for the sweltering days that were waiting for us. Because of that, I'd already prepared a sizable supply of them at home. Freezing them with cherries meant that I wouldn't need to use up that much either, which was another plus.

Mind made up, Kon and I proceeded to eat up the cherries in the bowl one by one and tidied up after we were finished. Wasting no time, we immediately dove into making frozen cherries.



THE recipe for frozen cherries in fermented milk drink is extremely simple.

Wash your cherries carefully and take off the stems. Arrange them in containers such as ice cube trays or freezer trays. Pour in your fermented milk drink concentrate. Chill in the freezer until your mixture solidifies.

As I repeated this series of tasks, I said absentmindedly, "If the cherries don't lose flavor for a long time when frozen like this, I can probably use the frozen cherries in all kinds of recipes during autumn and winter. That sounds fun. Especially with fruit pie—I personally feel that they are more delicious when you dig in during

those two colder seasons, so if they can hold out for that long, I'd love to bake some cherry pie and see how it turns out."

Kon, who was watching over me from his usual chair, began sniffing audibly. "Cherry pie! I don't think I've had any of those before. Rei makes things like apple pie and strawberry pie though!" He paused. "Oh yeah, by the way, there are all kinds of pies out there, right? Like meat pie?"

I nodded. "Yep, meat pie certainly exists. There's even fish pie. You can probably make a pie out of anything."

"Huuuh… Fish pie…" Kon inclined his head with intrigue. "When I hear the word pie, I only think of sweet things… I can't really imagine what a meat or fish pie would be like."

"Hmm, but from what I remember, people mainly used to fill pie with meat, fish, and vegetables in the past. But gradually, as the times changed, putting in sweet things like fruits gradually became more popular. That's what I heard, at least. It's because pie is designed to be a portable meal you can carry along wherever you go, such as when you're on a journey."

Kon's big, doe eyes blinked. He looked up at the ceiling and tried his best to remember what he knew about pies before turning to me again and blinking with confusion. "Mikura, um… I don't really think you can carry pies around with you though," he said in a gentle, persuasive tone, like an adult trying to explain something to a child.

I let out hearty laughter and grinned. "Well, Kon, the pies a long time ago aren't like the ones you're imagining. How do I put this… With most pies, you didn't, no, couldn't eat the crust outside—ah, that's the shell. They were thick and hard so that they could withstand prolonged baking inside a stove with high firepower, so the shells were actually more of a baking dish."

I continued, "The pies didn't have a lattice crust like the ones we put on top of pies nowadays. The thick crust covered the entire filling like armor. After they were cooked through, people used to wrap the pies up with cloths and store them in their bags before they headed out somewhere. When you want to eat them, you cut open the crust with a knife and scoop out the filling, along with a

small part of the inner crust that slightly softened, with a spoon. You were never meant to eat the outside from the beginning, so it's fine even if it gets dirty or damaged. They are quite sturdy too, which made them good as portable food."

Kon's eyes widened. "That's cool… Hm, but I'm still having trouble imagining it! Sounds like people from a long time ago carried around strange things as food."

"Yep. Over in Europe, where pie was widespread, long-distance travel wasn't really long-distance travel. Unlike medieval Japan, if you walked a couple of days or so over there, you'd come across a town or a monastery. That's why they carried around food that prioritized taste—maybe they never considered traveling nonstop for a long time in the first place."

I continued, "Anyway, that's basically what ancient pies were like at the beginning, but our ovens improved with time, and thick crusts to that extent were no longer necessary. Eventually, it evolved into our modern-day pie, where the crust is edible too. Or at least, that's what I read. Around the same time, sweet baked goods, such as sweet pastry, saw an incredible rise in popularity. Because of that, sweet pies with fillings such as fruits also became more mainstream."

"That's so interesting!" Kon exclaimed. "Did they also invent the lattice covering that lets you see inside around the same time?"

"Probably? I'm not too knowledgeable about the history of pies, to be honest." I shrugged. "Nowadays, you even have pies where you stack up a big pile of fruits on top of the pie shell without any coverings whatsoever, so you could say that modern pies are nothing like their ancestors. This kind of heaped fruit pie…probably isn't that portable."

Kon waved his hands enthusiastically. "Oh, but Mikura, I love those kinds of pies! Rei makes the kind of strawberry pie with loads of strawberries, but it's so good! They're amazing! I like them just as much as your toast with jam!"

I couldn't fight off a wry smile at that. *Ranking the pie of a professional on the same level as the toast with jam of an amateur? If Rei hears this, he might faint on the spot.* "I-I'm honored to hear

that, thanks. But, uh… Maybe you shouldn't say things like that around Rei, just in case."

Kon inclined his head with bewilderment, unable to grasp why I'd said that. Meanwhile, I'd finished getting through all the cherries and was in the middle of cleaning and putting things away. In the back of my mind, I wondered whether I should make an extra batch of frozen cherries.

Cherries were heavenly and versatile in all kinds of recipes, whether it be pie or cakes. If I could find a way to preserve them for a long time, it would be fantastic. The problem was their price—even if they preserved well, purchasing in bulk would burn a hefty hole in my wallet. *Hmm… This is tough.* Either way, I would have to check whether my current batch of frozen cherries turned out well first before I could think about the next step.

Just as I was weighing options in my head, I noticed Kon's ears twitching slightly. The next moment, the phone in the pocket of Kon's overalls began ringing, signaling a call.

Now that was rare—a call on Kon's phone? As I blinked in surprise, Kon stood up, took out his phone nimbly, and tapped on the accept button. He struggled slightly to hold up the phone that was quite large for his face as he answered the call.

"Yes, this is Sanmaya speaking. …Ah, right, this is Kon speaking. Mmhmm… Yeah… Okay, got it. Yes, I know. …Yes, yes, Mommy, I hear you loud and clear! Okay, see you later." He tapped on the end call button and put his phone away in his pocket. After letting out a small sigh, he sat back down on his chair as if nothing had happened.

I frowned slightly. "Can I ask what happened? Is it an emergency?"

Kon said in a nonchalant voice, "Oh, Mommy just said that they've just scheduled the date for my arranged marriage *inta-view.*"

Ahh, it's only an arranged marriage interview, thank good… My thoughts ground to an abrupt halt. *Wait. Arranged marriage interview?! For Kon?!*

I gaped. Though I'd heard he was going to have arranged marriage interviews a while ago, I still couldn't help but be surprised

when I heard it again, especially since it had a definite date now. I wasn't Kon's family, direct or even indirect, so this should be none of my business. But even while knowing that in my mind, this came as a greater shock than the scuffle with Techi's uncle. My heart pounded hard against my chest, and an odd sense of anxiety gripped every cell of my body.

Kon’s Marriage Interview

JUST as a reminder, the arranged marriage interviews in the Wilds are completely different from human ones on the other side of the border. You could say that it’s a culture that came into being because beastfolk start working from early childhood. The parents from both sides will talk with each other and ascertain whether the other child is suitable as the future marriage partner for their own child.

Of course, the children involved would converse too, and the parents would also check whether the children have good affinity, but this is secondary in the end. The most important part is the judgment of the parents. Apparently, this judgment phase is especially important for Kon, who earned a small fortune due to the incident that happened a while ago.

The interesting thing about the marriage interviews in the Wilds is that even in the case when children meet each other at their workplace, eventually fall in love and have plans of marriage, these interviews would still be held for the couple in question. If I looked at it another way, the arranged marriage interviews of beastfolk might be something close to a couple greeting each other’s parents in the human world.

On that thought, the conversation Techi had with my parents when they came over and my conversation with Techi’s parents could be one such “marriage interview” in the culture of beastfolk.

In summary, the “marriage interviews” in the Wilds mean a completely different thing compared to the same words on the other side of the border, but it’s still certainly an important first step in any marriage—which means that it’s a highly important event in your life.

That was what I thought, but Kon’s attitude as he reported that his interview was scheduled was completely relaxed. Even after that,

he didn't even look nervous as he went about his business. He seemed more interested in the results of our frozen cherry experiment than his interview—perhaps that was because he was still a young child, or perhaps that was because he was Kon, the glutton. Funnily enough, a complete outsider like me was more anxious about this event than he was.

My anxiety didn't ease with time. My shock and bewilderment lasted all the way into that night.



ON the next day, after breakfast, I saw Techi off as she went to work. Just as I was about to start tackling the chores, Kon arrived with his usual bright, "Incoming!" He raced over, leaped onto the veranda, then sprinted into the bathroom. After washing his hands, he joined me in the living room.

"Welcome, Kon," I smiled, then hesitated. "Just checking… Your marriage interview is this Sunday, right?"

He inclined his head, as if he didn't understand why I was asking this question. "Yeah…?"

"Okay, got it… Sunday, huh?" I muttered to myself, thinking that I would probably maintain this anxious state all the way until Sunday despite it being none of my business.

That was when suddenly, relatively loud rustling rang out from the trees on the other side of the garden. For a moment, I suspected it was the grandpas and grandmas patrolling the area. But from what I remembered, they didn't go all the way into the forest, instead focusing their attention on the garden, the road, and the path leading to the orchard.

Could it be Techi's uncle and his friends then? At the same time, it seemed strange for them to make such a commotion so early in the morning as they made their way here from the forest. Why draw unnecessary attention when they knew I was already on the lookout?

If so, there was a high chance that it was some kind of wild animal, such as a boar or a deer. I frowned. *Is the animal repellent I*

used a while ago wearing out? I thought as I moved to the veranda, took up a position where I had a good view of the trees, then watched them warily. There was another loud rustle. Not a moment later, I spotted a tiny, shadowy silhouette jumping from a tree near the source of the sound onto another tree.

The size and the shape of the silhouette, as well as its movements, were very familiar to me—they were exactly like Kon. Which meant that the silhouette must be a chipmunk beastchild. With that, I relaxed my guard and called out to my mystery guest. "Is something the matter? Did you end up coming late to your work at the orchard?"

Most of the chipmunk beastfolk I saw around here were kids that worked at the orchard. It was hard to imagine that they'd be anyone else, but there was no reply from the silhouette.

I cocked my head. "Or…did you come here to find someone? Is it one of your siblings or friends?"

Another rustle. From the depths of the forest, a lone girl walked out into the light. She scuttled down the tree rapidly before running next to my legs. She seemed to be roughly around the same age as Kon, and she was wearing a blue dress, possibly to fit the summer theme. Small, cute ribbons were tied next to her ears. Her attire was the reason I'd assumed she was a girl.

I stared quizzically at her—I'd never seen her before. She wasn't one of the children working at the orchard.

But then, Kon, who'd stood at the ready next to me with his staff, gaped at her with surprise. "Sayo? Why are you here?"



Sayo. That was the cute name of Kon's acquaintance. *Hang on.* I could practically hear the gears turning in my mind. *A* girl *who's Kon's acquaintance… Could she be?*

While I was deep in thought, Sayo bowed politely and greeted me. "It's nice to meet you, Mister. I'm Sayori Ichishikishima." Though her voice was sweet, it was also dignified and assertive. "I'm Konshironushi Sanmaya's prospective marriage partner."

Sayori gave me the impression of a levelheaded and self-possessed girl. After her introduction, she stared long and hard at Kon with a nervous expression.

I smiled at her. "Thank you for your courteous greeting. My name is Mikura Moriya, it's nice to meet you too. I'm the owner of this house and the orchard farther down the path, and Kon, who works there, has been really nice and helpful to me. We're good friends."

Even after I returned her greeting, Sayori's gaze remained fixed on Kon. Meanwhile, Kon's expression transformed from flabbergasted to troubled. Fidgeting somewhat restlessly, he sent a pleading gaze in my direction.

Receiving his message, I glanced at Sayori, then looked back at Kon. I took turns to observe them as I spoke up. "Um, let's see… Sayori, I heard that you're going to have a marriage interview with Kon this Sunday. Just wondering, but is it all right for you to come see Kon ahead of time? If there's any issues with it, I might have to call your parents and ask them to fetch you."

My message was directed at both of them, and I was hoping for a response from either of these children, but all I received was silence. For some reason, a strange and somewhat terse stillness took over.

It stretched on. And on.

Feeling completely at a loss, I took out my phone from my trouser pocket, swiftly dialed Techi's number, and tapped firmly on the call button to initiate my SOS signal.

A marriage interview, naturally, isn't a one-sided affair. Just like how Kon and his parents are trying to appraise his potential spouse, the other party is doing the same for Kon. In terms of financial security, Kon is considered an excellent marriage candidate. Because of that, he's been flooded with offers of marriage interviews, which means that he is spoiled for choice—he's the one doing the choosing, not the one waiting to be chosen. That much is true, but Kon mentioned that his advantage isn't overwhelming or absolute. It only gives him a slight edge over his marriage interview partner.

And his current potential future spouse is his friend, a cute girl named Sayori Ichishikishima. Recently, Kon hasn't been doing work or hanging out with his friends, instead choosing to constantly stay in my house. Because of this, Sayori was concerned that he might be indulging in unsavory pastimes and ended up sneaking here to check up on him.

But her plan was to come in secret—she was going to be careful so that no one would discover her, so the fact that I'd noticed her had caught her completely off guard. Because of that, she'd been stumped, which led to her silence.

I only had all of this information because Techi managed to skillfully coax Sayori to speak from the other end of the call. *Wow, she sure is a professional preschool teacher. She really knows her way around kids,* I thought with admiration.

Techi had one last message for me. *"I'll head back when it's lunch break, so hold out until then."* She hung up.

By the time we finished the call, we'd moved into the living room. Sayori was sitting on her knees in front of the low table, her straightened back practically oozing dignity.

"Umm…" I hesitated before I addressed her. "Kon has been busy helping me out. We've been making food together and he's been my good companion in my hobby of making preserves, so I don't think there's anything you need to be worried about."

The young girl turned and looked straight at me with a solemn expression. Her eyes were slightly narrowed with a hint of scrutiny. It seemed that she didn't trust my words—or maybe it was more

accurate to say that she likely didn't trust me. I pressed my lips into a thin line, wondering what I should say to her.

But that was when Kon, who was sitting next to Sayori, spoke up first. "Sayo, it's okay, Mikura isn't a scary guy. He's never yelled at me even once, and whenever I say I want to eat something, he always makes it for me. He's also really close with Techi, so he isn't a bad person."

Sayori stared intently at Kon before sending a sharp gaze in my direction. She glanced at Kon again before she finally addressed me. "Please pardon my rudeness. This is my first time seeing a human in the flesh, so I'm afraid my fear got the better of me." She hesitated. "To be honest, I'm still a little scared, but if that's what Kon says, I will put my faith in you. And, um, I also have a question for you, if you don't mind… Are you really cooking with Kon? I mean, I have heard that's what you two have been doing in the rumors, but… truly? Sorry if I sound rude, but I never expected to hear that two men are busy with cooking."

I blinked. "Hm? Yeah, we are. Most of the time, I'm the main chef, but there were a few times when Kon worked hard and took over the reins. Plus, when it comes to cooking, no matter what gender you are, it's a good skill to have. Being a good cook has a direct connection with good health sometimes. I'm hoping that I can keep at it with Kon and that we can both become better cooks. Ah, no pressure, but you can even join us when you have time, Sayori. Do you want to try? You're always welcome here, even if you just want to sit and watch."

Hearing that, she silently cast down her eyes and mulled over my words for a moment. Then, looking between Kon and me, she replied, "That's very kind of you. I would love to come and watch, yes. But, um, before we move on…" She hesitated. "I don't mean to sound suspicious of you, but if what you're saying is true, is it possible for you to cook something as a demonstration? Would that be all right?"

Kon and I traded glances and had a silent exchange. We came to this conclusion: *Yeah, that should be perfectly fine.* Then, we nodded at the same time.

I looked up at the clock to check the time. It was going to be lunchtime soon, so I smacked my knees to psych myself up and climbed to my feet. "Sure. I'll prepare something right away." I turned and walked into the kitchen.

Meanwhile, Kon grabbed his bag, which he'd left in one corner of the living room, and took out his coverall apron before gearing up for his cooking ventures. I washed my hands and donned my apron as well.

Opening the fridge, I inspected it before calling out to Kon, who'd dashed up onto the counter next to the sink. "Hey Kon, what do you think about pizza toast today? It's something simple that even you should be able to prepare. You spread ketchup on the bread, cut up toppings and put them on, then cover it with a layer of cheese. That's all you have to do before you bake it in the oven. It's simple, delicious, and full of veggies too. Not a bad lunch, right?"

"Pizza! Toast!" he exclaimed with excitement. "That's so nostalgic! Wasn't that the first meal you cooked for me? Yeah, I think if I work hard, I can do it! I'll make food for you, me, Techi, and Sayo! All four of us!"

His declaration was the signal that began our cooking session.

Start off by washing your bell peppers and cutting them into bite-sized pieces. Peel and cut onions. Then, you'll want bacon from the supermarket—which is unfortunately out of stock at the moment, so we'll use scrumptious Vienna sausages, which are a tad on the pricey side. Cut them into thin, diagonal slices. Today, let's indulge ourselves a little and use plenty of good cheese.

With Kon's help, we processed our ingredients before spreading ketchup on one piece of bread at a time. Then, we piled on the ingredients carefully so that they wouldn't fall down easily. We sprinkled on a generous amount of cheese for the finishing touch, lined them up in the toaster oven, and turned it on.

While we waited for the pizza bread to cook, we put away the cooking utensils and did the dishes. While we were at it, we also made preparations for the next step, such as fetching plates for serving the pizza toast.

After we finished everything there was to do, I started one of my cooking tip sessions again. "By the way, when you use a lot of toppings or want to use big pieces of toast, it can take a longer time to bake. If you want to cut down on the time, you can quickly stir-fry your bell peppers and onions before you put them on, since they're what takes the longest to cook. When you stir-fry them, you can add in a bit of dashi stock, mushrooms, herbs, or salt and pepper. Choosing to add some other types of seasoning will make it taste better too.

"Now, if you want to make it better and fancier on top of that, you can even make your own homemade tomato sauce. Buuut going that far would take too much time and effort, so you will have to save that for an occasion when you've got plenty of spare time. A simple alternative would be using ready-made pizza sauce from the supermarket instead of ketchup."

Soon, the pizza toast was ready. I transferred the steaming hot toast onto plates and carried them over to the low table in the living room. While I was at it, I also brought cups and milk. After filling up the cups, everything was ready.

Techi chose that exact moment to return home—she had perfect timing. Once her hands were washed, all of us gathered around the low table and voiced our thanks for the food.

The four of us—Kon, Techi, the wide-eyed Sayori, and me—sank our teeth into our respective portions of pizza toast. There was a nice crunch as I bit down. Possibly because summer was approaching, the aroma of the bell pepper was especially sharp and crisp, which I highly appreciated. The generous helping of cheese was also excellent, and the ketchup added just the right amount of spice. *I can proudly say that we did a good job.*

After I finished my piece of pizza toast, I helped myself to some milk, then stood up and advanced into the kitchen. Today, we had one more glutton present, adding up to a total of three big eaters. If someone didn't take up a position in the kitchen and start up a tireless pizza toast factory, it would be a disaster in the making.

And so, I proceeded to bake seconds for everyone and deliver it to the living room. As I served the toast onto the three plates, I

spoke up. “For now, I’ve prepared two pieces of pizza toast for everyone, but if you want more, make sure to tell me. Having too much pizza toast might get boring, so you also have the options of things like toast with jam, toast with honey, and toast with honey and butter. Tell me if you prefer one of those. All right then, I’ll be heading back to the kitchen now… May I have your orders?”

Techi’s hand shot up into the air right away. She folded her fingers to display the number three. Kon followed her example. It appeared that both of them wanted a third piece of pizza toast. I nodded and then looked at Sayori. Though her mannerisms were very nervous and reserved, she quietly raised her hand and gave me a number three as well.

Thus began the toast feast of the three chipmunk beastfolk. As you would expect, three additional pieces of toast wasn’t nearly enough. They respectively added two pieces of toast with jam and a piece of toast with honey and butter onto the list before they were finally satisfied.

Other than the very beginning, Kon was totally absorbed in moving his mouth and enjoying his food. I felt like we were veering away from the initial goal of demonstrating his skills as a chef, but he’d participated zealously in the first round, so it should be all right.

Finishing up lunch, everyone headed over to the bathroom to brush their teeth—we lent Sayori an unused disposable toothbrush—then migrated back to the living room and lounged for the rest of our lunch break. I prepared barley tea for the kids and a stronger, more bitter tea for Techi. We passed the time by watching the TV collectively, enjoying our rest at our own pace.

This was when Sayori, who finished all her barley tea, let out a small exhale. She looked straight into my eyes and politely said, “Thank you very much for treating me to a delightful lunch. The pizza toast was tasty, yes, but the toast with jam was especially good, and I was very surprised. After seeing that coverall apron, it also makes sense that Kon is able to participate in cooking. I understand I was making a willful request, but you were willing to go this far despite that… I truly can’t thank you enough.”

I smiled and replied, “I’m glad you liked the food.”

She gave me a subdued nod.

Techi, who'd been watching over the entire exchange unblinkingly, turned and addressed Sayori. "In Kon's case, he's only able to visit and hang out in our house because he has saved up his money properly. He has plenty of savings, and he doesn't need more, so he's giving his share of the work to the others, who might need it more. Plus, he wasn't only having fun all day. He's cooking and learning how to make preserves at our place, so you don't have to be so anxious about him."

I didn't know what Sayori thought after hearing that, but she nodded slightly. And then, she fell into contemplative silence.

I'd already heard about this before, but the kids working at the orchard were paid in commissions. What mattered was how much time they spent at work and how much work they got done. Which meant that if there were more children working, there would be less work for each child, resulting in less income per person.

Meanwhile, Kon, who'd received compensation money for being dragged into the incident a while ago, had obtained a small fortune. Therefore, he'd chosen to deliberately take a break from work so that his assigned work and pay could go to his fellow coworkers. That was the reason he was popping in to visit every single day.

Now, if he were only hanging out and having fun, his parents might have had some very understandable complaints, but in truth, he barely spent any time playing. Most of his time was taken up by helping me with cooking, chores, and making preserves. After he went home, he'd either test out the new things he'd learned or impart them to his mother, a Japanese chef to the bone who was unfamiliar with Western food.

Even though he was in a position where he could play around all day, he didn't. Kon was a responsible, earnest, and energetic boy. There weren't any notable flaws to him either, so he would be an ideal candidate if you wanted to choose a prospective spouse.

But Sayori was still quite young. I could understand her unease about her marriage and possible marriage candidate. *Hopefully we've helped ease her anxiety through this lunch today, even if it's just a little.*

After lengthy pondering, Sayori jerked her head up at long last. She shifted her gaze onto Kon and said in a spirited voice, "Excuse me, Kon, may I have your opinion on full-time househusbands?! Personally, I wouldn't mind becoming a full-time housewife, but judging by what I have seen today, it looks like you have more opinions and expertise on household affairs. Even the food you made was very delicious, so I think that I can trust you to take care of the house! If you wish to become a house husband, I'll work very very hard in my studies and get a good job, so I think it's better for us to decide now and start planning things out with that in mind!"

Now that was certainly a speech Kon didn't expect. He stammered, "Huh? Um? Wha? W-Wait, we've got to wait until the marriage *inta-view* is finished to talk about stuff like this though." Though he was taken aback, he gave her a rational reply. "And we also need to talk with Daddy and Mommy—"

But Sayori cut him short. "I know that the marriage interview is important! But I think what's even more important is how we feel about each other! We could make a decision now then persuade our parents. There's nothing wrong with that!" Her eyes were practically glowing with passion and determination as she spoke. Her gaze was glued to Kon's every movement.

Only moments earlier, Sayori had been calm and collected. But in the blink of an eye, she became a young maiden hopelessly in love—no, more like a hungry hunter of love determined to capture her target. I froze, unsure whether I should be shocked or baffled.

What in the world was spurring Sayori on like this? Was it Kon's sizable savings? Or was it the fact that Kon had learned how to take care of the house and cook at my place?

Meanwhile, Kon was completely overwhelmed by Sayori's blazing eyes and resolute words. Feeling daunted, he sent pleading looks to Techi and me. Seeing that, Techi clapped her hands loudly, stopping Sayori in her tracks and getting the younger girl's attention.



Techi said patiently, "Sayori, you've already got a marriage interview scheduled with Kon. But now, you're trying to force your opinion on him, which isn't a good thing to do. Like Kon said, the right choice is to discuss such matters in front of your parents in an official setting during your interview. If you keep pushing your opinion here, at this rate, the interview might be called off altogether. It looks like you've taken Kon by surprise, so I suggest we stop here for today. It's okay, just have patience and wait until the day of your interview."

Those words seemed to have done the trick and helped Sayori regain her presence of mind. She bowed apologetically to Kon. "I'm sorry."

"O-Oh, it's okay," Kon replied.

Sayori lifted her head, and a sunny smile bloomed on her face. And then, she fixed her intent gaze on Kon again—the heated, ardent gaze of a maiden hopelessly in love.



KON returned home early that day, saying that he wanted to discuss a few things with his parents. Hearing that Kon was going to go home, Sayori also took her leave. Techi went back to work. As for me, I did the chores absentmindedly, reeling in the chaotic sequence of events that had happened that morning.

The rest of the day went by in a blur, and soon, morning arrived again.

At a time that was slightly later than usual—I'd already finished most of the housework after breakfast—I heard the tiny pitter-patter of feet.

"Incoming…"

Kon greeted me in a voice that was smaller and less energetic than I was used to. He dashed over to the bathroom, washed his hands, then plopped down on his usual seat in the living room. And then he just sat there in a daze, doing nothing at all.

This definitely wasn't the usual, far from it. Worried, I finished the chores in a mad frenzy, washed my hands, took off my apron,

and fetched a certain item from the kitchen freezer. I moved the contents into a small bowl and broke it up into smaller pieces, then finally marched into the living room.

Sitting down at my seat, I gently called out to Kon. "Is it about Sayori?"

Kon nodded weakly.

Seeing that there was no verbal response, I continued, "Well… I'd be surprised if something suddenly sprung up on me like this too. Not to mention that she was so energetic and assertive… I might have gotten a bit overwhelmed."

Again, Kon nodded without a word.

I decided to press on. "Since you're a bit blue today, I assume that you tried to discuss it with your parents, but it didn't go all that smoothly? Did they maybe tell you to wait until the day of your interview and to decide after that?"

Kon raised his head. His eyes were wide with surprise as he nodded.

Smiling wryly, I pacified him. "I know this must be stressful for you. But hey, your parents—the Sanmayas care a lot about you. I'm sure they won't choose anyone that you'd be uncomfortable with. Above all else, Sayori is your friend, isn't she? You've known each other for a long time, which means that you understand her well. Having such a person as your partner wouldn't be bad."

Kon nodded, but he hung his head again even though he'd finally started looking up.

I thought for a moment about what I should say. "Okay, other people's opinions aside, what about you, Kon? Let's ignore the marriage part for now—what do you think of Sayori as a friend? Do you like her? Do you dislike her?"

Kon raised his head. With a serious look on his face, he reflected upon all his memories with her and thought long and hard. Then, he gave me a short reply. "As a friend… I like her."

I nodded encouragingly. "I see. You like her as a friend, but you don't really know what you want to do with your marriage yet, do I have that right? In that case, well… I don't know whether you will like her more one day or whether the two of you will become more

than friends, but let's focus on the present. You can go to that marriage interview and keep treating her as a friend just like before. Or maybe you can try hanging out with her in the company of your other friends. How about that?" I paused to give him a chance to process what I said.

"As you spend more time with her, even if you can't find your answer now, it might become clearer to you eventually," I continued. "It might work out…or maybe it won't, but even in that case, you're able to move on because you've got a clear answer that Sayori isn't the one for you—you want to look for someone else. I understand that you feel really lost because there are so many things you can't figure out, but it's because of that that I think going to the interview is a good thing. There, your parents can help you as you get to understand her better or understand what you want to do better. You can work things out in a safe environment."

Honestly, I couldn't say that I fully understood and supported the marriage culture of beastfolk, but here, marriage interviews were normal for children and were seen as a good thing. Therefore, the right thing to do should be choosing your best option within the constraints of those rules and not stray too far. Rather than becoming stubbornly cynical about the whole thing, it might be better to go in with an open mind and try taking steps forward, taking things into your own hands. …Probably.

I was sure that in the event Kon decided his potential partner wasn't the right person for him, his parents would help him out. More than anything, Sayori didn't seem like too bad of a marriage candidate—at the moment, at least. She was full of spirit, cheerful, and self-possessed. She had a clear understanding of what she wanted to do and was levelheaded. A part of me felt that she and Kon would be a good match for each other, for she could support Kon and Kon could support her.

But of course, if it didn't work out, his parents, as well as Techi and I, would give Kon our full support and help him with searching for the best path to the future he wanted. We would make sure that he had the freedom to choose—I hoped that would be enough.

These thoughts were churning in the back of my mind as I spoke to him. He seemed to have received the message, because he gave me a firm nod, then wore his usual merry smile. Seeing that, I stood up, went to the kitchen, and fetched a certain dish I'd left on the counter.

Back in the living room, I called out to Kon. "We didn't get the chance to eat these yesterday, so let's have our taste-testing session today. Frozen cherries in fermented milk drink… I'm certainly curious what it's like now." I showed him the white clumps dotted with red cherries here and there, which I'd transferred into a glass bowl.

Kon's ears and tail perked up. "Oh! I forgot!" He grinned with brimming excitement, his eyes shining with hopeful curiosity.

I flashed him a smile of my own. "It's apparently better to wait until it defrosts a little more, but I'm sure it'll melt a bit while we are busy processing it, so let's get ready to dig in. I read that it's nice almost fully frozen as well."

"Gotcha!" Kon chirped.

Placing the glass bowl on the low table in front of him, I returned to the kitchen again and grabbed two small plates, two relatively big cups, a water pitcher, as well as an ice pick. I put one small plate and one big cup in front of my seat and Kon's. Next, I put down the water pitcher full of water onto the table with a small thud. Finally, I held up the ice pick at the ready.

I'd already broken up the white ice into smaller pieces, and now, I used the ice pick to stab the pieces to make them even smaller. Whenever I excavated cherries from the ice, I moved them onto the small plates. Once there was only ice left from the chunk, I moved it into our cups. Using this method, I separated the cherries and the fermented milk drink.

"Judging by their looks, the cherries haven't lost any water content," I observed. "As for the fermented milk drink… Yeah, there are parts with a bit of cherry red, but it doesn't seem like the juice of the fruit seeped out and mixed with the ice. If the frozen cherries stay this way for a long time, I have to agree that it's a good way of preserving them."

I quickly sorted through the white ice chunks as I spoke. Kon was staring at me the entire time, and it appeared that he'd finally run out of patience, because he picked up a single excavated cherry from his plate and plopped it into his mouth. He moved his jaw up and down, then spat the pit onto a small plate. Beaming, he reported, "It's yummy!"

Following his example, I also threw a single cherry into my mouth. *Mm…* A nice crunchy texture, a pleasant chill, and the flavors of a cherry stimulated my taste buds. It didn't feel like it had lost any of its flavor or richness. If it maintained this flavor profile even after thawing, I could declare this as an ideal and flawless preservation method.

I could also enjoy the fermented milk drink after it melted—once I diluted it, I would have a delicious drink with a slight hint of cherries, which sounded wonderful. *All right, I think this is a success. I should make a little more than I initially planned so that I can enjoy cherries even after cherry season ends.*

After that, Kon and I waited for the cherries and the milky ice to thaw completely. But we weren't doing a very good job at it. I didn't know whether it was because we'd already fallen to temptation once or whether the cherries were simply that tantalizing, but neither of us could stop ourselves from sneakily picking up cherries from time to time and eating before they were ready.

However, we somehow held out until the cherries thawed, even if our gluttony got the better of us occasionally. Finally, we could eat the cherries without restraint.

I chewed carefully. Neither the flavors nor richness had changed one bit. As for the texture, I could tell that it was preserved extremely well. They had traces of the fermented milk drink on the surface, which affected their taste, but I could solve that problem easily by wiping them thoroughly or giving them a rinse. *Scratch a little more, I should make a* lot *more. I can store them in the warehouse freezer unit and maybe even enjoy cherries all year round. That doesn't sound bad at all.*

As for the fermented milk drink, once it was completely thawed, it didn't have any problems either. Of course, you couldn't avoid having some of the cherry flavor transferring to the drink, but it became a nice subtle undertone that only made it better.

I nodded to myself as I kept eating. "Cherry jam and cherry and syrup are splendid, but I have to say that this method is quite helpful because you can preserve the cherries raw. You can eat them directly or process them first… Sheesh, freezing food is incredible."

Kon nodded profusely and moved his mouth single-mindedly.

I continued, "Jam and fruit preserved in syrup both have their own unique charms…and this does too. I guess the best thing to do is to keep all their differences in mind and make good use of every method available to me."

Kon, who'd accumulated a small collection of cherry pits in his cheeks, spat them out one after another onto a small plate and voiced his opinion. "I like jam and these frozen ones, so I vote for that too! I dunno much about the syrup version though."

I blinked. "Huh? Wait… Oh!" Realization dawned on me. "Right, that reminds me, I don't think I've used my homemade fruits in syrup to make anything yet, have I? Shaved ice is the best… But do you want to try drinking it as fruit soda right now?"

That caught Kon's interest. "What? Shaved ice?! I wanna eat shaved ice! I want to have both soda and fruit ice!" he exclaimed. "It's definitely good if you're the one making them, Mikura!"

"Hm…" I furrowed my brows slightly. "The weather isn't hot enough for shaved ice yet though… I also haven't made ice with such plans in mind, so I probably can't make too much—"

"That's okay!" Kon interrupted enthusiastically. "I still wanna try it!"

I'm sure it wasn't a surprise to anyone by now that I wasn't good at turning Kon down. Relenting, I muttered, "All right, if you say so," as I made my way back into the kitchen.

There was an ice shaver I'd stored in the back of the kitchen cabinets—a relic left behind from the period when I used to live alone. It was a manual one where you turned the crank, transforming smallish ice blocks—made with ice machines for

household use—into a shaved ice-esque consistency. Making sure to wash every single part carefully, I assembled it in the sink.

Next up was the syrup. The item I chose was a bottle of strawberries preserved in syrup, which I'd made quite a long time ago. Many strawberries were suspended within the bottle, and they'd produced plenty of bright red syrup. With a ladle, I scooped out the amount of syrup I was going to use and a handful of strawberries before transferring both into a convenient bowl I could find. Then, I prepared a glass bowl as a container for the shaved ice.

I was ready to get into action.

There's nothing simpler than shaved ice. Take out ice from your ice maker and add to the ice shaver. Move the bowl to the output end of the ice shaver. Rotate the crank until you deplete your supply of ice.

Once I made enough shaved ice for two, I poured on a lavish dose of syrup, then topped the treat with the mushy strawberries, which were soft like jam because they'd been preserved in the syrup. *And there you have it, strawberry shaved ice.*

Kon had been waiting for me, his eyes and face shining with anticipation. I handed him his spoon and bowl before I picked up my own portion and began moving to the living room.

As he walked beside me, Kon exclaimed in wonder, "There's fruit on this! It's not like normal shaved ice! I've never seen shaved ice with fruit on them before!" He swiftly sat down in his own seat and held up his spoon without waiting for me. The shaved ice rustled as he scooped one spoonful after another into his mouth. "I knew it, it's so GOOD! It's nothing like the ones I have during festivals!It's sweet, sour, and properly strawberry!"

"I'm not surprised," I said as I sat down. "The syrup they use during festivals sometimes isn't made directly from fruit—some sellers only add a bit of fragrance to them. It would probably taste nothing like the proper ones made with real strawberries."

I also took a small bite of my shaved ice. I wasn't very satisfied with the texture, because I hadn't made the shaved ice with large chunks of ice like you were supposed to due to time constraints. But

the heavenly taste of the syrup more than made up for it—the flavors of the strawberry were expressed very well in this desert.

After making some progress with my shaved ice, I changed things up by eating one of the soft strawberries chilled by the ice below, and it was simply splendid. My glass bowl was empty in no time.

I hummed in thought. "When it gets a little hotter, I should prepare the right type of ice and make tall mountains of shaved ice next time. Nothing beats shaved ice in the sweltering summer, so it'll taste way better than the one you had just now."

Kon had saved one of his soft strawberries to the very end and was in the middle of tossing it into his mouth. He only replied after he savored its taste and soft texture. "I think it's already yummy enough now, but it's going to become even yummier in summer, huh? I can't wait for summer to arrive! Usually, summer isn't the best season for me. The shedding season and the heat isn't fun at all, but I think that's going to change this year thanks to you, Mikura!"

Oh, interesting, they have a full-on shedding season? The heat being suffocating was to be expected when you were covered with fur, but if you even had to shed from head to toe, it sounded like a nightmare. Even adults like Techi had to shed fur from their ears and tails. This was likely an inconvenience beastfolk had to deal with for their entire lives.

When it came to fur care, I didn't have any knowledge or technical skills, so I couldn't do anything for them. *I've got to study these things properly so that I can at least help them out a little,* I decided.

I stood up, carrying our glass bowls to the kitchen and stacked them in the sink. Then, I prepared two relatively plump, transparent cups. I fetched the syrup once again and poured some into each cup, followed by chilled sparkling water I'd stored in the fridge. Next up were ice cubes and mushy strawberries.

Yes, you've guessed it: I was making strawberry soda. The bottom of the cups were a vivid color, while the top of the cups were

almost clear and colorless, creating a stunning gradient. Just looking at it was enjoyable.

We had to mix it all up in the end, of course, but I wanted to enjoy this color until the moment we had to drink them, so I left the cups as they were. I inserted the straws, then carefully carried them into the living room so that I wouldn't shake the glass and destroy the gradient.

"Here you go," I said as I placed the cups on the low table. "Sorry that we've got the same flavor in a row, but next up on the menu is strawberry soda. When it comes to making something with syrup, your mind would immediately go to this drink—it's a classic, and it's even simple to make. You're meant to mix it before you drink it, but stir slowly and softly because it's soda, okay?"

Pure elation was on Kon's once again as he looked at me before he gazed unblinkingly at his cup. It was a miniature world of a gorgeous gradient, and every so often, bubbles would appear and pop. He admired it at his own pace, sucked up a tiny bit through his straw, then smiled wide—the sweet and sour taste must've been much stronger than he'd imagined. Stirring the cup with his straw slowly, he took one small sip after another.

After thoroughly savoring the strawberry soda, Kon let out a contented "Whew!" before pulling his mouth away from the straw. "This is good! This is amazing too! It feels like anything homemade is yummy… The shaved ice and soda you make are completely different from the ones you see in stores!"

With a wry and fond smile, I informed him, "That's not always true. If you look at the things we've made together… Remember the canned food? There are some things that are only possible in big factories designed for mass production. I guess you could say each method has its strengths and weaknesses? Certain recipes taste better when pros are on the job, so my policy is to leave those to them and fork up money."

Kon blinked. "Really? Not everything homemade tastes good?"

"That's the way I think, at least. Plus, buying ready food at a shop means that you can eat it right away, which will save you a lot of time and effort, right? You know that if you make it yourself, it's

still going to be good, but you don't always have the time or the energy for cooking." I shrugged. "When you're busy, using your money to save yourself trouble is a very important choice to make in my opinion."

I continued, "Think about the jam in supermarkets. The jam I make. Then the handmade jam of a pro like Rei, which is likely many times more delicious than mine. You calculate how much time and money each takes, then choose wisely based on your current situation."

Kon hummed thoughtfully. "Is that how it works? Choosing what suits you best is the most important, huh? In that case, I've got to learn how to make them so that I've got lots of options when I'm an adult."

I nodded. "Exactly. Not just jam, but it doesn't hurt to know how to cook in general. What you eat impacts your health directly, after all."

It seemed to be food for thought for Kon. He stared intently at his empty cup, his mind churning away. Kon held his straw in his mouth, and it moved up and down as he slowly said, "You can make lots of different things, Mikura, and it's your hobby. Rei can also make lots of different sweets, and he made it his job… That's what you calculated and chose, isn't it? You used to work at a…trading company, right? Hm, what kind of job am I going to choose? Something that involves creating things might be nice…"

Back when I was around Kon's age, I declared that I wanted to become a firefighter under the influence of an anime. Next, I insisted I wanted to become an attorney under the influence of a game. And then, I convinced myself that being a cook was my dream job under the influence of a manga. Basically, I never thought out my "dreams"—I only whimsically went with my mood at the time. But Kon wasn't anything like me. He seemed to consider his future pragmatically and strictly.

He wasn't just a mature boy, he was an impressive and awe-inspiring young man. I gazed at him and carefully chose my words. "I suggest you keep your mind open to all kinds of possibilities. Think, research, and study about a wide range of things. Something

that might help is asking about the stories of your dad, mom, grandpa, or relatives. Take the initiative to talk to everyone you know and use all that information to help you find your own path. That would include asking people like your friends, Sayori, and other kids around your age about their dreams—about what they want to do when they grow up. I think that would help."

Kon blinked slowly. He inclined his head then let out a contemplative hum. "With Sayo, she mentioned she is going to do the same work as her dad, so I probably can't go down the same path as her."

My eyes widened. "Really? What's his job?"

"Oh, he's a police officer. I heard that Sayo's family are police officers for *gen-ah-rations* and have been protecting the peace in the Beastly Wilds for a long time. There aren't that many incidents, so they usually don't have a lot to do, but when something happens, their entire family and relatives go out like a swarm and *invest-ah-gate!*"

"P-Police officers for generations?" I stammered. "The entire family and all their relatives? Wait, the police in the Wilds are hereditary occupations? No, that can't be, it sounds like it would lead to all kinds of problems… Oh, but Sayori is a chipmunk… That likely means her family are the police among the chipmunk clan. There must be police in other clans too. Do they all assemble as one organization and monitor each other? Is that maybe how it works? Hmm… I've got to ask about law enforcement in the Wilds when I have the chance. I might need their help one day."

Kon wore an extremely conflicted expression as he listened to me think out loud. It seemed that he still had some apprehension toward Sayori and felt that there was a rift between them. He needed more time to digest the events and figure out how he felt about everything.

I hope there's a good way to mend broken bridges… Or at least a way to help Kon and Sayori sort out their relationship peacefully, no matter what they choose in the end. Praying that, I stood up and hustled over to the kitchen to make lunch that would warm up our chilled stomachs.

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AS Mikura and Kon held their conversation about the beastchild's future, three men watched them with sinister eyes from their hiding places between the gaps in the trees. They held their breaths, minimized their presence, and stood there motionlessly. The intent behind their tireless surveillance was unknown.

When they'd come across the pair along the path last time, their plan had been cut short by that eccentric old man. As if that wasn't enough, ever since, old people had been on the prowl near that bastard's house, meaning that they hadn't found any chances to strike.

But that wasn't going to deter them. *We won't give up no matter what*. *We need to protect the pride of our race. To protect our pure blood. To uphold justice! Nothing will stop us.* Perhaps those were the thoughts running through their mind—or perhaps they were only letting time flow by meaninglessly.

Soon, lunchtime approached. The elderly who'd been chatting idly inside and outside the house became more active and moved around, leaving the shortest of openings. It wasn't enough for the men to lay their hands on the fellows they targeted, but perhaps it gave them time to at least have their way with the plant pot out in the garden. Thinking that, the three men prepared to take a step forward.

But one step was as far as they got. Because not a second later, someone grabbed their shoulders with terrifying force from behind.


Kemono
gamori

Shock. The trio's hearts threatened to burst out of their chest with fright. They swallowed the scream that had almost torn out of their throats, trying to somehow regain their composure as they slowly, ever-so slowly, turned around to face the people who had an iron grip around their shoulders.

A low voice, almost like a growl, echoed out ominously. "Tell me. What business have you got with our sweet and angelic Sayo's fiancé, hmm?"

The first thing that entered their vision was the rugged face of a man. The man's veins were bulging all over his face with an indignant strength that was barely suppressed. Seeing that, the trio came even closer to yelling out loud, but they swallowed, somehow forcing their voices—no, terrified shrieks—back down into their chests.

The man who looked like wrath incarnate spoke in a low drawl. His tone was polite, but anyone could hear the scalding threat within. "First things first, may I have a moment of your time? I would like to ask you a few…*questions* over there, please." Not even giving the trio time to protest, he and his companions dragged the three men across the forest by force, though their captives didn't put up much of a resistance.

The Criminal Law System of the Wilds

IT was our usual rest time after lunch when I chose to promptly ask Techi about law enforcement in the Beastly Wilds. Apparently, the police and the criminal law system here was mostly the same as the one I was familiar with. They had district courts, District Public Prosecutors Offices, police stations, and prisons. They even had proper warrants issued by the court.

If I had to point out the only thing that was different, it would probably be the fact that it was almost impossible to make an appeal to higher courts. Technically, the rules allowed it, but making an appeal to higher courts meant that you had to physically go to the High Court and the Supreme Court—going to the other side of the border. According to Techi, it was almost unthinkable to receive permission to leave for such a purpose. Therefore, making appeals to higher courts was impossible in practice.

Since you couldn't appeal to higher courts, the judgment at the first trial was final. It placed a lot of pressure on the police officers, the public prosecutors, and the judges. In the Wilds, these were jobs you couldn't enter without a strong resolve. The necessary resolve and knowledge were passed down within families, which was why most occupations to do with the criminal law system were hereditary.

But of course, there were glaring flaws with such a system, and everyone knew that well. Due to that, they strived and devoted every effort into nipping all possible problems in the bud, as well as skirting around those flaws in ways they could. Despite being a District Court, they had an impressive assembly of judges from every single clan within the Wilds. The same could be said for the police

and the prosecution, which consisted of representatives who staked their clan's pride and honor on their duty.

It certainly sounded like they had their work cut out for them—it was much more rigorous than I'd expected.

Despite the problems, they'd still managed to maintain public peace without any issue so far, and they possibly owed that partly to the unique environment of the Beastly Wilds. Their population was small, and it was an autonomous region. They even had the special Fusang trees that germinated with good deeds. All these factors intertwined intricately to form the current Beastly Wilds I lived in.

Furthermore, in the Beastly Wilds, committing crimes was a much more grave and severe matter than on the other side of the border. Scratch much more, it was practically on a whole other level. Because of that, most beastfolk gave crime a wide berth and led law-abiding lives, so the jail was almost empty. In fact, you could even round down the number of prisoners to zero.

Techi's wording of "almost empty" made me extremely curious, but since she deliberately glossed over it, there must be circumstances that she couldn't tell me. I didn't want to poke into a hornet's nest, so I chose to swallow my questions.

Techi shrugged and concluded, "In any case, no matter what the criminal law system is like, as long as you live virtuously, you don't really have to care about it. We barely have any incidents here, so the police and the court mostly deal with accidents and civil cases. Apparently, the prosecutors are especially idle on their job.

"When it's so slow that they've seriously got nothing to do at all, I hear they'd reenact incidents on police TV dramas and play a game of make-believe, acting out what they'd do as a prosecutor if they came across such a case. They claim that it's simulation exercises or something, but well… Looks like having nothing to do on your job isn't always a good thing."

Having finished giving me a brief rundown of the system in the Wilds, Techi sipped on the strawberry soda I'd prepared for her with her straw. After refreshing her parched mouth, she cleared her throat and asked, "Any questions?"

I gave it some thought. “Ah. Just wondering, what was the last time you had a criminal case in the Beastly Wilds? What kind of incident was it? Since the prison is almost empty, it means that you haven’t had a big case in a long time—or rather, cases that ended with prison sentences with no stay of execution, right?”

Still holding her straw in her mouth, Techi looked up at the ceiling and hummed thoughtfully, seemingly struggling with finding the details in her mind. “How long ago was it again…? I think… I think it should be around May last year. There was a big commotion about a shoplifter back then, and that was probably the most recent case to my knowledge. Remember that supermarket you visit often? There was a moron who shoplifted there, and it caused quite a stir. I remember that.”

I blinked in surprise. “Um, I wasn’t really talking about shoplifting, but something a bit more severe…” It was then that the meaning of her words sank in. “Wait, what? A shoplifter caused a big stir?”

“Yeah, it was intense.” She nodded. “It started with the police officers of each clan mobilizing at once, and nearly a hundred officers went around to investigate and question the perpetrator and witnesses. I think it probably took roughly half a year until the public prosecutors came to the decision to drop the criminal charges against the suspect. Meanwhile, the court was preparing for the trial, so they were livid that the prosecutor dropped the charges.

“The reason for the prosecutors’ decision is that the damage was only a cheap candy priced at ¥20, and the moron who shoplifted on impulse felt deep remorse about it. Everyone was also exhausted after tireless investigations every day, so they figured it wasn’t worth it. The investigation and questioning in the Wilds are all recorded to prevent a bunch of problems, and a lawyer was present at every single questioning. But the work was so harsh that even the lawyer started saying that they wanted to resign midway.”

Techi shrugged. “And well, everyone finally regained their senses and realized that even if this was the first case in a while for the law enforcement, they were taking things too far, so all those involved got a big scolding. There was talk about measures to

prevent it from happening again, so I think the system should have been improved somewhat now. Probably."

I was dumbfounded by what I'd just heard. "Wh-Whoa… It escalated to that point? But, uh… Just wondering, were there really no incidents other than shoplifting? For example, was there never anyone who got into a brawl because they were drunk?"

"I mean, of course there are fights and brawls, that's just a part of life. But we all know how hectic it can get if it becomes a criminal case, so everyone stops when it gets to a certain point. No matter what kind of maddening things happen, we try to avoid turning it into an incident. 'If I punch this person right now, it's going to become a giant problem. I'll suffer and waste roughly half a year doing nothing.' When you think that, you can't really fight because of a silly reason, can you?"

She continued, "Even if you failed to restrain yourself and it ends up getting physical, most of the time, you resolve the issue in private. The representative of their clans—you can think of them as our chiefs—and the president of the community association will assemble to negotiate and try to settle things as peacefully as possible. The shoplifting incident only got to that point because the perpetrator didn't feel any regret at first. In fact, when the supermarket manager caught them red-handed, they hurled abusive language and taunts at the manager, who called the police in the heat of the moment."

"H-Huuuh…" That was the only thing I could say. "That sounds like quite a distressing incident."

"Yeah, it sure was. So Mikura, be careful…" She looked at me solemnly. "Even if you don't get arrested, just attracting the attention of the police means a whole load of trouble, such as getting stopped for questioning. In some cases, they might come all the way to your house over and over for days on end, trying to fish out every single detail about your life."

"Yikes…" I grimaced. "I'll be careful so that such a thing doesn't happen."

Kon, who'd been quietly sipping on his new cup of strawberry soda, raised his voice cheerfully. "Me too, me too! I will also take

care not to do anything bad!”

Techi and I both smiled at the precious boy. We then traded glances and communicated with each other silently through eye contact.

We both knew why I’d asked her about the criminal law system in the Wilds to begin with—Techi’s uncle, who seemed to be up to no good. Those three men had attempted to do something on that path, and the malicious looks in their eyes meant that their intentions hadn’t been harmless. Getting involved with those three thoughtlessly meant that we’d end up in the same position as them—we’d become the subjects of investigations and questioning, going down the exact same path as the stressful shoplifting incident. Both of us wanted to avoid that at all costs.

That was why we weren’t going to tackle them directly, keeping them at arm’s length while leading a peaceful, respectful, and law-abiding life. I could tell from her eyes that the sentiment was mutual. The two of us kept our guards up, determined not to let such a disaster unfold.



A few days flew by after that. But to my surprise, nothing of interest happened, even though I’d braced myself for the worst.

Considering how those chaps had started pestering me under broad daylight along the path, I was convinced that they’d definitely do something before long. However, our life remained peaceful and uneventful. Even when I went out to shop after that day, I never bumped into them. According to Techi, they hadn’t called her or done anything to her family either. Techi’s uncle and his two companions had practically disappeared from our world—it was almost uncanny.

It was indeed a rather strange occurrence, but this was real life, not fiction. Such anticlimactic conclusions were certainly possible. After a discussion, we agreed that the incident with Techi’s uncle had already settled thanks to the sharp warning from the community association president back then.

Since those three were no longer troubling us, the elderly beastfolk watching over our house and orchard had fulfilled their mission. It probably wasn't necessary for them to keep patrolling the area, so they'd gone back to their lives with smiles on their faces.

The smile they'd shared back then oddly stuck with me. It had been remarkably delighted and somewhat…kind? As if they were looking at something heartwarming? Either way, there had been a hidden undertone I hadn't been able to decipher, but they'd voluntarily watched over us every single day until today, so it would be rude of me to be suspicious of them.

In fact, I owed them a large debt of gratitude, and one way to pay it back was by preparing a large box of confectionery or snacks, which Mr. Karashina had suggested before.

And so, after lunch on Sunday, I began planning.

I was lounging in front of the low table like I always did after lunch, enjoying freshly brewed tea in Techi's company, when I started the discussion of what we should deliver to Mr. Karashina.

Folding my arms, I took the initiative to voice my suggestions. "The first thing that comes to mind is senbei crackers… Oh, but some of them were rather over the hill, so maybe something soft and easy on their teeth is better? I guess the next best thing would be traditional Japanese confectionery that goes well with tea. Japanese confectionery made with smooth sweet bean paste or delicate *wasanbon* sugar would melt in your mouth, and it wouldn't get stuck in their throat. It's not what I imagine when I think of snack gift boxes, but I think it has its merits. I feel like they'd like it."

Techi sat at her dedicated seat, her back straightened with dignity. Her tail swished lazily back and forth. With a solemn expression, she said, "That's not a bad idea or anything, but nothing beats meat."

I looked at her blankly. "Huh? M-Meat? You mean…you're suggesting we gift raw pieces of meat? Or are you talking about meat dishes?"

"Technically, either is fine. But in your case, the entire neighborhood should know your skill in the kitchen by now, so meat dishes might be better."

"They do? Wait, when did that happen?" I shook my head. "N-No, more importantly, Techi…are you sure meat is the right choice? Even if they are beastfolk, I don't think the elderly have an appreciation for meat in general."

She blinked at me with confusion. "Hm? Whoever said that? Meat is *the* classic and best gift for the elderly, isn't it? It's because of their age and declining stamina that we want them to eat meat, build up more energy and strength, and live a long, healthy life. I'm sure that the people receiving the gifts would a hundred percent hope for meat too."

"Whaaat?" I muttered weakly. "I mean, I get the wish of wanting them to be healthy and have a long life, but sending meat for that sake…doesn't really seem like the right combination in my mind? It sounds like the culture is different for beastfolk, though… Maybe it's better considering your constitutions. W-Well, the most important thing for gifts is choosing something that they'll like, so…I guess that means meat dishes is the best choice, yeah."

Techi nodded. "Mmhmm. Totally. Recently, you've only been making standard meat dishes. Even with your preserve hobby, you've been occupied with plum work. I haven't gotten to eat the special and delightful meat dishes that are your specialty, so I think it's about time you put a new item on your menu."

She stared directly at me, and her eyes were shining with anticipation. I narrowed my eyes with suspicion and stared back. "Are you saying that you chose meat dishes because *you* want to eat them, Techi, not because the elderly like them?"

She wasn't fazed by my scrutiny at all. Her eyes still lit up eagerly, she replied in an animated voice, "I won't deny that it's part of the reason. I love your meat recipes, and I'd love to eat the kind of food you made at the wedding. In fact, if possible, I'd love to feast like that every single day. But hey, I won't let my selfish wish get the better of me and make a proposal that would cause trouble to people who helped us out of goodwill. Elderly beastfolk love meat—that's a fact. If you give them meat, they'll be happy, so for us beastfolk, meat is the default option when it comes to gifts for the senior citizens."

"Well…" I considered her words. "Human metabolism is completely different from beastfolk, so even if you're past your prime, you guys probably need more calories than I do… It's likely natural to crave meat, which is packed with calories, I guess? Hmm, but surely they still prefer softer food that's easier to digest, right? I assume that teeth and digestive systems weaken with age for beastfolk as well."

"Yeah, that's true." She shrugged. "When you grow old, your body declines."

"I see… Okay then, let's go with meat as our gift." I frowned. "But what kind of meat should it be? Hamburger steaks, maybe? Or tender meat stewed for a long time? Ah, poultry is comparatively soft even if you don't do any processing, so…poultry marinated with koji salt? That reminds me, I think a friend of mine mentioned that spareribs with honey is delicious and tender…"

As I continued contemplating my options, the glint in Techi's eyes only grew stronger and brighter. On top of all that, she even started panting erratically with excitement. It appeared that she was truly starved for novel meat dishes.

In my defense, I've made quite a lot of different meat dishes for her though… Like pork steak paired with a tangy sauce and pork shogayaki. Since bitter gourds have started showing up in the supermarket, I've even made bitter gourds stir-fried with pork and other vegetables. But sadly, it looks like those were but a drop in the ocean—it wasn't nearly enough to satisfy the rumbling stomach of my dearest carnivorous chipmunk wife.

I kept going, listing more and more dishes and observing Techi's reaction attentively. For a long while after that, I was stumped about what I should give to my friendly elderly neighbors.

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AFTER lengthy consideration about what kind of confectionery box —no, what kind of meat dish I should prepare for the grandpas and grandmas, I arrived at one answer.

On that Sunday afternoon, at a time just before an afternoon snack, I stood in the kitchen with my apron on and declared, "Simple is best, as they say. I'm going with the straightforward option of tender, simmered meat. To be more precise, red wine braised beef loin. It's easy, popular, and delicious."

Techi sat leisurely on the kitchen counter as she said, "Red wine braised beef, huh? Sounds like it has nothing to do with preserves this time."

"Nope. This is meant to be a gift, so it would be strange for me to involve my personal hobby, won't it? I mean, if they made a specific request for my preserves, I would go ahead and do just that. But they haven't, so I'm going with a more standard route."

She folded her arms and hummed. "Interesting. By the way, you just mentioned it's easy and popular, but…*this* counts as easy?" She furrowed her eyebrows slightly. "You've certainly got a big lot of ingredients here."

Her eyes scanned the display of ingredients on the counter: carrots; onions; garlic; celery; beef; an assortment of herbs; and Muggi bouillon.

I smiled. "I've got a lot of ingredients, yes, but the recipe itself is simple. You only have to cut the ingredients, do the necessary preparations, then simmer it all slowly. For the chopping part, you can even use an electric blender to do the hard work for you, so it's a recipe that almost anyone can find success with."

"Huh." She raised an eyebrow. "But you're still doing a test run today despite that?"

"I suppose. I want to make enough to distribute to everyone who helped keep an eye on the property for us, and that'll be an incredible amount. If I fail with such a big batch, my wallet is going to cry, so I've got to do a test run first just in case."

Techi nodded. "I see. Well then, it sounds like my job is to taste your test run and give you my feedback, got it. All right, Mikura, good luck and work hard." She propped up her chin on her palm and stared at me carefreely.

Under her watchful gaze, I got to work.

Start with prepping the vegetables. In terms of ratio, you want more carrots and onions, less celery and garlic. Prep your vegetables by washing them and peeling them. Finely chop the garlic. As for all your other ingredients, mince and crush them as finely as possible. If this step is too much manual work, feel free to blend them all in one go in an electric blender. You could even grate your ingredients. As long as you come out with tiny pieces at the end, anything goes.

Next is prep for the beef. Cut your beef into cubes. If your priority is having a fulfilling texture and amount per bite, make your pieces bigger. Season with salt and pepper. Rub your seasoning thoroughly into the meat. Sprinkle on flour.

Heat a large pot. After the pot is hot, drizzle in oil. Sear the surface of your beef, which should be covered with flour. At this step, you don't have to cook it all the way through, but you need to grill the surface properly. Wipe away excess grease with kitchen paper. Turn your steak cubes until all the sides are golden brown. Transfer from pot onto a plate.

Sauté the chopped garlic in the oil left behind in the pot. Once the garlic is cooked, add in carrots, then onions, then celery. Turn to low heat and cook the mixture slowly. Once it starts bubbling, add beef cubes back into the pot.

Simmer the beef with the vegetables and vegetable juice for a few minutes before adding the bouillon stock cubes. Gently pour in red wine.

You could choose to add other alcohol on top of your red wine. For this batch, I decided to add a small amount of brandy.

Cover your meat fully with the mixture of vegetable juice and wine, then simmer. If there isn't enough water, add small amounts of water at a time so that it won't become too diluted.

Add thyme, rosemary, and bay leaf to your pot. Don't overdo it with the herbs—too much thyme and rosemary means that it's almost the only thing you'll taste, and there's no point adding too many bay leaves either. Cover the pot and simmer over low or medium heat for roughly two hours.

At the two-hour mark, temporarily remove meat from the pot. Add a generous amount of butter to the broth and keep simmering.

Cook the mixture until a good amount of the water evaporates, leaving you with a thick, gooey consistency. The sauce is the most important part of this dish's taste, so make sure to simmer it thoroughly. Taste it as you go, adding salt for flavor and butter for aroma and richness when necessary.

While the sauce is cooking, arrange your meat in a deep dish. Pour the thick sauce over the meat. Garnish with cream and parsley. Bon appétit.

All that was left to do was toast some baguettes and arrange them on a separate plate. Once I finished serving everything on the low table, dinner was ready.

The moment I started moving from the kitchen to the living room, Techi speedily moved to her usual seat and sat down. She stared unblinkingly at the beef. "Now that's interesting. You called it red wine braised beef, but it felt more like vegetable juice braised beef."

I also settled on my seat. "I can't argue against that. When the pros are cooking, they don't mince the vegetables this finely. They actually scoop out the vegetables midway and toss it out, because it's only there for flavor. But it's kind of a waste when you cook at home, so I tend to go with a recipe where you keep simmering them and turn them all into sauce. Thanks to this extra step, you really draw out the flavors of your ingredients, and both the sauce and the meat turn out delicious in the end."

Hearing that, this time, Techi stared intently at the kitchen. "Huh. You didn't chuck out the vegetables that you're supposed to throw, so that's why you've got so much sauce left over… You've got quite a lot in that pot. What are you going to do with it?"

"For now, I'll move them into plastic food containers and store them in the fridge," I replied. "Tomorrow, I'll add beef stew roux to the sauce and remake it into beef stew. You don't have to use good beef for this—something cheap and readily available will do. Because you've got plenty of fancy beef flavors and essence inside that sauce, the resulting beef stew is heavenly, as if you used high-grade beef in the stew instead. It doesn't have to be stew—curry also works, but personally, I think stew is better. That's why I also

prepared baguettes to go with our braised beef—the flavor of the sauce is somewhat similar to the taste of beef stew, so dipping your bread in it is amazing."

It appeared that Techi had succumbed to her hunger, because she clapped her hands together and began glowering at her plate. Smiling with fond exasperation, I placed my palms together and voiced my thanks for the food.

She echoed my words before picking up her fork, stabbing a piece of red wine braised beef and tossing it eagerly into her mouth.

I had a piece of my own. The meat was tender, melting in my mouth even before I chewed. The savory goodness and sweetness of vegetables had seeped into the beef properly, and combined with the rich and elegant flavor of the beef, it was simply exquisite. I mustn't forget about the sauce—the herbs, butter, and cream added aromas and richness into the mix, which had wonderful chemistry with the beef itself. The end result was simply tantalizing, and I could proudly puff out my chest and declare that I'd done a great job.

I scarfed down the meat, then took bites of my baguette soaked in the sauce. It was practically the taste of paradise. Techi must've been just as absorbed in the delectable taste, because next to me, she stuffed her mouth with meat and baguette—which I'd prepared extra for her—into her mouth at an astounding rate. She was more zealous than usual, her eyes were shining brighter than usual, and she looked more blissful than usual as she dined.

As I watched her, I gained the conviction that braised beef loin was the best possible gift for beastfolk. Nodding happily to myself, I relished in the taste of my portion of red wine braised beef and baguette once again.



SINCE my test run had received a highly favorable reception yesterday, I wasted no time. Promptly on the next day, I called the houses of the elderly beastfolk who had helped me out one by one

then confirmed with them in advance by asking, "Do you think you'd like red wine braised meat for dinner tonight?"

After calling the last household, I borrowed Rei's delivery van and drove off to purchase groceries. Eventually, I returned to the kitchen that was flooded with cardboard boxes of food, food, and more food. So that I could get to work, I put on my apron, fished out my tools, and began preparations.

Since I was cooking in bulk, I decided to leave the vegetables to my trusty blender. I would also use two large pots at the same time. I was in the middle of meticulously cleaning these tools when Kon arrived with his usual announcement of, "Incoming!"

He darted in and ran directly to the bathroom. After efficiently washing his hands, he came into the kitchen, and his eyes grew as wide as saucers upon seeing the mess. His nose twitched as he sniffed a few times, then he raised his voice cheerfully. "Oooh! It looks like you're up to something interesting! And this smell! I can tell that you made something super-duper YUMMY!"

I couldn't suppress a chuckle at the excitement in his voice. Somehow, I managed to keep my laughing fit in check as I replied, "Yeah. Yesterday, I did a test run of making beef loin braised in wine. It went well, so today's the full-on cooking session. I'm making it to thank all the people who have helped by standing guard over us, our house, and our orchard."

"Whoa! Seriously?!" Kon exclaimed. "That dish sounds awesome! Awww, Mikura, you're no fair! You and Techi secretly enjoyed all the good food while I wasn't here!"

"I-I mean, you were busy with your marriage interview with Sayori yesterday, weren't you?" I protested. "I can't exactly just summon you over while you're doing that, and I've heard that sometimes, these marriage interviews can last over several days. I didn't know when you'd be free, and I can't exactly wait for you forever…"

Kon huffed. "Sheesh! I know! But still! You could have just sent a text to me on my phone!"

I hung my head. "Y-Yeah, you're right. Sorry, I'll do that next time…" After a moment of hesitation, I cautiously asked, "By the

way, how did the interview go?"

"The interview was…" He paused, dragging his sentence out. "It's a bit embarrassing, so I'll tell you later! More importantly! What is braised beef?! What does it taste like?!" He stamped his feet in the heat of the moment before nimbly rushing up onto the counter that had a selection of tools and ingredients on display.

I'm personally more curious about the interview than the beef though, I thought with a wry smile before I gave him a brief rundown about the recipe and what kind of food it was going to be.

After listening to my explanation, it seemed that he wanted to help me out, because he ran back down into the living room, changed into his coverall apron, then came back to the kitchen. "Okay then, we're supposed to start with the veggies, right? We throw them all into the blender and go whoosh?"

As he spoke, I assembled the blender, which I'd finished cleaning, and placed it next to the sink. "Yep," I said, nodding.

First, I washed the carrots, peeled them, and cut off the carrot tops. After cutting them roughly into smaller pieces, I tumbled them all into the blender.

When I was done, I gave Kon his first mission. "Chef Kon, could you take care of turning the blender on and off? When you press the button over here, it will start spinning and going whoosh. Keep pressing it down until the carrots inside the blender look like juice. But if the entire blender shakes violently or makes a very loud noise, let go of the button for a while and press it again if there's nothing wrong. Or, call out to me first before you do anything."

I explained, "Sometimes, the contents get stuck in a weird place that causes a lot of burden to the blender blade, and if you keep pressing the button, the blender might break altogether. This is a slightly more difficult job than usual, but I'm trusting you on this, Kon."

Kon nodded with a severity I'd never seen before on his face. He placed both of his tiny hands on the button steadily before pushing it down solemnly.

The blender started up. The blade spun and made a normal noise—there didn't appear to be any problems. *Yeah, everything*

should be fine. I nodded to myself before I continued peeling more carrots.

Whenever I finished prepping the carrots, I transferred them into the blender, which Kon operated. Then, I would pour the resulting mixture into a large mixing bowl. We repeated the same process with onions. Once we had enough for two big pots of braised beef, I moved on to cutting garlic, putting seasoning on the meat, and sprinkling flour. It was the exact same recipe as yesterday—the only difference was the amount I was making.

When we got to the step where I simmered the meat in the pots, I left the heavy lifting to the stove. The two of us sat with a thud on our seats and let out a huge sigh simultaneously.

"It feels simpler than usual," Kon began, "but it's a lot of work because there's so much to make."

I rolled my stiff shoulders. "Yeah. If it were a more complicated recipe or a recipe that needs more complex seasoning, it might have been impossible to pull it off with just the two of us."

He nodded fervently. "There were sooo many carrots and onions. And now, they smell real nice while they're bubbling away…" Kon paused. "By the way, Mikura, you mentioned that you're gonna remake the leftover sauce yesterday into curry or stew, but…what are you gonna do with the leftover sauce today? You've got loads more than yesterday… With this much, even Techi and I won't be able to finish it off."

"That's a good question…" I sighed. "I'll transfer the leftover sauce today into zipper bags and store them in the freezer. Since they are cooked and frozen, they should preserve well for quite a long time, so I can just gradually chip away at my reserves."

"Ohhh! So you can just freeze it!"

"Yep," I said. "That doesn't just apply to sauces like this. You can do the same with vegetables and meat as long as you make the necessary preparations beforehand. They become convenient preserves that you can use at any time." I shrugged. "But well, your freezer is only so big. You've got to make sure to use your supplies as you go, or else you'll be in big trouble later on. That's the one thing you have to be careful with."

Kon hummed. "Gotcha… Oh yeah, I think Mommy buys lots of food from the supermarket before the New Year holidays and stores them in the freezer. She said it's because supermarkets don't open during the first few days of the New Year."

I nodded. "That's probably how preserves came to be in the first place. You preserve food during the period when you can get your hands on food, then eat your preserves during the period when you can't get your hands on food. It was a wisdom we polished for survival. But I guess it was likely also invented so that you can preserve food when you've got an abundant harvest you can't finish. That way, you can store it in case your food ever runs out.

"In that sense, frozen ingredients and frozen food fit the definition of preserves…" I scratched my cheek sheepishly. "But honestly, I still can't say I'm all that interested in frozen stuff. To me, preserves are the type that you can put up on warehouse shelves—like the ones Gramps used to make."

"They're both tasty, so I don't mind either way!" Kon chirped.

I smiled warmly. "Well, there's nothing wrong with that. I think that's a great way of thinking."

It was then that I hesitated. We'd finished most of the cooking and had a good chat, so it was probably all right to address the elephant in the room by now. Finding my resolve, I asked, "Now, could you tell me what happened during the interview, Kon?"

I couldn't really read Kon's expression because of his mask, but it seemed like a difficult topic to him for some reason. I could sense his conflicted feelings from the minute shifts on his face.

For a while, there was only silence.

It lasted until I heard the energetic pitter-patter of feet—someone was sprinting here. It was followed by the spirited greeting of "Hello! I'm coming in!"

I recognized the voice that echoed out. It was Sayori. Like Kon, she dashed to the bathroom, washed her hands, then joined us.

I greeted her with a smile. "Welcome to my humble abode, Sayori. We just so happened to be talking about your marriage interview with Kon. And well, since you're here to hang out with him…I assume it went well?"

Contrary to my expectations, Sayori's expression was also a bizarre mix of emotions I couldn't describe. She replied, "Yes, it went very well! Since our betrothal is official, it was a big success! But…" She furrowed her eyebrows slightly. "Halfway through, Kon was much more interested in talking to Dad than me, and he even got Dad to teach him how to wield his staff… Kon pretty much said yes to the betrothal because of that!"

She huffed. "It's meant to be a marriage interview, a very important part of your life, but I didn't get to talk to my partner at all! I'm happy that we are going forward with this, but something just doesn't sit right with me!"

Without thinking, I let out a noncommittal "Oh…"

Sayori's father was a police officer—an occupation that young boys like Kon looked up to. Naturally, as a police officer, he was physically fit and must be active in martial arts training as well. Therefore, it makes sense that he was remarkably skilled with wielding a staff. Perhaps I should have expected that he and Kon would hit it off from the very beginning, especially considering how Kon was at an age when he still didn't really understand or think about romantic love.

In my opinion, Kon wasn't the one to blame. The system was at fault for making children go to marriage interviews at such a young age. Or maybe the one to blame was Sayori's father, who'd forgotten his role as a parent and failed to restrain himself in front of her future partner.

Sayori puffed out her chest with determination. "Because of that, pardon my intrusion, but I shall visit your house and the orchard for a while starting from now! I will work very hard for my happy marriage life! I will do all I can to get along better with Kon! Mr. Mikura, please take care of me!"

Now that they were betrothed to each other, it was better for them to get along and understand each other. And of course, I would be elated if I could help them out in any way I can. Thinking that, I nodded with a warm smile and welcomed a new petite frequenter to our cozy home.

Stories from Days Gone by

WE had a new regular visitor at our house, the young Sayori. Accordingly, we decided to hold a small welcoming party. I carried a selection of snacks and juice onto the low table, and we all enjoyed them in each other's company.

"That reminds me…" As we lounged, Sayori, who cupped both hands and was steadily nibbling at her handful of dry fruits, spoke up. "When I mentioned to my great-grandfather that I met you, Mr. Mikura, he went to the warehouse of our house and pulled out a very, very old scroll. He mentioned that the name 'Moriya' was written on it, and he opened it to show me."

This topic came out of nowhere, but I was already extremely invested. I widened my eyes.

Sayori continued matter-of-factly, "I think it's called a historical document… According to the scroll, a samurai called Mr. Moriya came to the Beastly Wilds a long, long time ago. He worked hard and did lots of things to help this forest. Back then, it still wasn't an autonomous region, and all the residents chose to live here as they liked. There wasn't just beastfolk, there were also a lot of humans living here, and the scroll said that we all lived in harmony."

She paused, recalling what she'd heard. "There was also a proper government official who came from the big city under…*relegation*? And it was pretty safe too. But… There were also people who wanted to disturb the forest and use it for their own gains. That Mr. Moriya was one of the people who came to the Beastly Wilds under the orders of a higher-up to obtain the treasure of the Beastly Wilds—things like the Fusang trees."

I didn't know how to react to that. *To think that someone who might have been my ancestor came to this place with such a motive…* But then, something occurred to me. *Wait, if that's true though, it wouldn't make sense for him to gain a piece of land in the Beastly Wilds. So maybe he isn't my ancestor?*

The young girl with excellent memory resumed her story after a pause. "But the moment Mr. Moriya saw the Fusang trees and the

scenery in the Beastly Wilds, he apparently fell in love with it. He betrayed the higher-up and chose to take the side of us beastfolk. It sounds like betrayal of samurai was a very big deal back then, because the higher-up got mad and sent a bunch of people here. But everyone sent got chased back. In fact, that samurai really got along with the residents of the Wilds and basically became someone in charge of talking on behalf of them. He talked with the people outside and helped solve all kinds of issues.

"He had lots of knowledge about the outside world, the laws, and so on. He was also a strong warrior. The government official I talked about earlier also took Mr. Moriya's side, and to everyone's surprise, they came together to assemble a team of humans to protect the Beastly Wilds. After that, the humans in that team married each other and left behind children, but maybe because they weren't able to introduce new blood from the outside, their numbers went lower and lower with time… Everything I've said up until now were things written in that historical document."

She paused to take a breath. "I know what you must be thinking. Did they not marry any of the beastfolk? Back then, people still didn't know much about the illnesses of the beastfolk and how to cure those illnesses. People didn't know what to do when beastfolk got sick or had to give birth. Plus, there was even superstition, so everyone believed that it was super dangerous for humans to get together with beastfolk. Even if they wanted to be together, they couldn't be.

"And so, they kept marrying their friends and fellow humans who cared about the Beastly Wilds, sometimes marrying humans from the outside. That team had something like a…base? And apparently, that base was located exactly where this house stands. They had to talk with people from the outside, so their base was near the outskirts of the Wilds—near the border! That's what Great-Grandfather told me!"

Once again, my eyes widened with surprise. *A samurai lived here and was in charge of diplomacy? Meanwhile, my family, the Moriyas, was given a piece of land in the Beastly Wilds even though we're humans… In that case, that samurai must be my noble*

ancestor. Possibly because the team kept marrying their relatives, the inbred genes caused their numbers to fall…and only the Moriya family was left? Is that what happened?

Hmm… If I remember correctly, Gramps married someone from outside—a human from the other side of the border. That was the case for my grandfather too, and when it came to my father's generation, he even lived outside the border. We probably don't have to worry about the effects of inbreeding now. That said…

After a moment of hesitation, I muttered, "If that's true, that's… Wow. Would that mean my ancestor was a samurai? Well, there's a chance that they're a complete stranger who's got nothing to do with me though…"

Sayori giggled heartily before replying in a carefree voice, "The thing is, we don't even know whether that scroll is telling the truth! Someone might have made it all up!"

I couldn't argue against that. It was a historical document that we hadn't even gotten a professional to appraise and date. Unless we got respectable research institutions on the case, I had no way of knowing whether the document was real or whether its contents were genuine too. Considering the circumstances surrounding the Wilds, trying to research and investigate into its history was definitely an uphill battle. I would probably never find an answer in my lifetime.

Techi offered her own opinion. "Tomiyasu and Mikura don't have that samurai vibe at all. If I have to choose, they feel like farmers more than anything else. Their ancestors must be farmers who wandered into the Wilds before joining that team or something like that."

Hm… I understand where she's coming from. I don't think I'm cut out for the samurai life either. Far from it.

Meanwhile, Kon expressed his enthusiasm. "Samurai! That's so cool! Aww, that must be so nice. I want to have samurai ancestors too! Or ninja ancestors!" His answer was quite in character for him.

Sayori chuckled. "I mean, I heard that this house was built rather recently, and it doesn't look like you've got any old katana or scrolls left lying around… It would be very hard to find evidence. If

you had an ancient warehouse or treasury like in my house, it would have been a different story, but the warehouse in the garden looks new as well. Maybe Mr. Tomiyasu would have known a few things."

She was right when she said that my house wasn't all that old. Well, it technically counted as old, but it didn't date as far back as the Edo period or a time when samurai had been active in Japan. Gramps had built this house, so it should be comparatively modern.

But I couldn't completely cross out the possibility that something ancient and timeworn was hidden within its crevices. There was a chance that Gramps might have inherited items from the previous house or treasury here and had stashed them somewhere. I'd explored most of the house, and nothing in particular had caught my attention during the house inspection for the renovations either. That said, I *had* spotted things like antique boxes and a few objects that reminded me of wicker hampers lying around.

There were still plenty of boxes and containers I hadn't checked. For some, I'd assumed that Gramps had stored his personal belongings inside, so I'd purposely avoided peering in. For others, I'd thought about taking a look later on, and that later on had turned into never. *Could there be something historical hidden in one of those?* At the same time, however, I knew that there was an extremely high chance that I wouldn't find anything of the sort. More likely, they contained private possessions, clothes, or tools for the orchard.

Thinking that, I didn't speak more about the matter, instead choosing to refocus on Sayori's welcoming party. I stood up and walked into the kitchen to prepare even more snacks and food to entertain the young girl and Kon.

The Arrival of Summer

I'D packed red wine braised beef into plastic food containers and gifted them to the elderly beastfolk who'd helped me out, and it resulted in a huge success, for the present was very well-received. In fact, they liked it so much that some had even requested seconds. But making red wine braised beef day after day was going to be exhausting, so I ended up telling them the recipe instead.

The dish itself was simple, and if you used tools to help you, you didn't need that much stamina either. Because of that, the recipe also had favorable reception, and red wine braised meat just might be the trend among the Wilds' senior citizens for a good while.

As for the beef stew and beef curry I'd made with the leftover sauce, both Techi and Kon, as well as Sayori, had good things to say about them. Though I'd ended up with an incredible amount of leftover sauce, at the rate they were going, I'd probably run out within a week.

A few days rushed by in a blur until one certain morning.

The sunlight had steadily grown stronger, and the air had become more humid. Anyone could feel the advent of early summer as they basked in the sun.

I was out in the garden, busy doing a DIY project, when I heard my two visitors run over from the depths of the forest, where it was echoing with the song of cicadas. Kon and Sayori were in the middle of an enthusiastic conversation.

"Incoming!" Kon cried.

"Hello! I'm coming over!" Sayori greeted.

"Welcome, you two," I replied.

The two beastchildren tilted their head quizzically as they stared at the makeshift workbench I'd assembled with pieces of wood.

"What are you up to, Mikura?" Kon asked. "Are you making sawdust?"

"K-Kon, no," Sayori whispered. "This is probably what they call weekend carpentry. You know, when amateurs craft and do

woodwork."

I paused in the middle of my task, picked up the towel around my neck, and wiped my sweaty face. "Hey, it's called DIY!" I paused. "I was thinking about making a chair for Sayori, so I pulled out the tools in the tool storage area. I'm not as skilled as Gramps, but I can still pull off a thing or two. I should be able to make something that doesn't look off at all when you put it next to the other one."

Feeling somewhat refreshed, I moved the file back and forth, smoothing out the surface of the wood I'd cut up.

Kon nodded. He was able to deduce what kind of chair I was making just from my statement. "Good idea. I think it's better if we have one more. A handcrafted chair by Mikura, huh? I can't wait to see how it'll turn out."

Meanwhile, Sayori inclined her head, looking baffled. She sent an inquisitive look in Kon's direction, as if asking what on earth we were talking about.

The young boy grinned widely. He pulled Sayori along by her hand and raced into the house, washed his hands, then moved into the kitchen. Guiding her to his dedicated sink chair, he began explaining all kinds of things to her.

I stole a glance at them. Honestly, I'd had my doubts and anxieties about a betrothal at their age—they likely still didn't truly understand things like marriage and romantic love.

Thankfully, after the interview, the two of them were getting along well, though I wasn't sure whether the adults had helped them work it out somehow or whether it had just happened naturally. Based on what I heard from Kon, beastchildren around their age were at the point of their lives when they felt embarrassed about hanging out or holding hands with a member of the opposite gender. However, they didn't have to feel shy around their fiancé. Kon and Sayori became closer by the day without a hint of shyness or distance, and perhaps by this point, they were more lovey-dovey than Techi and me.

Recently, there were days when the two of them didn't come to visit, instead hanging out in private somewhere. They would even schedule the meeting place ahead of time, going on their version of

a "date." You could say that love—or rather, their betrothal—had encouraged them to mature. From time to time, I'd catch glimpses of their growth and inner transformation.

On the topic of dates, I hadn't gone on any proper ones with Techi yet. *I know it's a bit late, but I kind of feel like we can think about going on outings like a standard couple would.* That said, Techi was the kind of person who liked lounging around and relaxing at home on her days off. Though I'd already thought about taking her on a date a few times before, I hadn't found the chance to do anything along those lines yet.

Still, it wasn't like she refused to leave the house or despised the idea of heading out to have fun. Perhaps I should look for an opportunity to suggest we head somewhere one day. On top of that, I'd barely explored the Beastly Wilds. According to Techi and Kon, there were a lot of fun places suitable as date venues, and I'd love to head there eventually.

Not to mention that the sweltering summer was just around the corner. Even if we couldn't swim in the ocean, I wanted to at least go out to swim in a pool of some sort—to enjoy one or two summer activities.

That reminds me. Didn't Kon mention there's a fireworks show or something like that in summer? In that case, I guess my summer wish list would be going to a pool, admiring the fireworks, and maybe going out camping.

But well… I know, I'm living deep in the mountains, and wanting to go on a camp sounds kind of silly. But it's all about the experience and the mood. Let's not sweat the little details.

All kinds of different thoughts flashed across my mind as I finished polishing the timber with the file. Brushing away the wood shavings, I used screws and glue to assemble the chair. Once that was done, I painted on a coat of varnish. In terms of design, I'd lifted it straight from the chair Gramps had made. It was almost identical.

I suppose I could have been a bit more original and creative if it were a human chair, but this is for a chipmunk beastchild, so it's probably better to stick to what's tried-and-true. Who knows what

kind of little details he added to make it more comfortable for Kon? Sticking to the original design means that I can avoid issues like the frame of her body not fitting well or her tail getting stuck somewhere.

After coating it with varnish, I was basically done for now. While I waited for it to dry, I put away my tools. Meanwhile, Kon and Sayori had been eagerly chatting about topics such as the chair, Kon's stories with Gramps, and memories he'd made with me after I came to the Wilds. Their conversation seemed rather lively.

By the time I put most of my tools away, it sounded like they'd reached a resting point in their talk as well, because they came over. They didn't come all the way out into the garden, instead sitting next to the smoking mosquito coil on the veranda. They swayed their dangling little legs as they quietly watched over me as I worked.

For a while, Kon was silent. He gazed at me, the garden, the sky, then at me again. "Ahh…" he muttered, sounding like his mind was in the clouds. "This is kind of nostalgic. Cicadas, the blue sky, mosquito coils, and Grampa Tommi busy in the garden… We get less work in summer because it's so hot and it'd be really tiring, and when I didn't have work, I came here to watch what Grampa Tommi's up to for hours. Mikura doesn't look like his great-grandpa at all, but just watching him makes me remember Grampa Tommi…"

I could understand someone of my age sounding reminiscent over my past, but Kon sounded as if he were a middle-aged man recalling his childhood, which was slightly surreal. But when I saw the faintly melancholic expression on his face after his speech, I realized that Kon wasn't remembering a snapshot of a distant summer, but instead missing Gramps himself.

His sentimental mood spread to me, and I recalled my summer holidays during my childhood. While Sayori was utterly confused in the background, I shared a quiet, wistful silence with Kon.

After roughly an hour, I checked the chair, and the varnish was dry. I fetched wood glue and nails before reinforcing the chair and adding more implements wherever necessary. I'd copied Gramps's

handiwork—the position of the nails and the structure were identical to his. The only difference was that it looked newer. I finished up the chair that wouldn't look off at all next to Kon's signature one.

While I was busy, Kon and Sayori engaged in lighthearted banter as they watched over me. The moment the chair was ready, the two of them ran up to me.

"Wow! It looks so cool!" Kon exclaimed.

"Thank you for all your hard work," Sayori said politely.

I smiled. "Thanks, you two. All right, once the wood glue dries, it's ready to go. We could wait here, but I think it's around time for lunch, so how about we enjoy a meal while we wait?"

The moment I finished my question, the two of them sported the exact same sunny smile at the same time before they dashed into the kitchen. I didn't follow them, instead choosing to go to the bathroom first to wash my hands and get changed—there were likely wood shavings on my top and trousers. It was only then that I headed to the kitchen and put on my apron.

When I walked over to the sink, I discovered that Kon had relinquished his chair to Sayori for today. Meanwhile, he sat majestically on an empty confectionery tin, which he'd found lying around, with a dignified attitude that was rather novel on him.

It was such a heartwarming sight, and I felt a smile soften the corners of my eyes. I speedily opened the fridge, checked its contents, then closed it. *Now then… What should I make for lunch?*

My mind was drawing a blank, so I began thinking out loud. "I ended up dedicating my time to making that chair today, so something simple would be ideal. Judging by our inventory, hm… Since we mentioned summer holidays at one point, how about we do something that's in theme, like yakisoba?"

Kon tilted his head. "Yakisoba is in theme for summer holidays?"

"Yeah, in my household at least. Gramps made it often for me. What I remember of my lunches during summer holidays are yakisoba, thin somen noodles, thin *hiyamugi* noodles, or chilled Chinese noodles. It was almost always noodles, maybe because they're easy to make. Once in a while, I *do* recall having some fried

rice or other things… But what I remember the most vividly are the noodles."

I continued, "Even among all these noodles, yakisoba showed up much more frequently than the others. Furthermore, yakisoba is the classic type of food you'd find available at festival vendors or during summer events. That's why to me, it's food that screams summer holidays."

Kon hummed thoughtfully. "Grampa Tommi's yakisoba, huh? I don't remember ever eating any, but was it yummy?"

"Yep, sure was." I nodded. "He mentioned that having yakisoba sauce every single time would get boring, so he made all kinds of arrangements. Sometimes, he'd flavor it mainly with soy sauce, sometimes with plum pop sauce, and a couple of times, he even made yakisoba with tomato sauce."

Sayori was the first to react among the two kids. Sounding surprised, she raised her voice. "Tomato sauce yakisoba?! W-Would that even taste good?!"

I shrugged nonchalantly. "I think so. Tomato sauce goes well with pasta, and noodles aren't that different. On top of that, in a prefecture somewhere along the Japanese coast, yakisoba flavored with tomato sauce is renowned there as a local comfort food."

"Huuuh!" Kon and Sayori chorused simultaneously.

They certainly sounded interested, so I decided to make tomato sauce yakisoba for lunch today. But a second later, I recalled that I didn't have the necessary ingredients, so I had to begrudgingly change things up.

The second best option popped up in my mind, and I announced, "Unfortunately, we are out of tomato sauce at the moment… So how about we have plum pulp sauce yakisoba today?"

Kon beamed, his anticipation practically radiating from his face as he nodded.

Having received his response, I wasted no time and immediately pulled out the ingredients from the fridge. It was time to get cooking.

The ingredients in a traditional yakisoba are the following: cabbage, carrots, bean sprouts, and boneless pork ribs. You can

never go wrong with this. You have a few options for the noodles, but I'm using Chinese noodles available in the market this time. For your nori seaweed, you want the seasoned type, not the plain nori seaweed. Since this is plum pulp yakisoba, also prepare coarsely chopped plum pulp. Finally, you'll want plenty of dried bonito flakes.

Roughly cut your cabbage and carrots into chunks. Wash your bean sprouts thoroughly. Cut meat into bite-sized pieces.

For Chinese noodles, there is sometimes oil residue, so wash quickly in a colander and drain. Add cooking sake and soy sauce, then toss to distribute the seasoning evenly.

Drizzle oil into a frying pan. Spread your noodles across the frying pan's surface and push it down lightly with a spatula. After the bottom browns slightly, turn it over and cook the other side until slightly browned. Remove noodles from frying pan.

Next, stir-fry your ingredients by adding them in the following order: meat, carrots, then cabbage. Once they are cooked, push them to one side of the frying pan and add the noodles back in. In a small bowl, mix chuno sauce—a slightly sweet fruit and vegetable sauce–pepper, cooking sake, and chopped plum pulp. Pour mixture only over the noodles. Untangle the noodles while you toss them in the mixture.

After the noodles have absorbed the flavors and seasoning, add bean sprouts. Mix the vegetables and the noodles. Once the sauce is distributed evenly, serve onto plates. Sprinkle on plenty of dried bonito flakes and crushed seasoned nori seaweed. Add optional red pickled ginger to preference.

After I finished arranging the noodles onto two plates, I fetched chilled cold-brew barley tea from the fridge. I lined up the plates, the bottle of tea, as well as cups on the low table in the living room. I turned to Kon and Sayori, who'd followed me into the living room, and said, "There you go. Feel free to start without me."

Just like Kon, Sayori was a big eater. It was extremely difficult to cook for four—well, more like three gluttons and one standard eater—in one go. Partly because Techi hadn't come back yet, I'd decided to make food for the two children first before I cooked for Techi and me. I'd piled on a giant heap of yakisoba on their plates,

and the piles were so high that the vegetables dished up on the summit threatened to roll down any moment now.

It seemed that Kon and Sayori read between the lines and swiftly settled down on their seats, voicing their thanks for the food in unison before they started digging in with overflowing energy and a hearty appetite.

"It's sweet and sour and tasty!" Kon reported happily.

Sayori nodded. "Umeboshi and seasoned nori seaweed go very well together."

Their cheeks were puffing out adorably with food as they eagerly wolfed down their yakisoba. After watching them for a short while, I returned to the kitchen and began round two of cooking. Just as I finished arranging my normal-sized portion of yakisoba and Techi's super deluxe mega yakisoba on our plates, Techi came home.

The two of us adults belatedly joined the children and admired their energetic mannerisms as we enjoyed our leisurely lunch.



ONCE we polished off our plum pulp sauce yakisoba, we relaxed until the end of the lunch break, tuning in absentmindedly to the chorus of cicadas that had only just begun singing the past few days. We were sipping on our barley tea unhurriedly when I heard heavy stomping approaching from the garden.

I could tell who it was just by the sound of their feet. All of us other than Sayori, who didn't know the owner of those footsteps, shared the same expression, as if to say, "Huh, he's early."

Soon, the carpenter Také came over with a large bundle of papers in his arms. The bearfolk took a seat on the veranda. I promptly offered him a cup and the infuser bottle with cold-brew barley tea, but he didn't use the cup—he lifted the infuser bottle and directly poured the tea into his mouth. In the blink of an eye, the bottle with a 1.5 liter capacity became empty.

"Whew, thanks for the drink, buddy," he said good-naturedly, vigorously putting down the bottle on the veranda. "It's gotten boiling hot in no time… So before the summer sets in and steams us

alive, here, I made sure to get your renovation plans sorted. Check it out." He handed over the documents he was carrying in his arms.

I began looking over the documents with Techi, who'd rushed up behind me, as well as Kon and Sayori, who'd both run up onto my shoulders from my back.

As I read, Také added, "The work's gonna take a week. I got all the materials, so I can get started as soon as tomorrow. You've got the quote there in those papers. Welp, it came down to a pretty decent price, if I say so myself. You have to stay somewhere else while we're busy with your house. If you want a recommendation, I'spose the public-owned Central Hotel at the center of the forest's your best bet."

I inclined my head. "Huh, I never knew there were hotels around here."

Techi had sat down next to me and was now looking in my direction. Her face was practically glowing with brimming anticipation and excitement. On top of that, Kon and Sayori, who'd sprinted down next to my legs, looked up at me with a similar expression.

Without a word, I looked at Také with the silent message, *Details please.*

He grinned. "You wanna know more about the Central Hotel? Sure. You go straight from here in the direction of the Fusang trees and pass through the tunnel at the roots of those trees. The hotel's right on the other side. They built it to receive guests from other countries—ah, should I call it the mainland? Anyway, it's for guests from the other side of the border and it was also built in preparation for when we're open to tourists one day."

Then, he shrugged. "But it was practically a haunted house 'cause it doesn't have guests or tourists with how the Wilds are now, and it got to the point that it'd have to shut down altogether unless it was public-owned. And so, they decided to forget about being a normal hotel altogether and made all kinds of renovation and remodeling. Now, it's kinda like a recuperation resort where us beastfolk in the Wilds drop by once in a while to indulge ourselves and rejuvenate.

"There's plenty to see. A crazy big shopping corner. Hot springs of all kinds like medicinal hot spring, open-air hot spring, you name it. Saunas, pools… Body care services like massages… The top-class restaurants in the Wilds… And while you enjoy the hot springs, there are even a hospital and a rehab center nearby—that's the recuperation part. You could spend an entire week or two, or even more in that place. Plus, if you've got a referral from people in the building trade when you've got to rebuild your house or something, you can even stay at a discount. Of course, your pal Také here has gone ahead and made the arrangements so that you can stay over during your renovations this time."

He raised an eyebrow and grinned triumphantly at me. Then, he promptly pulled out a promotional flyer of the hotel and something that looked like a discount ticket from the bottom of the documents.

I looked over the flyer. What immediately entered my eyes was the photo of a vertically elongated building—roughly five or six stories high, the hotel was the picture of luxury and extravagance. "Whoa…" I muttered in wonder.

Perhaps my reaction spurred them on, because not only did Techi look at me expectantly, even Kon and Sayori gave me a pleading, hopeful gaze. I checked over the terms and conditions on the discount ticket, and after confirming that the two children were also eligible for the discount, I turned to Techi. She gave me a big, encouraging nod.

Having received her approval, I slowly spoke up. "Well… Personally, I think it's perfectly fine for the two of you to join us, Kon, Sayori. But it would mean staying out for an entire week, so we'll need to see whether your parents are okay with that before we make any plans. If your parents give you permission, I'll contact the hotel just in case. Let's head there together if everything works out. We'll finalize the date for the renovations after we finish that—"

Before I could even finish my sentence, Kon and Sayori sprang into action. They whipped out their phones from their pockets and began calling their respective parents about the matter.

Their explanation was something like this: *We want to stay in the Central Hotel with Mikura and Techi. It sounds like we can stay at a discount. It will be for a week while their house undergoes renovation. We'll make sure to pay with our own savings.*

The reaction they got from their parents on the other side of the calls were quite similar. They chuckled cheerfully before replying, *"Yeah, go ahead, that's a great idea. It's your early honeymoon."* And contrary to my expectations, everything was settled in no time.

When they finished their call, Kon and Sayori gazed at me. They used their tiny fingers to tap on the part of the flyer with the hotel's phone number. Relenting under their insistence, I promptly called the hotel.

After I explained my circumstances and asked whether that was all right, the hotel staff replied, *"Ahhh, Mr. Moriya, yes? We have heard about your potential stay. Yes, we'd be delighted to have your little additional guests. In fact, we have so much vacancy that you can almost say we are hoping for more customers all the time, so please don't hesitate to come here whenever you wish. We will be very happy to receive you even as soon as today."*

In my peripheral vision, I saw that the ears of my three companions were twitching attentively—they were probably listening in. Their expressions lit up brighter than the sun, and I raised the white flag of surrender in my heart.

I made up my mind and continued speaking to the hotel staff. "If that's the case, let's see… I would like to reserve two rooms for a total of four people—two adults and two children. The adults will stay in one room and the children will stay in the other. We will check in in three days' time and stay for a week.

"…Yes, we have plans of going to the hot springs, as well as experiencing the other facilities available such as the pool, the saunas, and the body care services… Yes, I think we'll keep ourselves busy around the hotel throughout the duration of our stay… I understand. …Ah, it would be great if we're able to sightsee in the vicinity of the hotel while we are there. …I would prefer to pay with… Yes. All right, I got all that. It should be fine. Okay, that's all

from me. …Got it, we will check in at ten in the morning in three days. All right, thank you.”

The moment I ended the call, Techi balled her hands into fists and stood up in celebration. As for Kon and Sayori, they leaped up in joy, exclaiming, “Yay!” in unison. They successfully high-fived in midair.

Shaking my head with fondness, I looked over at Také. “Well, I think you heard all that, Mr. Také. Would it be all right if we start the renovations in three days?”

Grinning from ear to ear, Také gave me a smooth and charming thumbs-up.

Ten Days Later

OUR collective stay in the Central Hotel was a blast. The week flew by, and every single day was filled with only entertainment and relaxation. We enjoyed the pool, the obstacle course, the leisure facilities, the hot springs, the saunas… We even went shopping at the shopping corner, which was like a miniature shopping mall. It was simply amazing.

But because it had been an entire week of hanging out and having fun, there wasn't anything especially noteworthy about it. It had gone by in a blur. One moment, I checked into the hotel. The next moment, it was already the end of our one-week stay.

We ended our stay by walking around the souvenir shops and mall on the first floor of the hotel before returning home with a whole lot of new luggage. Since I'd contacted Since I'd contacted them in advance, Kon and Sayori's parents were already waiting in front of our house for their children's return. The moment Kon and Sayori saw them, they charged into their parents' waiting embrace, together with their armful of souvenirs. Both kids started eagerly sharing their vacation stories with their families.

I watched the heartwarming sight in my peripheral vision as Techi and I lifted the sliding storm shutters, put down our baggage, and immediately explored our newly renovated house.

In terms of outward appearance and structure, it was pretty much the same as before. I couldn't spot any notable differences. The thatched roof also looked unchanged—but only in looks. It had transformed into an ornament that concealed the real roof underneath, which was made properly with fireproof material. Even if the thatched roof somehow caught on fire, the real roof underneath would protect this house.

Similarly, fireproofing material and fire-resistant insulation had been installed within the walls. Even the windows had been changed into fireproof ones. In the event of a forest fire, these windows might contort somewhat in shape, but they wouldn't crack or break. Therefore, the fire wouldn't have an entrance into the house. Their

effectiveness was apparently proven in a real incident with a large fire in a city somewhere, according to Také. The same applied to the fireproof material used in the walls and the roof.

I couldn't be too negligent, of course, but thanks to all these upgrades, we should be able to feel more reassured as we lived in this house. Furthermore, he'd installed fire alarms in the kitchen and near the bathroom, and he'd even planted a belt of fire-resistant trees around the house. As if that wasn't enough, he'd even added reinforcing material to the pillars and stairs, which meant that this house was also more resistant to the shock from earthquakes.

As a small bonus, he'd even upgraded the water boilers in the house to the latest ones, such as the ones in the bathroom. I was honestly impressed that he'd managed to do so much within such a short span of time.

Of course, this meant that it all came down to a significantly hefty bill, but this was a house I was going to live in for the rest of my lifetime with Techi. It was a necessary expense and investment.

And well… I might have also put the money I got from my dad to good use. Ahem.

After we finished inspecting our house, we went back to check on the others. Kon and Sayori must have gotten even more homesick after seeing their parents again, because they started insisting that they wanted to go home right away. Soon, the two families went home merrily, happily talking about what the children had enjoyed during their vacation.

Techi and I were also kind of exhausted. It wasn't quite physical exertion, per se, but an indescribable mental fatigue that could only be healed at home, sweet home. And so, we promptly took baths in the upgraded bathroom, changed into our pajamas, and spent the rest of the day doing absolutely nothing at all.



ON the next day, Kon and Sayori visited with their cheerful greetings like usual.

"Incomiiing!" Kon declared.

"I'm heeere!" Sayori exclaimed.

Their calls signaled the restart of our routine life.

A thought seemed to occur to Techi. "Speaking of which, it's about time we add extra fertilizer. Mikura, you should come and watch when that happens. You mentioned you want to learn more about your trade, didn't you?"

"Add extra fertilizer to the trees in the orchard, right?" I nodded. "Got it."

Kon was the next to speak up. "The cicadas have started getting really noisy! When it's morning, they all start making a fuss at once, and it wakes me up! That's why I need to go to bed early during this period."

"Huuuh, that's interesting," I replied. "For me, the cicadas don't really wake me, it's the birds."

Last but not least was Sayori, who asked, "Oh, may I ask what's on the menu today? I would be grateful if you could tell me the recipe."

"Sure, of course." I smiled at her. "But we're not making anything too special today. I was thinking about some refreshing hassaku orange jam."

Hassaku oranges were perfect for summer with their aromatic and invigorating citrusy scent. They had a well-balanced blend of sweet, sour, and the hint of a bitter tang, which transferred well to their jam.

Absentmindedly, I looked around me. Accompanied by the heat of early summer, a refreshing mountain breeze swept into the living room. All of us were here, enjoying barley tea as we watched the TV. Our stay in the hotel had been great fun, that was true, but in the end—*and yes, I know this sounds clichéd*—there was nowhere like home.

After that, we prepared to collectively make our way to the orchard for the first time in a long time. Techi and I had left the orchard in the care of Rei and my parents-in-law during our weeklong absence. Techi mentioned that she could only order the fertilizer after checking over the trees, so once we prepared our

package for the children who were always hard at work in the orchard, we set off.

I was greeted by the sight of a canopy of luscious green leaves stretching across the entire orchard as they basked in the early summer sun. Here and there, I could spot growing verdant chestnut burrs hanging from the branches.

"Wow!" I exclaimed on reflex. "I see chestnuts! Chestnuts in burrs growing everywhere! Huuuh, so they already start producing chestnuts in summer… These will turn brown in autumn and be ripe for the picking, okay…"

Until now, Techi and the kids had been the ones who mainly took care of the orchard. I hadn't done much, but seeing the literal fruits of their hard work was a moving sight, and I couldn't stop myself from blurting out my thoughts.

The corners of Techi's lips quirked up with a smile. "They've still got a long way to go. It's only after they become much bigger and produce a much more appetizing aroma that they're ready for the harvest."

Kon and Sayori, who'd been restlessly waiting near my legs, left their backpacks in my care before they sprinted out into the orchard. Climbing onto a tree nearby, they stood on the branches, looked around them, took deep breaths, then began staring unblinkingly at the chestnuts.

Possibly because they hadn't been able to come to the orchard for an entire week, they seemed to get giddy about scaling the trees, and soon, they began hopping from one branch to another. They climbed up and up, all the way onto the slenderer branches that could just about tolerate their weight. Their excitement looked like it would last for quite a long time.

Techi and I watched them out of the corner of our eyes as we headed to the usual rest area. We put down our large amount of baggage—which we'd either been carrying on our backs, slinging from our shoulders, or holding in our hands—onto the table. The next moment, I heard a burst of cheerful and lively chattering as the chipmunk beastchildren raced over to us.

To be more specific, they crowded around Techi's feet.

"Techi! I haven't seen you in ages."

"Techi! Welcome back!"

"Techi, how are you?"

Techi called out their names one by one as she stroked their heads. Then, after taking the attendance, she began talking with them, asking whether anything had happened during her absence, as well as how the chestnuts and moments were faring.

"Nothing happened!"

"Same old, same old."

"Rei's sweets were amazing!"

"It's another year of finding very few bugs!"

Then, one of the boys, who was noticeably taller and bigger compared to the others, said, "There were many cicadas though. We took care of lots and lots!"

Techi nodded and stroked that boy's head. "Great job."

Slightly startled, I called out to her. "Techi… Are cicadas pests?"

Techi and the kids blinked blankly at me for a moment before giving me incredulous looks. As she stroked the head of the kids, Techi replied, "Mikura, do you know what cicadas mainly feed on? Tree sap. To suck up the sap, they would naturally make holes in the tree, creating an opening where fungus and bacteria can invade and infect. If they suck up too much sap, it will also affect the tree's health.

"I can't remember how many years back it was, but there was a time when a mass outbreak of cicadas happened in the apple orchard near the Central Hotel, and that was a disaster. The trees didn't have enough nutrients, and the fruits they produced also became smaller. In the end, they couldn't harvest anything that year. On top of that, treating the trees and replacing old trees with new ones also cost a fortune." She paused. "There are even cicadas that suck on the sap of rice plants and sugarcanes, causing terrible damage. Cicadas are definitely pests on the farm, you can be sure of that."

"O-Oh…" It clicked in my mind after I heard her explanation. "That makes sense… I never realized before you pointed it out to

me.” I paused. “Would cicada extermination be the main job of the kids around this time of year, then?”

“Pretty much.” She nodded. “Very soon, it’s going to be around the time when a certain type of despicable and infuriating pest tries to lay their eggs inside the chestnuts—they are our greatest and mortal enemies—but for now, we mostly deal with pests that are after the tree sap, like cicadas. As long as you keep their numbers in check, cicadas don’t cause too much damage, but it doesn’t mean leaving them be is a good idea. If you overlook them, they will lay their eggs, and their larvae will suck up the sap directly from the tree roots… We want to decimate the population as much as possible. Oh, and by the way, if you tell me in advance, I can keep the cicadas we catch as an ingredient—”

I cut her off before she could finish her bombshell statement, forcefully putting a stop to the topic there. “Thank you, but no thank you!”

After that, Techi gave a signal to the kids to start working, and the kids sprinted over to the orchard. Once I saw them off, I moved to the small washing area nearby and started on my own task.

First, I took out the four watermelons I’d chilled in the warehouse fridge. We’d put them in nets and carried them here laboriously. I picked out one of them, which was especially large, and washed it with water from the faucet. I moved it onto a chopping board, which I’d also brought with me, and split it cleanly with a knife. With a spoon, I scooped out the fruit carefully, making spheres as round as possible like ice cream scoops, and put the scoops down into a large glass bowl.

Thanks to its position on a mountain, the Wilds in the early summer wasn’t too hot, at least compared to the other side of the border. The temperature rarely ever went above eighty-six degrees, and refreshing winds were with you wherever you went. It was a pleasant place to escape the heat in summer—I would even go as far as to say that it would make a good summer retreat.

However, if you were out and about like the kids working hard in the orchard, you were naturally going to perspire, not to mention that the kids were covered with fur from head to toe, which only

made it hotter for them. Continuous sweating all day long would lead to dehydration, which had terrible consequences.

For that reason, drinking plenty of fluids during summer was also seen as an important thing in the Beastly Wilds. According to Techi, her job description as a preschool teacher included helping the hard-working children quench their thirst in a delicious manner.

Today, we were going to mainly entertain them with watermelons and watermelon desserts. What I was doing right now was the preparation for that. While I was scooping out the watermelon, I also used a fork every now and then to gather the watermelon seeds.

Techi, who'd been watching me from my side, asked, "What are you going to do with those seeds?"

I continued hollowing out the watermelon as I replied, "Watermelon seeds are actually rather nutritious items. Well, you can't really eat them raw because you can't digest the shell, but you can crack the shell or strip it off, or even stir-fry the seeds until they're nice and crunchy. Apparently, ingesting them gives you a whole lot of nice nutrients and prevents the summer heat from getting to you.

"That's why I'm going to sprinkle on some salt and stir-fry them today to make a snack which can also help the kids replenish salt. But well, we've only got four watermelons. I don't think we'll have enough seeds for all the kids to eat to their heart's content, so I'm also going to mix in crushed almonds and walnuts from the supermarket. It'll be something like mixed nuts."

Hearing that, Techi nodded. Imitating me, she picked up a fork and walked forward until she was right by my side—until she was at a distance where her skin was gently pressed against mine. Then, she began helping me out with separating the seeds from the fruit.

The watermelon seeds were going to be stir-fried with almonds and walnuts. Meanwhile, I divided the watermelon scoops into separate bowls. One bowl was for eating them as-is. The other bowl was going to turn into the ingredient in a fruit punch—I was going to

add canned fruits and fruit jello to the bowl before pouring on soda just before the kids dug in.

Once I finished all the preparations, I served the three items separately on large platters before arranging them on the table in the rest area. When I was taking out spoons and small plates for everyone, the diligent kids in the orchard noticed what I was doing, and they all came rushing over while yelling in excitement.

But Techi stopped them. "Wash your hands first!" she barked. "As for those of you sweating all over, you need to take a shower in the shower rooms and get changed before you can have your dessert!"

The kids obeyed dutifully. They split up into groups that went to the sink area and the shower rooms.

The rest area came equipped with all kinds of facilities, such as a sink area, toilets, and deeper inside, you could find the type of shower rooms that you'd often see in campgrounds. Apparently there even used to be a washing machine here in the past. It honestly felt like a full-blown campsite.

We no longer had a washing machine because it had malfunctioned a long time ago, but the shower rooms were still very much ready for action. After taking showers there, the kids shook their bodies all over to fling the water away. They walked out into the sunlight and borrowed the aid of the sun to dry their wet fur.

Seeing that, Techi grabbed a brush and fur oil—tea seed oil—before rushing over and brushing everyone's fur speedily, making sure that they wouldn't get tangled and matted. Then, she ushered them to get changed.

Doing orchard work in summer meant that you were naturally going to get sweaty and take showers. And if you were going to take showers, you'd need a change of clothes. As you would expect, the kids had come prepared—they took out fresh clothes from their backpacks and promptly got changed. They arranged the food on the table onto their small plates before they sat down on the picnic blanket or benches nearby. With big smiles, they scooped up spoonfuls of their refreshments and enjoyed their break.

First, they'd eat plain watermelons to hydrate up, then the salty stir-fry of watermelon seeds and nuts to replenish salt. Once their bodies weren't as hot and thirsty, they'd dig into the fizzing fruit punch to quell their hunger.

I noticed that some of the kids began eating watermelon seeds again, seeking some salt after they savored the sweetness of the fruit punch. Meanwhile, some other children were satisfied with the fruit punch and began napping away in the shade.

Watching over the kids from my place on the bench, I observed, "Looks like the watermelon seeds are relatively popular. I was a bit worried because you looked so surprised, Techi, but I'm glad it turned out well." That was when a question popped up in my head. "Actually, chipmunks often crack open shells and eat edible parts inside, don't they? I feel like watermelon seeds would be a part of their diet… So why were you so taken aback?"

Techi, who was sitting across from me, sported a somewhat awkward look. "Around here, we think that eating watermelon seeds is bad for your body… Well, that's the superstition, at least." She hesitated. "Maybe you've heard of it before. There's a rumor that if you eat watermelon seeds, it will sprout out from your belly button…"

I blinked in surprise. "Y-Yeah, I've heard that a few times when I was a child. But the rumor says that it only happens when you swallow it whole, and as long as you chew it properly, it should be fine… I mean, if watermelon seeds can truly grow in your stomach, I'm sure that the government would issue a warning or ban against eating them. Not to mention that all chipmunk beastfolk have the habit of chewing well if they see something as a seed, no matter what size it is, so I think you don't have to worry about it at all."



As I spoke, I glanced at the children who were eating watermelon seeds. These seeds were very small, while the teeth of these kids were relatively large, as you would expect from chipmunks. Chewing properly on every single watermelon seed with their big teeth would be very troublesome.

However, the children thoroughly worked through every individual seed, moving their mouths minutely and tirelessly. It seemed that they enjoyed the sensation of chewing itself, not just the food. I was sure that none of the watermelon seeds in their mouths retained their original shape.

"Oh, good point." Techi looked slightly shaken. "Yeah, if you don't have the shell outside, the seed can't sprout… I see… Right, it should be impossible for the seed to germinate if you crush it with your teeth…"

Seeing her reaction, I realized that Techi had been terrified of the watermelon seed myth even now as an adult. She'd likely heard the rumor when she was a child, and the fear had been planted in her. Because it was the irrational fear of a child, she'd never thought about the logic or facts around it.

She'd eaten watermelons before she heard the rumor but had never thought about removing the seeds. Ever since, she'd been haunted by the thought, but she'd been liberated from her fear right at this moment. That was my guess at least.

Techi remained somewhat on edge for a while, but she let out a small sigh and gathered her wits. Then, she picked up one of the watermelon seeds on the large platter and popped it into her mouth before chewing it thoroughly. She swallowed.

"That's it, huh?" she muttered under her breath.

The watermelon seed she'd been terrified of for all her life turned out to be nothing significant once she actually tried eating it. It was just that—a watermelon seed. That was probably what she meant by her comment.

Regaining her usual casual attitude, she lightheartedly ate one watermelon seed after another, just like how she usually nibbled on senbei crackers and other snacks.

I'd chosen to make watermelon seeds into a snack for no particular reason—it had been a whim. However, if Techi was able to take a step forward and overcome her fear because of it, I was elated that I'd managed to help.

I placed a hand on my chin. "I have to say though, I never knew that even *you* have things you're scared of, Techi. You dealt with creepy bugs without batting an eyelid, so I was convinced that nothing could intimidate you. On the topic of scary things, summer is the season when people like to do tests of courage, right? Just wondering, is there anything else you're scared of? Like ghosts or spirits?"

Narrowing her eyes, Techi sent a frosty look in my direction. She didn't look like she was angry; she was slightly displeased, as if to say, "Why would you even ask that?"

Puffing out her cheeks, she replied offhandedly, "I suppose I'm scared of manjū and your cooking, Mikura."



WE finished up our first day of work at the orchard in a long time when evening fell. Kon and Sayori reported that they were going to have dinner at our place, so all four of us came home together. We washed our hands, took showers in the renewed bathroom, and changed into fresh sets of clothes.

While Techi and Sayori lounged in the living room, Kon and I made a beeline for the kitchen and began prepping for dinner.

"Mikura, what's on the menu today?" Kon asked as he sat down at his signature chair.

"Can you guess?" I opened the fridge and took out pork cutlets and eggs. I also fetched panko breadcrumbs from the cabinet.

Seeing these ingredients, Kon announced, "Tonkatsu!"

I grinned at him. "Close, but no cigar. Well, I suppose tonkatsu will be part of it, but the actual dish is a little bit fancier."

Next, I took out spring onion, Japanese yams, daikon radish sprouts, shredded nori seaweed, and bottled plum pulp. I lined them up in a row on the counter.

Kon inclined his head. “Tonkatsu and salad? Tonkatsu and tororo grated yam? Hmm… I can’t tell at all…”

While Kon was at a loss, I prepared to deep-fry the pork cutlets. I took out a deep-fryer pot, poured in oil, and turned on the stove. I stuck a thermometer into the oil and watched the temperature like a hawk as I explained our dinner today.

“Everyone sweated a lot today, right? There’s you and Sayori, of course, and also Techi, because she’s got a furry tail. That’s why I decided to make something that can help us fend off the summer fatigue. The first thing that came to my mind was *katsumabushi don*.”

“Katsumabushi?” Kon repeated. “What’s that?”

I thought about a good way to describe it. “There’s a dish called *himatsubushi*, where you serve chopped *kabayaki* eel over rice —that’s the type of eel dipped and broiled in semi-sweet soy sauce. Katsumabushi is like the tonkatsu version of that.”

Then, I went into detail about the recipe.

There’s a version of katsudon rice bowl in Nagoya where you dunk deep-fried pork cutlets into Worcestershire sauce. The first step of katsumabushi is making this style of deep-fried pork cutlets. Dunk deep-fried pork cutlets into sweet and salty Worcestershire sauce with plenty of richness and flavors. Cut into bite-sized chunks.

Prepare plenty of minced spring onion and bite-sized chunks of Japanese yam. Serve rice in a rice bowl. Arrange the pork pieces, spring onion, and Japanese yam on top. Sprinkle on shredded nori seaweed and daikon radish sprouts. Garnish with shredded plum pulp at the very top of the pile.

Before you eat this dish, mix all the ingredients on top of the rice. Enjoy other ingredients and rice together with the pork cutlet, which has relatively strong flavors due to the sauce.

I continued, “You can choose to pour tea over it like himatsubushi, but today, we’ll have the normal version. Oh, and a delicious optional topping is silky onsen tamago, which I don’t have at the moment.”

“Wooow!” Kon raised both hands in the air with amazement. “I can’t really imagine what it tastes like, but I’m sure it’s yummy since

you're the chef, Mikura! I've never had pork cutlet with that kind of sauce either, so I can't wait!"

I nodded. "It's even tastier if you make homemade Worcestershire sauce, but it needs too much time and a bunch of ingredients, so I'll use the slightly expensive version in the supermarket. As for the pork cutlets, I'll only have a thin layer of panko breadcrumbs because we're going to soak it in sauce anyway, so it's not going to be too crunchy. Meanwhile, for the veggies, you can just cut it up roughly.

"You could choose to cut down time by buying tonkatsu covered in Worcestershire sauce from a restaurant somewhere. I added plum pulp to help with the summer heat, but this is optional. Sprinkling on toasted sesame seeds could be something else to consider."

As I talked, I began deep-frying the pork cutlets. When the oil was at the right temperature, I added the pork with panko breadcrumbs into the pot. Once it was cooked through and golden brown, I placed them onto an oil drain rack and left them there to cool. Once they weren't as hot, I dipped them into Worcestershire sauce and cut them into pieces. As for the rest of the steps, they were the exact same as the recipe I'd described.

Once I finished making the rice bowls, I smiled to myself. "All right, food's ready. It takes some time and effort if you deep-fry your own pork cutlets, but it becomes extremely simple if you buy it from somewhere. You can make all kinds of adjustments to your vegetables and seasoning too. Say, you could add wasabi, or tea, like I mentioned earlier. Since the rest of it is simple… Maybe next time, I'll get you to make them when we feel like having them again. How does that sound, Kon?"

With shining eyes, Kon nodded enthusiastically. "Let's do that!" He swiftly grabbed the dry tea towel in the kitchen, washed it thoroughly with tap water, then wrung it firmly. Kon then darted into the living room, quickly tidied up the low table, and wiped it clean. He even prepared a floor cushion for me.

As I thanked him, I set the table with our rice bowls and chilled barley tea. It was now time for dinner.

We voiced our thanks for the food in unison before we mixed up katsumabushi don. Once the distribution was even, I picked up a piece of deep-fried pork, vegetables, and some rice with my chopsticks and carried it into my mouth. The flavorful sauce was the first thing to hit my tongue. Next was the refreshing mix of spring onion, daikon radish sprouts, and Japanese yam. Mixed well within was the unique accent of nori seaweed and sour plum pulp.

I bit down. The rich, savory umami of the pork seeped out along with its juices. The varied textures of the vegetables were delightful. The delicate balance of aromas was simply exquisite. I couldn't put my bowl down once I began—since the ingredients had been cut into small pieces, nothing could stop me.

Each part of the dish served a different role. The pork and Japanese yam helped me replenish energy. The plum pulp provided citric acid and salt. And of course, having vegetables of any sort was always good for you. The refreshing ingredients paired with the pork also meant that it didn't taste too greasy or overwhelmingly for your stomach.

It could fend off the summer heat fatigue, it was easy to stomach even if you were already fatigued, and it was still absolutely delicious. On top of that, it was simple to make.

This was the paragon of summer food. Therefore…

"Give me seconds," Techi stated.

"Seconds!" Kon yelled.

"Seconds, please!" Sayori exclaimed.

…even when I heard such requests from the three gluttons, I could rest assured.

I stood up from my seat. "I hear you loud and clear. I'll get to it right away."

Together with Kon, who'd stood up with me, I went to the kitchen. The opportunity for "next time" had come very soon, and Kon was pumped up to take over as the main chef. We got to work without a moment's delay.

THE next day came around.

After breakfast, I saw Techi off as she went to the orchard. Then, I finished all the chores I hadn't managed to get to yesterday. At noon, Techi came back with Kon and Sayori, and the four of us savored chilled Chinese noodles for lunch.

Now, it was the afternoon. We seemed to be fine with our measures for the summer heat fatigue at the moment, so I figured I should start thinking about measures for heatstroke next. I visited the supermarket to stock up on my ingredients and sprang into action immediately after I returned.

Sterilize preserve jars by boiling them in a pot. During the wait, repeatedly wash slightly pricey and good quality lemons produced locally in Japan under running water. Be patient—wash every single spot meticulously.

This could be said for all citrus fruits, but their skins were a feast for mold and nutritious for humans. Because of that, it was easy for them to grow mold. Even if they didn't look like they were moldy, sometimes, they might have invisible spores all over the skin.

I'd heard that when people in the cheese industry were involved with the fermentation process, they would avoid eating citrus fruits altogether so that they wouldn't accidentally get mold spores onto their bodies. This was only hearsay, so I didn't know how true it was, but what I did know was that it was indeed easy for citrus peels to grow mold. If you didn't cook your fruit, the mold might spread in no time at all.

Frankly, I had no clue whether washing citrus skin could get rid of all the spores. It might only serve the purpose of giving me peace of mind, but I still washed the fruits thoroughly just in case. Then, after draining all the water, I cut the lemons into slices.

I used a toothpick to remove the lemons seeds, trying not to damage the fruit whenever I could. I took out a jar of honey I'd stored deep inside the cabinet.

"Uh-oh, it's gotten all stiff," I muttered.

Sometimes, liquid honey would harden inside jars and bottles. It would become a consistency similar to jello—no, agar jelly. It will be a challenge to use it like this, but if you warm it gently in water

around 104 degrees to 122 degrees, it will melt easily and regain its liquid properties. This wouldn't affect the taste either, so you could enjoy it as if it were a brand-new jar.

If your honey container was made of glass, you could heat it directly, but if it was plastic, it might melt in the heat, so you had to be careful. Transferring your honey from your plastic bottle to a glass jar might be a good idea for long-term storage.

Lectures aside, this meant that I had one additional task to do. I put another pot on the stove and heated my honey jar over low heat. I waited until the sterilization was done and honey was ready.

Remove sterilized jars from the pot. Fill them up with lemon slices. Pour in honey until full. Screw the lids tightly before storing in the fridge. After one day, your lemon-infused honey will be ready.

Lemon-infused honey was a convenient ingredient to have on hand. It could be used in lemonade, lemon pie, and so on.

Some people prefer to store them in room temperature instead of the fridge, but from my experience, lemon-infused honey grows mold easily. If it were just honey, that wouldn't happen, but because you added lemons and the water content of the lemons, it provided a better environment for mold to thrive. You couldn't afford to let your guard down.

Neither honey nor locally produced lemons were cheap. If these things grew mold, it would burn a very sad hole in my wallet, so I moved them straight into the fridge to avoid such a travesty.

It was also important to consume them as soon as possible after making them, so I decided I'd make lemonade for Techi and the others tomorrow.

The recipe for lemonade only consisted of one step: dissolve lemon-infused honey in chilled water. You could use sparkling water instead or add things like mint. A pinch of salt would also help you replenish your salt reserves.

This kind of lemonade was an effective measure against heatstroke. You could rehydrate, replenish your sugar levels—plus salt levels if you added that—and ingest some citric acid. On top of that, it was even refreshing and tasty. What more could you ask for?

You could spread it over meat like jam. It also had a good affinity with certain types of fish like salmon. There was even the option of making a lazy person's edition of a lemon pie by using store-bought pastry and baking it with lemon-infused honey as the filling. Then there was toast with lemon-infused honey or sandwiches with salmon, herbs, and this honey. I'd heard that some people mixed it with potato salad as an accent to give it more variety. *Hm, I should test out all of those when I have time.*

In the back of my mind, I considered all the things I could do with lemon-infused honey as I stashed my preserve jars in the fridge. That was when a certain bag caught my attention. It jostled with a rustle with my movement, as if reminding me that I mustn't forget about them.

"Ah, right… It's about time, isn't it?" I muttered to myself. "Okay, I've got to check the weather forecast and aim for sunny days."

My words were directed at the pickling plums in the fridge. They were dyed bright red, having absorbed the color of the red shiso. And now, they were only waiting to be dried under the sun.

Ideally, you'd want to dry them under the midsummer sun under a cloudless sky so that it would produce plenty of umami and acidity. Once I returned it to the salted plum juice after the drying process, the umeboshi would be ready. The flavorful and sour umeboshi will elevate the taste of your rice to a whole other level.

Putting umeboshi into your lunchbox during summer will help your food last longer, and because they are pretty much little balls of salt, they also help prevent heatstroke. They are also just as versatile, if not more versatile, than lemon-infused honey. Above all, I'd invested quite a lot of money and effort into them, so I had to be careful not to miss a good opportunity.

Once again, I muttered to myself, "I've got lots to do in summer too, huh?"

Summer was hot and humid, which meant that everything went bad and grew mold more quickly. It definitely wasn't a season suited for making preserves, but my schedule was still going to be jam-

packed. In fact, this was going to be my prime season for making sun-dried things.

There were still plenty of preserves I wanted to make. *And I also have plenty of time, so I should try my hand at everything I can,* I decided.

But that was the future, not the present. For now, I focused on the preparations for dinner tonight.

Tonight, I would make bitter melon *chanpurū*. The ingredients were pork, tofu, eggs, and bitter melons. Apparently, this combination made it a good way to fend off the summer heat fatigue and heatstroke as well.

Now then, the problem is whether Kon and Sayori can withstand the bitter melons… I guess I've got to do everything I can to make it easier on their tongue. And so, I began by curbing the bitterness by rubbing in salt and parboiling it in hot water.



ONCE I finished prepping the bitter melons, I checked over my inventory again and confirmed that I had all the necessary ingredients. I did all the prior preparations I could so that I was ready to start cooking at any time.

Then, I went to the bathroom, cleaned it, and filled the bathtub with hot water in advance. There was nothing left to do now, so I lounged in the living room until I heard the energetic voices of Kon and Sayori.

Techi came back with the kids. She was the first one to say, "I'm home."

Kon was second. "I'm baaack!"

Sayori was third. "Hello, I've come back."

They went straight to the bathroom, washed their hands, then went to the shower and bathing area. I checked that everyone had gone in, brought over towels and a change of clothes for everyone, and placed it in the basket of the changing area.

Then, I moved to the kitchen and did the finishing touches for dinner. Other than bitter melon chanpurū, there was also boiled

spinach in dashi soy sauce, as well as clam miso soup. I figured the trio should finish their bath soon, so I began making lemonade.

I already shared the recipe for lemonade, but there was one thing you had to be careful with: don't put too much honey. The sweetness and aroma of honey was extremely potent and overpowering. Adding too much would dampen out the refreshing taste of lemonade, which wasn't ideal.

That said, having too little honey meant that you couldn't enjoy the sweetness that you look forward to in a lemonade, so I had to be a good judge to get it just right. As long as I succeeded at this, I could make the perfect lemonade. This tasty and refreshing drink would blast all heat and fatigue away.

The aroma and taste of honey was different depending on the type you used. I didn't really have good advice for how to get it right in one go—it was something you had to learn with experience.

Deciding I'd use sparkling water instead of normal water, I fetched the chilled sparkling water from the fridge and large glass cups. Sometimes, adding honey right off the bat would cause it to cling to the bottom of your cup, so I poured in a small amount of water first.

Then, I added two slices of lemons and honey to each glass cup before slowly filling the cups with more sparkling water. Sparkling water reacts to the lemons and fizzes dramatically, but I didn't want all the bubbles to be gone before we could enjoy the drink, which was why I was going slow. I was equally gentle as I stirred the drink with the spoon I'd used to transfer the honey earlier. Once the golden sheen of honey was distributed throughout the drink, it was ready.

Now, as for whether I squeeze the lemon slices to add the juice into the lemonade or get them to eat the lemons as they drink… I guess I'll let everyone decide for themselves.

As I carried the finished lemonade onto the low table in the living room, the refreshed trio came in as well. They greeted me again.

"Mikura, I'm home," said Techi.

"Mikura! I'm baaack!" Kon chirped.

"Good evening, Mr. Mikura, I'm back." Sayori dipped her head in greeting.

They each settled in their seats and reached for their cups. Techi lightly squashed her lemon slices with her spoon. Kon drank the lemonade vigorously, leaving his lemon slices suspended in the drink. Sayori sipped on her lemonade slowly, savoring its aroma and taste.

Techi nodded to herself. "Your lemonade never fails to impress."

Kon beamed. "The lemons aren't that sour! This is good!"

Sayori held up her cup firmly with both hands. "It smells wonderful."

I sipped on my own cup of lemonade as I said, "This time, I've added a couple more steps and tried starting by making lemon-infused honey. And yeah, putting in a little more time and effort definitely shows. The sweetness and flavors of the honey has seeped into the lemon, so its sourness should be mild, making it easy to eat."

Techi raised an eyebrow. "Not just lemons, but even honey? Sounds like we've got a rather lavish drink here." She took another slow sip, rolling the drink on her tongue and tasting it thoroughly.

In contrast to Techi and Sayori, who enjoyed their drink unhurriedly, Kon had already finished his lemonade in the blink of an eye. Now, he was busy nibbling away at the lemon slices left behind, not even sparing the peel.

I watched him absentmindedly as I began my routine trivia session. "In America, lemonade is a popular beverage that children would make and sell at drink stands. But due to various circumstances, such as budget, sometimes they don't use lemons at all, instead using citric acid as a substitute. They'd add citric acid powder or citric acid tablets sold in pharmacies, along with sugar into water, mix it, and sell it as lemonade.

"I know it sounds a little halfhearted, but it still tastes like genuine lemonade. Interesting, right? Other than that, I've heard that there's something called pink lemonade. For this drink, you use a spice called sumac. It's red and sour and reportedly tasty, but I don't see it very often in Japan."

Techi inclined her head with intrigue. "Interesting… You mentioned it's a spice. Would it have a spicy smell like chai or cinnamon? I prefer lemons then."

On this summer evening, I happily engaged in a lively chat with Techi about trifling things that technically weren't of any importance.

I continued, "On that note, the word 'lemonade' has a slightly different definition depending on the country. In some places, they say that a non-carbonated drink with lemons is lemonade while a carbonated lemon drink is called lemon squash. In another, I read that all fizzy drinks are categorized as lemonade, including coke. There's also red lemonade. I heard there are also countries where you add alcohol to it. The variation is fascinating.

"Oh, and on that topic, I mentioned this to Kon before, but we've got a fizzy drink called ramune in Japan, right? That's apparently based on the word lemonade too, just corrupted."

Techi nodded. "Ahhh, ramune. We also drink that in the Wilds during the summer festival. They've got those glass marbles in them, and playing with them right after we finish the drink is the best part."

"Mmhmm." I recalled my experience with the beverage. "I'd drink them during summer festivals, when I'm having lunch during my summer holidays…ah, and at the beach. For some reason, Gramps had an obsession with serving ramune with yakisoba, and I remember thinking that I didn't really understand why you'd pair them together."

Techi shrugged, a fond smile playing at the corners of her lips. "Tomiyasu *did* have a thing for strange combinations like that. He'd pair Napolitan pasta with apple juice, ramen with barley tea, omurice with orange juice… I couldn't understand it either. He never strayed from these combinations… Maybe there's some kind of reason he was so fixated about it?"

I frowned and mulled over it. "Hm… I don't know either, but I have a guess. Back during Gramps's time, people still weren't used to western or foreign food. Maybe he remembered the combinations the first time he ate them, or the combinations he first saw on TV, and those stuck. Speaking of drinks, when he made barley tea, he'd

add small amounts of salt and sugar, and it tasted weird… Now that I think about it, it was probably to prevent heat stroke in summer."

We became more invested in our idle talk than I'd expected, and the mood only got livelier when Kon and Sayori participated too. Our chat went on for a good while—long enough for our miso soup to go cold, and I ended up having to reheat them.

Eventually, our topic went from random things to our plans for the summer ahead. This was when Kon got excited and listed one thing he wanted to eat after another. Sayori looked at him and giggled to herself.

As for Techi, this is what she had to say: "I feel like summer with you, Mikura, is going to be different from the summers I'm used to. My gut's telling me it's going to be fun."

I gave her a soft, happy smile. "We certainly have a lot of things to look forward to. Our orchard, the summer festival, summer ingredients, making umeboshi… I honestly can't wait."

She replied with a big, sweet smile of her own.

This early summer night trickled by peacefully and delightfully in good company, and I was sure that I would be blessed with many more such nights from now on.

Afterword

THANK you for making it all the way to the end of volume five! Hello, I'm the author, Fuurou.

This series was originally serialized on a website called *Shōsetsuka ni Narō*, a Japanese novel self-publishing website, but I've added quite a lot of new scenes in the published version starting from volume four. That applies to volume five as well. I didn't just add new scenes, I've also cut parts that I felt were unnecessary. Though I was the one who wrote it myself, when I reread my work, I would come across parts that feel like fillers or are a bit dull. That's why I made this decision.

It's probably especially evident during the transition between the last two chapters—I've removed all the scenes during their stay in the hotel while the house is undergoing renovations. The entire section was originally somewhat like a travel journal, but this hotel and the area around the hotel don't ever show up in the story again, nor are they significant in any way. And…sadly, it wasn't that interesting either.

Because of this, starting from volume five, you might come across many original chapters and arcs in the published version… I'm sorry for any inconvenience or confusion I might have caused.

Now then, onto the topic of summer.

To me, summer in the countryside basically summed up my summer holidays during my childhood. I think I've written this in a previous afterword as well, but I would always remember how I went to visit my great grandmother's house during the summer holidays whenever the heat starts settling in.

If you walked roughly five minutes from her house, you would arrive at a beach where you could go fishing. But if you walked in the opposite direction for ten minutes, you would find a mountain where you could go insect hunting. All kinds of strange insects and creatures, which you can only find in the countryside, sauntered inside and outside the house. All the food was gorgeous without exception… Even now, I remember it as a paradise for children.

My experience and memories from back then are still a part of my life. I'm picky about my food and ingredients, I go out fishing once a week, and I test out all kinds of recipes, trying to reproduce the taste of my great grandmother's cooking. That house and my grandmother has truly left a lasting mark on me.

These fond memories have also left their imprint on this work. If you can detect even a subtle hint of their presence, I would be delighted.

If there's going to be a volume six, we will dive headfirst into making umeboshi at last. It wouldn't be Japanese summer without umeboshi—it's that iconic, and it's also a preserve. I hope I can capture the wonderful atmosphere of Japanese summer and convey it to you through my work.

That's all from me!

Fuurou
Spring, 2024



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