

COOKING WITH WILD GAME

Author: **EDA**

Illust: **Kochimo**

VOLUME
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“It can’t
be...!”

Swimming
inside were all
manner of fish,
the first I had
seen since
coming to
Genos.





Varkas

An extraordinary chef tasked with cooking for the welcome banquet alongside Asuta. He requests that Asuta turn down the job.

Asuta
clashes with
the greatest
chef in all of
Genos!!!

Rimee Ruu energetically exclaimed as she stepped into the stone room filled with white steam.

“Yay, the bathhouse!”



MENU

Chapter 1: Unfamiliar Ingredients

Chapter 2: A Worthwhile Day Off

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Group Performance: The Rutim
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Chapter 1: Unfamiliar Ingredients

1

It was the twenty-seventh of the black month, the day after Dan Rutim's birthday.

After finishing up our business in the post town, we headed for the castle town as promised. Our goal was to inspect the vast stock of unfamiliar ingredients hidden away in the pantry at the Turan manor.

It wouldn't be appropriate to go barging in with a huge crowd, so my companions consisted of just Reina and Rimee Ruu, Toor Deen, and Ai Fa to act as a bodyguard. After leaving our own wagon at the gates to the castle town, we switched over to Polarth's carriage. As our guide, he had naturally prepared passes for us.

"Well, let us head out," Polarth declared, at which the carriage started slowly moving.

Since Toor Deen alone looked rather nervous, I decided to ask her, "Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine... It's just, I never could have imagined that I would be setting foot in the castle town alongside a noble," the young girl quietly whispered back, seemingly worried about Polarth overhearing. It actually made me feel a bit nostalgic as I nodded back, remembering how Reina Ruu had said almost the exact same thing last time around.

"Well, I figure pretty much anyone from the forest's edge would feel that way at first. But it's not a problem for you that I asked you to help out, is it?"

"Of course not... The fact that you chose me out of so many other women is an incredible honor. It makes so, so proud," Toor Deen said, finally shooting me a joyful smile.

We had been hired to prepare a welcome banquet for the envoys from

Banarm, who would be arriving in the following indigo month. I had asked the three who would be assisting me on the job to join me today.

Would the ingredients awaiting us in Cyclopeus's treasured pantry turn out to be an asset for us when the time came? Even though we were only heading there thanks to Polarth's forceful invitation, I couldn't deny that I was feeling rather curious.

"I believe there will be around twenty or thirty folks attending the welcome banquet. Naturally, I shall be participating as a representative for the house of Daleim!" Polarth declared from the seat opposite me, seemingly once again in quite the pleasant mood. "Normally a more grandiose banquet would be held, but since the envoys shall be staying in Genos for at least ten days, up to half a month or more, the schedule will instead proceed more gradually. After all, were a banquet to be held in the castle, there would be a hundred or even two hundred guests. And that would be too great of a burden on you, would it not, Sir Asuta?"

"Hmm, it certainly does seem like it would be rough to have to prepare six different dishes for a hundred people."

Catering for nobles in the castle town typically meant arranging six different dishes in a full-course meal, and I had spoken with a workload of that size in mind, only for Polarth to reply, "Oh no," with a shake of his plump hands. "We certainly wouldn't have six separate dishes presented in order with a banquet that large. But instead, there has to be a wide variety of food on offer, including appetizers to be freely munched on."

Even so, that was sure to be something completely different than how the banquets at the forest's edge were held. The sight of everyone happily eating giba dishes together and smiling from last night's Rutim banquet remained firmly fixed in my mind.

"Well, at any rate, I'm certainly looking forward to the welcome banquet! And to today's investigation as well. No matter how high your hopes may be, I can't imagine them being dashed, Sir Asuta."

"Right. I'm looking forward to it too."

After around thirty or so minutes more of swaying back and forth in our seats,

the tolos-drawn carriage came to a stop.

We had arrived at the Turan manor.

“It’s still just as huge as I remember!” Rimee Ruu declared as she looked up at the massive brick-built residence, having been the first one to jump down from the carriage. This was Rimee and Reina Ruu’s second visit, while it was the fourth time here for me and Ai Fa.

The first time had been when I was kidnapped and my clan head had come to rescue me.

The second was during the showdown with Cyclaeus, as representatives of the forest’s edge.

The third time was similar to today, with me as a chef and Ai Fa acting as bodyguard. Secretly, I thought that we would need to brush aside our bitter memories and step into the manor with clear minds.

“Welcome to the Turan manor... Lord Torst is awaiting you...”

As we passed through the double doors, Chiffon Chel greeted us. Her honey-colored hair was partly curled and her eyes were purple, but the northern woman’s incredibly pale white skin stood out even more so.

“I believe you were officially staying here at the manor as Lady Lefreya’s servant, were you not? Yet now it seems you are once again charged with acting as our guide.” Polarth commented as we walked down the carpeted hallway.

“Yes...” Chiffon Chel replied with a smile. “Lord Torst has not kept very many servants around, so as the one who has been here longest, I’ve been tasked with this role...”

“Hmm... It seems that Lord Torst is proving to be quite thrifty. I suppose that is how he ended up being assigned as Lady Lefreya’s guardian,” Polarth said, not sounding especially cynical or anything as he did so.

The northern and western nations had been enemies for a great many years, so Chiffon Chel’s position was that of a slave. However, Polarth didn’t seem to be looking down on her for that, which secretly caused me to feel relieved.

I'm really glad that Chiffon Chel didn't end up getting punished or anything. All she ever did was follow her master's orders, I thought to myself, right before I noticed the woman stealing a glance my way. Her eyes seemed to say "It's been a while," so I shot her back a silent smile.

When we eventually hit the end of the hallway, Chiffon Chel came to a stop. She then led us into an office guarded by two soldiers, where Torst was waiting.

"Ah, Lord Polarth, welcome. And welcome to all of you from the forest's edge as well."

He was a small middle-aged man with a squished face like a pug's. For better or worse, he didn't possess the stately air of a noble, and he looked just as exhausted as always. In fact, that sense I got from him only seemed to have grown stronger since the last time I had seen him.

His office was excessively spacious and also sparsely decorated, which seemed to fit him perfectly. Atop his large desk made of blackish wood was a mighty pile of what looked to be official documents written out on bundles of parchment, the first of their kind that I had seen since coming to this world.

"Please feel free to inspect the kitchens and pantries to your heart's content. I've already prepared the necessary guards. And Sir Asuta..."

"Yes? What is it?"

"Thanks to the efforts of Sir Yang and yourself, we've been able to convert some of those ingredients overflowing from the pantries into coins. I shall certainly never forget your efforts, which you made in spite of the bad blood you shared with the house of Turan," Torst said, sounding as if he was sighing all the while. "Please, give the items a careful examination as you inspect the pantry today, to determine whether or not any of them can see use in the post town. I have reached the point where I cannot stop my head from aching whenever I look upon that mountain of foodstuffs."

It seemed that Torst was at such a loss that he didn't even care about being seen whining in front of me, when we had hardly even interacted before.

As a gourmand, Cyclaeus had controlled the flow of a huge amount of ingredients, but now that he had fallen there was no longer any use for them.

And the finances to maintain those trade deals were crumbling too. Torst really was having to exert himself day in and day out to try to get the house of Turan back on its feet.

He had originally been an unfortunate man left ostracized by Cyclaeus, and now he was giving his utmost effort to save the house from this dilemma. Just like Polarth, Torst really was someone who could help overturn the image of nobles all being haughty and arrogant.

“And there is no need for you to accept this request if it is too much to ask, but...”

“Right, what is it?”

“The head of the house has requested to meet with you. So if you do not mind, I would appreciate it if you would do so.”

I turned in shock to face Polarth, whose shoulders had fallen into a slump.

“As long as Lord Torst gives his permission, anyone may meet with Lady Lefreya. With soldiers keeping watch, of course.”

“I see.”

I had thought I might never see Lefreya again in my entire life. But if that was what she wanted, then I had no objection.

“Well then, shall we stop in before heading to the kitchen? And Sir Torst, it seems that you are still in the midst of handling official matters?”

“Yes, that’s right. I’m certain this work won’t be done until my very life is expended.”

After that, we exited the office, leaving a truly pitiable looking Torst behind us.

“Initially, Genos Castle dispatched ten officers specializing in financial and foreign affairs, who had to do quite a bit of work to clean up after the previous head of the house. Things seem to have calmed down greatly since then, but, well, one still cannot help but feel sorry for him.”

“It sounds like a major undertaking. Not that I understand anything about the duties of nobles.”

“Those official duties have all been about the ingredients in the end. The reach of Cyclaeus’s business dealings stretched astoundingly far and wide, and as he handled them all personally, things have gotten quite out of control now that he is gone, from what I have been told. Well, I suppose that goes to show how capable he was to handle it all on his own, as well as how little he trusted others...”

It was that skill of his that had made him so useful to Duke Marstein Genos...until his ambitions ended up overtaking him.

“Supposedly, famous restaurants throughout the castle town had ingredients distributed to them by Cyclaeus. Without having built up relationships with the suppliers for themselves, they had to pay high prices to get ingredients on their own, so they were all desperate to get in his good graces. Shockingly, though, even after continuing to send ingredients both to the shops Cyclaeus dealt with and those he gave the cold shoulder to, there still remains an excess of ingredients left over at the manor.”

“That really is something. In other words, that just goes to show how large a supply Cyclaeus was hoarding for his personal use, right?”

“Indeed. For the sake of having delicious meals made, he had used up a tremendous number of ingredients as if they were water. On top of that, the man was possessive to an extreme degree, stockpiling far more than he needed and letting it rot,” Polarth replied as we walked along. “If we can simply eliminate that waste and make sure the surplus of ingredients is sold for coins, it should make everyone happy. Even the ingredients will be better off, being made into delicious meals to end up in someone’s stomach rather than being tossed away unused.”

“That’s for sure. I absolutely agree.”

“I’ll be expecting some exquisitely tasty meals, Sir Asuta. It would relieve a great deal of burden from Lord Torst if you could use those ingredients not only at the welcome banquet, but in the post town as well.”

While our discussion went on, we were led to the second floor of the manor.

Once again, we were greeted by two soldiers standing watch. When Chiffon Chel informed them of Polarth’s visit, one of them nodded and knocked on the

door.

“Lady Lefreya, your guests have arrived.”

At that, the door opened from the inside. The one to greet us from inside was a dark-skinned young man in a simple yet high-quality pale yellow frock.

“Welcome, Asuta. I am glad, that you accepted our request.”

“Sanjura... It really has been a while, hasn't it?” I said with a slight bow of my head, filled with some complicated feelings about this reunion.

Sanjura just gently smiled back like he used to. The young man had mixed blood from the eastern kingdom of Sym, long chestnut-colored hair, and a tall, lean figure. That was all the same as always, but he gave off a pretty different impression when he wasn't in a traveler's cloak. In fact, what he had on now wasn't the sort of clothing characteristic of Sym, but rather attire from the western kingdom.

When she saw the short sword hanging from his hip, Ai Fa casually moved up beside me. Even if he had already paid for his crimes, Sanjura was still a man who had once abducted me by force. And since he was as strong as a hunter of the forest's edge, it was only natural that Ai Fa was on guard.

Showing no signs of being intimidated by Ai Fa's piercing gaze, Sanjura held out his arm toward the far side of the room.

“Lefreya awaits you. Please, enter.”

Sanjura was standing in the antechamber, and there was another door on the far wall. The rest of our group stayed behind, while Ai Fa, Polarth, and I went farther in along with one of the soldiers.

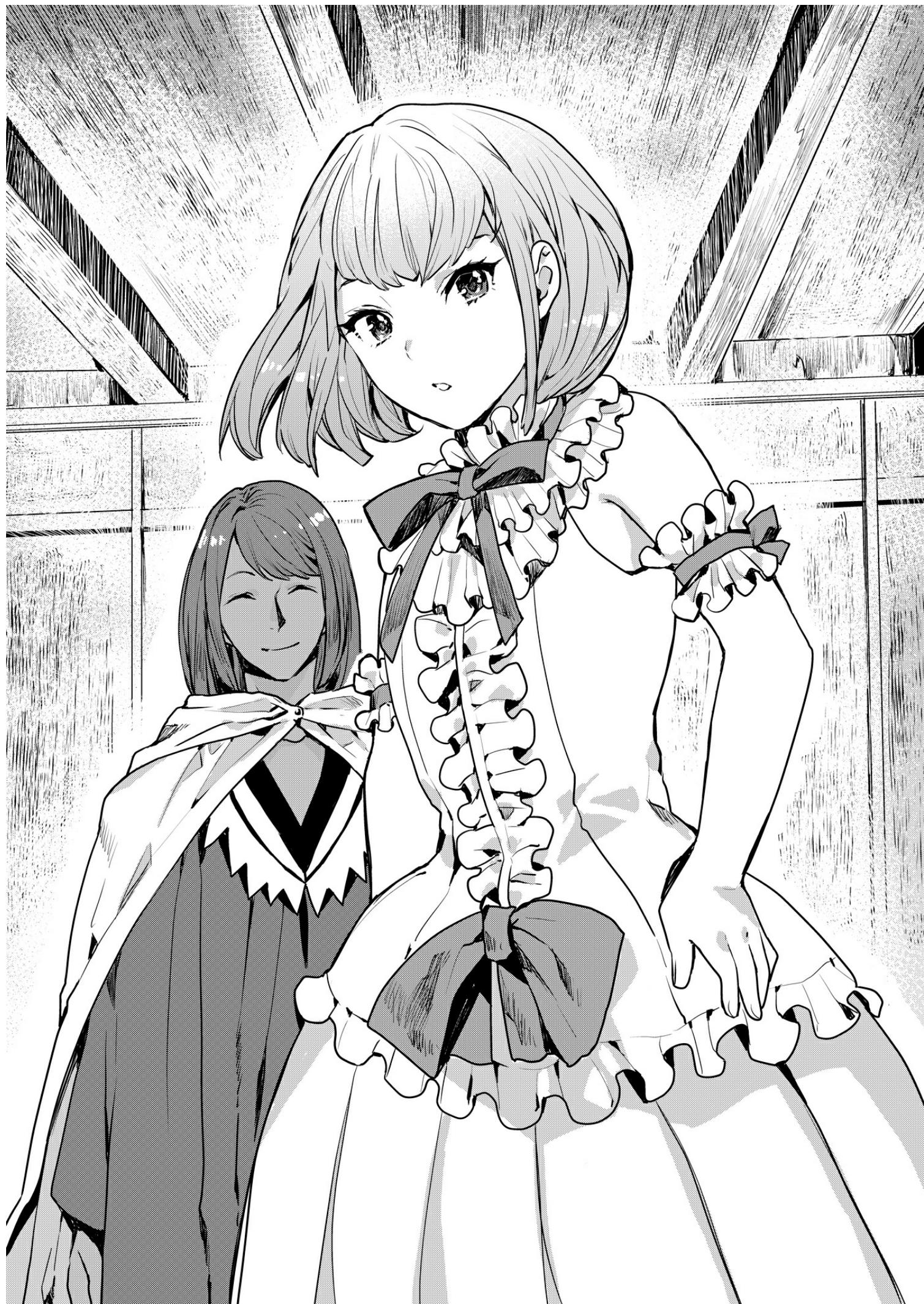
“Ah, it has been some time, Asuta. I am glad to see you looking well,” Lefreya said, grasping the hem of her skirt in an affected manner.

She had on what looked to be a pure-white frilly dress. Well, for a young noble girl like her, that level of luxury probably just made sense even when it came to loungewear. Still, she wasn't wearing very many accessories, so she didn't give off quite the same extravagant impression as before.

“It is not as if I had any business with you in particular. I simply thought that I

would not have a chance to see you outside of such circumstances, so I figured I would at least say hello.”

She really was just the same as I remembered. Even with a regular conversation like this, you could tell how cheeky this pretty young girl was. Her chestnut-colored hair she had chopped off herself two months ago had grown a bit since then, and she might have gotten a bit taller too. After all, she was still only ten or so years old.



“It’s been a while. I’m glad you seem to be doing okay too.”

Even though Lefreya was now the head of the house of Turan, I still recalled her chiding me for being formal with her before, so I kept things casual.

Honestly, I felt more relieved than I had expected to find that Lefreya was just the same as always. If she had looked like an expressionless doll as she had at the dinner party, it wouldn’t have sat well with me.

“Asuta, I hear tell you have once again been tasked with handling the kitchen for a banquet. I suppose that may simply be natural, considering your level of skill.”

“Right. Will you be there too?”

“Indeed. The Turan fuwano and mamaria shall be essential in establishing trade with Banarm, so it is a matter of course that I would be dragged out as the head of the house, is it not? But, well, since it will grant me the opportunity to eat your cooking, I have no reason to complain,” Lefreya said, haughtily lifting up her jaw. “By the way, I have a single warning to give you. Will you hear it?”

“A warning? What is it?”

“It is nothing all that serious. Perhaps it will even prove an unnecessary and difficult-to-understand bit of advice. Still, I believe that this time around, you would make the envoys of Banarm happier if you were to prepare dishes a bit more befitting nobles. That is all I wished to express.”

“Dishes befitting nobles? Could you explain that in a bit more detail?”

“I meant what I said, so I don’t see what detail there is to give. Your dishes were every bit as delicious as Timalo’s the last time around, but I do not believe they were all that appropriate to be served to nobility. I suspect that there may have been some who felt taken aback at tasting them.”

That really was an unexpected statement.

When I glanced over at Polarth, who had also attended that banquet, I found him stroking his chin.

“Well, Sir Asuta can only make dishes using methods from the forest’s edge and his home nation, so I feel it would be mistaken to expect dishes made to

the tastes of nobles from him. And on top of that, the previous dinner party was meant to foster friendship between the castle town and the forest's edge by having each side sample the other's cooking. So with that in mind, would you not agree that Sir Asuta was fully correct in the dishes he prepared?"

"That's true. But this banquet is meant to welcome the envoys from Banarm. So would presenting the unsophisticated cooking of the forest's edge truly be the proper choice?"

"I'm not so certain. Of course, I could see there being some complaints in that case... Still, I can see that being at least a bit out of touch with Lord Welhide's desire to show the people of Banarm Sir Asuta's skills."

Somehow or another, I started to understand what they were getting at.

On the night of that dinner party, the nobles had low expectations in regards to giba cooking, so my dishes received a rather lenient evaluation. And since the event was meant to foster peaceful relations between the forest's edge and the ruling class of Genos, the nobles undoubtedly knew well enough to praise any dish that was presented.

But the envoy group this time around were guests who held a neutral standing. Actually, I'd bet that they were really wondering just what kind of food would be served after what they had heard from Welhide.

"At that dinner party, Duke Genos opined that you and Timalo would be about equal in a comparison of taste, but did you take those words at face value, Asuta?"

"No. I don't think he was trying to make himself look good by helping us out or anything, but I'm sure he said that so the people of the forest's edge could save face."

"That's an admirable attitude to have. Though I was harboring some small hope that I would get to see you humbled just now..." Lefreya teased, then shrugged her slender shoulders. "Still, your dishes were all truly delicious. If we were to compare them one by one, I would likely give you the victory in each case. The only one I would hesitate on would be the appetizer, which was overly plain."

“Thanks, I’m honored to hear it.”

“Still, those six dishes felt somehow inconsistent. It was not too noticeable when eaten alongside Timalo’s cooking, but if I were to eat your dishes alone in turn, I may have found that inconsistency more unpleasant.”

“That’s some good insight there. Both in my home country and at the forest’s edge, it’s not really the custom to eat dishes one at a time in order.” Now understanding what she was getting at, I shot her a smile. “Thanks for the unexpected advice. I don’t know if I can make dishes that a noble would consider proper or not, but I’ll at least try to make the menu more unified for the coming banquet.”

“Right. It is not as if I care in the least what those envoys from Banarm think, however, so I do not mind if you go ahead and make whatever you please.” After saying that, Lefreya’s face took on a bit of a strange expression. It looked as if she was uneasy, or maybe like she got a small bone stuck in her throat or something. “However...Varkas will be presenting his cooking on that day as well, will he not? If you offer up dishes too far removed from the customs of the castle town, that obstinate man could end up making a real mess of the welcome banquet.”

“Oh? But I recall Sir Varkas being quite a gentle and polite man,” Polarth chimed in, looking intrigued.

Varkas was the guy who had previously served as the head chef of the Turan manor. And supposedly, he was either the first or second most skilled chef in all of Genos. Even putting aside the evaluation of the castle town, even Mikel, a man I respected, acknowledged his skill, so I had been looking forward to the chance to meet him today.

Lefreya gave an affected shrug of her shoulders. “It’s true that Varkas is the sort of man you say. But he is a different person entirely when it comes to cooking. He has come here to this manor today, has he not?”

“Indeed. He was summoned so that he may meet Sir Asuta.”

“In that case, go ahead and see for yourselves. I hope that you do not lose the desire to cook for the welcome banquet as a result, Asuta,” Lefreya said, staring straight at me.

Once again, I shot her back a smile.

“The lord of Genos and the leading clan heads of the forest’s edge already came to an agreement about that. I can’t really back out now even if I did want to.”

“Hmph. Then do not pay any heed to whatever that stubborn man may say. Back when they shared a kitchen in this manor, I can recall Timalo being run ragged day in and day out.”

Maybe Varkas was a stubborn man who took serious pride in his work just like Mikel. Honestly, that thought only made me all the more interested to meet him.

“Well then, shall we head toward the kitchen? We need to get you all back to the forest’s edge before the sun sets, after all.” With that, Polarth gave a single bow and exited the room.

Lefreya called out “Ah,” as if to stop me, but then she turned away in a huff. “It is nothing. Farewell, Asuta.”

“Right. See you at the welcome banquet.”

In the end, neither Lefreya nor I made a single reference to Cyclaeus. But then, how could we? It wasn’t like we were very close. Not enough to have an open discussion about something so heavy...and I didn’t think I had the kind of life experience needed for it anyway.

“Thank you, Asuta. I believe Lefreya, was very glad to have seen you.”

Because of my lack of experience, I couldn’t really come up with a proper reply to Sanjura either.

“Well then, off to the kitchen and pantry! Sir Asuta, I shall see you later!”

“Huh? Are you going somewhere, Polarth?”

“Hmm? It’s necessary to cleanse yourself before entering the kitchen, correct? I intend to join you there today!”

Now that he mentioned it, we did still have that custom ahead of us.

Apparently, nobles had a bathroom meant for their own exclusive use, so

Polarth departed with some pages who had appeared out of nowhere, while we were led to the same bathroom we had used in the past.

“Ooh, it’s been a while! I’ve been looking forward to getting in this bathhouse thing!” Rimee Ruu excitedly proclaimed.

Ai Fa, meanwhile, remained silent with a displeased look as the young girl pulled her along. My clan head probably much preferred bathing in the Lanto river.

Toor Deen looked pretty nervous heading in, as it was her first time, but when she stepped back out she appeared nice and refreshed. Personally, I was decently fond of using the steam bath myself.

After we were all nice and clean, we met back up with Polarth, at which point we finally headed toward our true destination: the kitchen and pantries that were the pride of the Turan manor.

“It may be difficult to tell thanks to everything being connected by enclosed passageways, but the kitchen and pantries were built as separate structures to the rear of the main manor. And they are in no way lesser than the kitchen and pantries of Genos castle,” Polarth explained as we arrived in front of a massive double door as large as the entrance to the manor. After giving us a bow, the soldiers guarding the place opened it up.

“Whoa, it’s huge!” Rimee Ruu excitedly shouted.

Reina Ruu’s eyes sparkled, while Toor Deen just stood there looking flabbergasted.

It really was a massive kitchen. Though the equipment looked similar to what was in the kitchen meant for servants that I had used in the past, this one was on a completely different scale.

Just how many workstations were there? They had to go into double digits, easily. Along one wall were brick-built stoves and metal ovens, and the opposite wall had shelves packed with pots, bowls, cooking knives, and all sorts of other tools.

It seemed like you could fit two whole classrooms in the space. Plus, the ceiling was quite high, which made the space look even wider. Both the walls

and the floor were made of brick, and there were small windows here and there for ventilation.

“Amazing facilities, are they not? In the past, over ten chefs and dozens of servants were always on hand, training their skills each and every day for the sake of their master.”

When you thought of all this as being for Cyclaeus alone, it really was a ridiculous amount of waste.

“It’s a shame to let all this go unused, so there is talk of remodeling the manor into a reception hall for dignitaries.”

“Huh? Then what’ll happen to Lefreya and Torst?”

“The house of Turan has other residences scattered here and there, so they would move to one of those. Besides, a manor this massive requires an extraordinary number of guards and servants to maintain.”

So in the end Lefreya would be torn away from the manor where she was born and raised.

As I suppressed the gloom that started to come over me, I called out to Polarth, “So, where are the pantries?”

“This way. It is finally time for you to come face-to-face with that mountain of treasure!”

Polarth led us to the far end of the kitchen. There were three doors along the wall in front of us, and the walls to the left and right each had a single door too.

“The three in front of us are, from right to left, a vegetable pantry, a seasoning pantry, and an herb pantry. The door to the right leads to the meat storage, and is also connected to a smoking room and even animal pens where karon and kimyuus were raised, but those are all empty now.”

“Wow, so they raised live karon and kimyuus here?”

“Indeed. But the cost of feeding them was extreme, so they were slaughtered for their meat and sold off, and new karon and kimyuus were not purchased. Since the meals have all been made in the small kitchen lately, the meat storage should be empty as well,” Polarth explained, and then he pointed to the final

door on the left wall. “This is the one I would like to have you check first, however. The vegetables and seasonings are quite interesting as well, but this room is the real highlight. You could say that it is the corporeal manifestation of Cyclaeus’s obsession with delicious meals. A mere glance at it was enough to leave me utterly stupefied.”

I couldn’t even imagine what might be in there that was more impressive than keeping live karon and kimyuus.

As our eyes sparkled with curiosity, we stepped forward, only for Ai Fa to push ahead and stand in front of the door.

“I will open it.”

She cautiously opened the door...and instantly, Rimee Ruu shouted, “Whoa! What’s with this weird smell?!”

Ai Fa furrowed her brow too.

However, as for me, a certain gut feeling caused my heart to start beating faster. It certainly was a stench. And I didn’t exactly find it pleasant either. However, it wasn’t an unfamiliar smell.

“It can’t be...!”

Taking the initiative, I plunged into the room. A moment later, I was left at a loss for words.

The manifestation of Cyclaeus’s obsession was left there plain to see. Though we were still indoors, there was a brick enclosure built up to around my chest level. Swimming inside were all manner of fish—the first I had seen since coming to Genos.

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“As I have said in the past, no edible fish exist in the vicinity of Genos. The ones swimming in the rivers are all poisonous. That is considered a significant idiosyncrasy of our land. The only real exceptions are the maru and the like that can be gathered downstream, which are edible,” Polarth triumphantly explained, having entered the room after us. “It is said that the river itself is

safe to drink because the fish have taken all the poison into themselves. In exchange for nice clear water we can use freely, we cannot eat fish here in Genos. Actually, that seems to be how it is across the entire eastern half of Selva. That means these fish had to be transported here over the course of half a month from the western part of the country.”

“Half a month...? Did they transport the river water along with the fish?”

“Indeed. Supposedly, there were special wagons constructed just for that purpose. An astounding degree of obsession, isn’t it?”

There really wasn’t any other way to put it.

The inside of the brick enclosure was filled to the brim with water, creating a fish tank. There were three separated sections, each five meters squared, with dozens of fish swimming around inside of them. The water was a faint greenish color, and the characteristic stench of fish permeated the room. It really was only natural that everyone else was furrowing their brows.

“The only ones capable of cooking them are the chefs who have diligently studied here at the Turan manor. That’s why we cannot find anyone to purchase them even in the castle town. But if we simply let them die, all the money it took to purchase them would go to waste, so the only option has been to continue feeding them.”

“This is absolutely astonishing...”

Genos was right in the middle of the continent, far removed from any ocean, and the only fish that lived in the rivers were highly toxic. I really never could have dreamed that I’d see such a sight here.

“Well, naturally it would be difficult to bring them back to the forest’s edge, so I imagine you would have no use for them either, but I wanted to share my surprise with you,” Polarth said before swiftly exiting the room. I soon followed, prompting the rest of the group to come along. “Now then, shall we return to the task of tasting ingredients? First up is the vegetables.”

Next, Polarth invited us into the rightmost door along the one wall. Awaiting us inside were rows of tall shelves, all packed with vegetables.

The huge room looked to be around thirty square meters, and what didn’t fit

on the shelves was stuffed into bags down on the floor. Reina and Rimee Ruu had been somewhat prepared for the sight thanks to having seen the smaller servant kitchen pantry, but Toor Deen's eyes went wide in shock.

Though I knew the majority of the vegetables, there were unfamiliar ones mixed in here and there. Filled with great anticipation, we started carefully examining them.

"There is an even larger storehouse farther in, but supposedly they would pick out especially good samples from there and transfer them here. For now, things are not sorted in any particular way, but these ingredients have nowhere to go, so feel free to use whatever you please."

In other words, these were the ingredients that had overflowed from the storehouse. The scale here really was absurd.

"There seem to be several here I don't recognize. What sort of vegetable is this exactly?"

I had picked up something that looked like a sponge gourd with purple skin. It was around fifty centimeters long and about as thick as my arm.

"Hmm, I believe that comes from Jagar. I would say it is quite tasty when boiled."

"I see. The vegetables on this continent taste a lot like the ones from my home country, but the shapes are totally different, so I can't picture what they're like before giving them a try."

"I would like it if you could bring such vegetables back with you and determine whether or not they are suitable for your cooking, Sir Asuta. In particular, it would be lovely if you could carefully examine the ones that we have an excess of, but what do you say?"

Even if he asked that, I had no way of knowing at this stage. So for the time being, I had him fill a bag with various vegetables they had more than enough of, but that weren't overly expensive.

"Next up is the seasonings. I believe you'll be able to see some rather unusual sights here as well."

Sure enough, we found another similarly huge room full of shelves. This time, though, they were loaded with many different sizes of bottles and jars.

“You can check more thoroughly yourself, but I believe these shelves should have seasonings, while these are alcohol. Naturally, that includes mamaria fruit wine, fermented milk and herbal liquor from Sym, sparkling wine from Jagar, and shockingly, even plenty of distilled liquor from Mahyudra!”

“Distilled liquor? That’s definitely interesting to hear.”

Even though it all used the same base of mamaria, there was distilled liquor similar to whiskey in the castle town. But if there was a grain-based alcohol closer to sake, I’d be really happy to learn about it.

“Whoa! Look, Asuta! It’s a snake!” Rimee Ruu shouted, tugging on my sleeve.

“A-A snake?”

When I turned to look, I saw that there was a black snake coiled about inside a glass bottle. It must have been some sort of medicinal drink similar to habu snake liquor.

“Now that I think about it, giba eat snakes too, don’t they? Are snakes tasty?” she asked me.

“I’m not sure. I’ve never had one myself.”

For the time being, I decided to take along one bottle of every type of alcohol that didn’t look too eccentric. Even if there wasn’t a way to use them in my cooking, the hunters of the forest’s edge could enjoy them, at least.

Then there were the seasonings. I had gotten my hopes up that I would find something similar to miso, but I sadly wasn’t able to locate anything like that. It was all stuff that didn’t feel particularly familiar to me, such as a juice that had a sweet aroma like coconut milk, a vegetable oil made with something other than reten, a fermented item made using gyama milk that had a powerful sour aroma, herbs pickled in alcohol, and so on.

“Ah, mustn’t forget that there’s a separate room over this way,” Polarth reminded us, pointing out a door hidden in the shadow of one of the shelves. When I opened it, a powerful fragrance exploded forth.

“These...are dried goods, aren’t they?”

There were massive chunks of smoked meat and dried fruit hanging all around. But something among them immediately drew my eye: a bundle of what looked to be dried seaweed coated in white salt.

“That seems to be dried seaweed, right?”

“Indeed. Supposedly, it is purchased from the capital, Algrad. This is all that is left now, but from what I hear, a significant amount of it is delivered multiple times throughout the year alongside other ingredients. A great deal of fuwano and mamaria are traded for all that, which is a great source of anguish for Lord Torst.”

“Oh, yeah? Well, anyway, I’m actually more grateful to see this than even the live fish.”

“Is that so? In that case, perhaps you will also be happy to see this?” Polarth asked, pointing toward a pile of wooden boxes.

When I opened up the lid of one, I was hit by a huge wave of excitement. Stuffed inside were little dried slices of what looked like bonito meat, all hard like chunks of wood. And inside the other boxes, I found dried shellfish, prawn-like crustaceans, and a strange octopus-esque creature.

“Amazing. This stuff alone should massively expand the breadth of my cooking.”

“Ooh, I’m glad to hear that. Truthfully, these dried goods have been just as difficult to find a use for as the live fish,” Polarth said before breaking out in a grin. “I had hoped that as a visitor from overseas you could find a way to utilize all this seafood. Apparently, they cannot be sold to anyone in the castle town besides Sir Varkas, so if you could use them I am certain it would make Lord Torst happy.”

“Right. I can’t say anything for certain until I actually try making something with them, but if I can get a good soup stock from them, that would be good for the post town too.”

“That is reassuring to hear. Ah, and what do you think of this box from Jagar?”

My expectations were high as I removed the lid, and those hopes were more than fully met. After all, the inside of the box was packed with all sorts of mushrooms. There was what looked like a scarlet shiitake, a sort of yellow cloud ear mushroom, and plenty of others with rather poisonous-looking colors, though naturally I figured there wouldn't be any actual poisonous ones in the mix. They had all been thoroughly dried out, and I found the condensed smell quite pleasant.

In another wooden box, I even found raw mushrooms packed in what looked to be sawdust. The rounded white one looked just like a common mushroom, while another that was like a light-brown umbrella seemed identical to a brown beech mushroom.

"This is incredible! It really *is* a treasure trove!"

Regrettably, I seemed to be the only one getting all ecstatic. But even so, Reina Ruu and Toor Deen seemed to be seriously observing and wondering just what sorts of dishes they could make.

"I am glad to see you happy too. And I have to say, this makes me look forward to the welcome banquet even more," Polarth said, at which point Ai Fa suddenly turned around. Without me realizing it, some unfamiliar figure had appeared standing in the door.

When he turned the same direction, Polarth gave a broad smile, "Ah, if it isn't Sir Varkas. Where in the world have you been?"

"I was in the neighboring room carefully examining herbs the entire time."

So this is the famed chef Varkas? I thought to myself, my curiosity welling up.

Something felt a little strange about the man. He was tall and slender, and his brown hair was a bit on the long side. His face was rather handsome, and his green eyes and pale skin reminded me a bit of folks from Jagar. On his slim figure he wore what seemed to be a white chef's outfit. Unusually for the warm land of Genos, it had long sleeves, such that only his face and fingers were exposed.

He didn't look to be especially young. However, he wasn't all that old either. His appearance and the general feel about him made it difficult to guess his age,

like he was a young-looking middle-aged man or a young fellow with a strong air of dignity about him. Though I figured he was definitely somewhere between twenty-five and forty, I couldn't really narrow it down any further.

"So you are the chef from overseas, Sir Asuta...? I am the proprietor of The Silver Star, Varkas," the man stated in a voice that sounded as vast as an ocean, yet also a bit sleepy. "If you do not mind, there's something I would like to discuss out front. Would that be all right?"

"Yes, of course."

As I thought to myself that he didn't seem all that stubborn as craftsmen went, I exited the pantry after him. We faced each other once again in the vast kitchen.

"Sorry for the late introduction, but I am Asuta of the Fa clan, a person of the forest's edge. I look forward to working with you in the future."

"Working with me, you say? Naturally, I have no issues having a personal exchange with you. However..." Varkas trailed off, a somewhat bewildered look in his eyes. "The truth is, I came here to make a request of you, Sir Asuta."

"Huh? What is it?"

"I would like you to withdraw from serving as a chef for the welcome banquet."

When he heard that, Polarth's eyes shot open wide in shock. "What are you saying? Just like you, Sir Asuta was selected by Duke Marstein Genos himself to handle this task."

"But Sir Asuta's position would not be worsened by turning down that request, correct? If at all possible, I would not like the ingredients here to be put to waste," Varkas replied. I honestly wasn't able to read his emotions at all as he talked. "These ingredients gathered from around the world by the previous head of the house are akin to a treasure. And I see allowing them to be handled poorly as a form of blasphemy."

"Hmm... But if we don't hurry up and use them, those ingredients will end up as a pile of rubbish. Isn't it better to use them freely rather than allow them to rot?" Polarth suggested.

“That is not how I see things. Does it not fit the will of the western god better that they return to the earth as is rather than be used as part of a poorly made dish?”

He seemed to have decided my dishes were poorly made before even trying one. However, Varkas’s expression remained completely vague and impossible to read. The only thing I could sense was that he seemed like someone troubled by having to lecture an unreasonable child.

“I understand your feelings on the matter, Varkas. But this is a job that Duke Genos asked me to do, and the leading clan heads of the forest’s edge accepted. It isn’t something I can reject by myself, so if you have concerns then I believe your only option is to petition Duke Genos.”

“Naturally, I intend to do just that. But as I am nothing but a mere chef, I cannot imagine that request being granted, so I would like to ask that you mediate the matter with the duke and your leading clan heads as well, Sir Asuta.”

He remained perfectly calm and composed, and I couldn’t sense any animosity or ill will from him. It was possible he didn’t have any scorn toward me or the people of the forest’s edge and was simply saying all this for the sake of the ingredients.

So he’s less a bad person and more just an eccentric?

I took a moment to contemplate, and once I had my thoughts and feelings in order I offered my rebuttal.

“If I had taken this job out of a sense of obligation or due to my own personal curiosity then maybe it wouldn’t make sense to push ahead in spite of your feelings on the matter. But what I feel is a strong desire to create proper ties between the nobles of Genos and the people of the forest’s edge. Can you please understand that I can’t back out of this job without throwing away that desire?”

“What exactly do you hope to accomplish using ingredients you are not accustomed to? If you did not remove any ingredients from this pantry and presented your dishes on a different day than my own, then I would have no reason to complain.”

“So you don’t want me working the kitchen on the same day as you?”

“Of course. If the guests’ tongues were sullied as a result, they would be unable to thoroughly experience the taste of my cooking.”

That got me thinking again about how exactly to handle this matter. Since I couldn’t sense any thoughtless malice from him, coldly turning down his request didn’t feel like the way to settle things.

Meanwhile, the women standing beside me were all wearing a variety of expressions. Ai Fa was expressionless, but with a piercing gaze fixed on Varkas half hidden behind her eyelids, while Reina Ruu watched over the proceedings with a demure look. Rimee Ruu was tilting her head, and Toor Deen...surprisingly, she had the most displeased look of all in her eyes as she firmly bit down on her lip.

Personally, I wasn’t feeling especially angry or anything. In fact, I honestly thought that it was pretty crazy to leave the catering for such an important banquet up to someone in my position. However, that didn’t mean I could simply accept Varkas’s demand.

“In other words, you don’t want an inexperienced chef like me using those precious ingredients, and you don’t want your cooking served alongside crude dishes, right?”

“Put frankly, that is the case.”

“I see,” I replied, my thoughts racing. “To be honest, I still see myself as a chef with a long way to go. I’ve only lived seventeen years, and it’s only been around half a year since I came here to Genos. Naturally, I have my doubts about someone like me serving food to nobles.”

“Very well. In that case...”

“Even so, Duke Genos and Polarth here had some knowledge of my skills before entrusting me with this important task. If I can live up to their expectations, then I believe that could lead to the standing of the people of the forest’s edge being reevaluated, at least a little.”

Varkas was silent.

“If you don’t mind, could I show you my cooking skills too before you make up your mind? Then if you still aren’t satisfied, your claim that Asuta of the Fa clan isn’t suited to cooking for such an important banquet will hold all the more weight when you tell Duke Genos. After all, you’re known as the foremost chef in the region.”

“You want me to taste your cooking...?”

“That’s right. Duke Genos assigned the task to me after eating my cooking, so it’s only natural that your words wouldn’t hold sufficient weight when you know nothing of my skill, right?”

Varkas fell silent, a somewhat pained look on his face.

Polarth had been watching over the whole exchange, and now he broke out in a big grin.

“Well then, there is definitely logic in Sir Asuta’s proposal. Personally, I would say that his skill is no less than that of Sir Timalo, you know, Sir Varkas.”

“Those words only make me feel more concerned... After all, Sir Timalo isn’t qualified to waste the ingredients here.” Running his almost femininely graceful fingers through his hair, Varkas gave a sigh. “It was a mistake by the previous head of this house to make Sir Timalo the assistant head chef. Whenever he vainly wielded a knife, I felt as though I could hear the ingredients crying out.”

“I see. That you would say such a thing only raises my expectations of your skills, Sir Varkas. But Sir Asuta comes from overseas, and he can create dishes using techniques that are unfamiliar to us. That should put him on more than equal footing with chefs invited from Sym or Jagar, wouldn’t you say?”

“As I said, if he were making dishes in some suitable place removed from me, then I would have no complaints.” At that, Varkas slowly turned my way. “Still, I understand what you are saying. If you are willing to go that far, then go ahead and show me your skill... And shall I show you my own skills as well, Sir Asuta?”

“Your skills? That’s definitely a welcome offer.”

“Is that so? Well then, we shall taste one another’s cooking before coming to a conclusion. I believe that will show you quite well that my feelings on the matter are correct,” Varkas said in a perfectly listless, gentle tone.

And so, I found myself in a completely unexpected cooking competition with a chef who was Mikel's equal, if not his better.

3

"As I don't have time to waste, let us make it a simple grilled dish," Varkas declared while standing in front of the countless ingredients and cooking tools.

The pages had brought out a water jug and left it by the chef's feet. Since this place hadn't been used as a kitchen for some time, there was no water. After carefully washing his tools, he lined up some containers of herbs and seasonings, and then finally seemed ready to start.

"By the way, Sir Asuta, are those women there your servants?"

"They're cooking assistants, not servants. If you don't mind, I would like to have them partake in the taste test too."

"As long as their tongues can properly distinguish between tastes, I do not mind..." Varkas said as he reached into his breast pocket, pulling out a small folded white cloth. It wasn't exactly like a hand towel or a hat. Instead, it turned out to be a cloth mask, with holes in it for just his eyes, nose, and mouth.

As we stood there at a loss for words, Varkas turned his gaze our way through those rounded holes.

"A single drop of sweat will change the flavor. This level of preparedness is only natural for a chef."

I turned to look at Polarth, only to find him blankly observing the strange sight as well. It seemed this really was a method unique to Varkas.

"Well then, I shall begin cooking."

Thanks to the area around his mouth being partly covered, his voice was coming out a bit muffled, but without paying that any mind, he once again headed toward the pantries. He didn't have any karon or kimyuus among the ingredients brought out to him, so he must have intended to use a fish from the tank. After a moment, we started following after him in a crowd.

Once he entered the fish tank room, Varkas grabbed a net with a handle from

the wall, then silently glared out over the fish. From what I could tell, there seemed to be four types of fish swimming around inside.

One had a long and narrow body like a char with yellowish-brown scales and white flecks. Then there was a darkly colored one with a more circular profile that looked like a black porgy, or maybe a tilapia. Another had speckles of yellow and red, and was short and stout like a knobsnout parrotfish from Okinawa. Lastly, there was an emerald green fish with a big, bulky body like a snakehead.

That snakehead-like fish had a tank all to themselves, while the three other types mingled together in two additional tanks. From among them, Varkas picked out one of those char-like fish that looked to be around thirty centimeters long. He then observed it up close, checking the elasticity of its long and narrow body with his fingers, before returning to the kitchen with it, net and all.

“So we’re really gonna eat a fish? What in the world do they taste like?” Rimee Ruu whispered to Ai Fa behind me.

Varkas removed the fish from the net and rubbed salt into it while it was still alive, then washed it off with water from the jug. That must have been to remove the sliminess. Next, as the fish was still twitching all about, he placed it atop a cutting board and grabbed a fish-cutting knife. The blade smoothly slid into the creature’s stomach, and then he sliced it open up to the throat.

After removing the innards, he scraped the meat off the spine using his nails. Honestly, the steps he used were pretty similar to the ones I knew for preparing a live fish. After washing it once more, he inserted his fingers into the initial cut, then stripped the skin off in a single go. Even though his fingers looked as dainty as a woman’s, they seemed to have some definite strength behind them.

“Your skills are truly impressive. This is my first time ever seeing a live fish prepared,” Polarth earnestly chimed in, but Varkas offered no response.

At that point, he chopped the head off of the fish and sliced off the fillets. He then tossed the head and backbone into the pot being used for garbage, after which he coated the remaining left and right fillets in a black herb.

Varkas then washed his hands, lit one of the stoves, and started heating up a

smallish pan. Once it was nice and heated, he again washed his hands, before placing the skin he had peeled off into the pan, along with a reddish herb.

Soon enough, the fat running off from the skin started crackling. Eventually the fat was exhausted and he discarded the skin, with his next step being to gently lay the herb-coated fish meat down in the bottom of the pan.

A sour aroma soon spread throughout the kitchen. It seemed he had employed that herb that reminded me of Thai food, which I had rejected when making my giba curry.

Since there wasn't all that much fat to be had from the skin, the herbs soon started giving off a burnt smell. Varkas didn't seem to mind, though, continuing to slowly cook both sides over a low flame. From underneath his mask, I could spy that the look in his green eyes had completely shifted, from apathetic to deadly serious. And there was no hesitation in his movements either.

Once both sides were grilled, Varkas suddenly picked up a bluish container which was filled with karon milk. I was a bit surprised to find that's what he was using. He filled a clay cup to the brim with that milk, added a pinch of salt and sugar, and poured it into the pan. When the liquid met the heated fat, they made a pleasant crackling sound.

"Are his skills the same as that other chef, Timalo's, to be adding karon milk and that black herb together...?" Reina Ruu whispered to me. Even after nearly two months had passed, she apparently still remembered the smell of that herb perfectly well.

But Varkas wasn't done. Soon he got to work adding several more herbs. He didn't grind them down, instead tearing them up above the pan and mixing them in. Though he did it very casually, I was certain he had carefully calculated the amounts. After all, no matter what herb he was tearing up, he stopped midway and tossed the rest into the trash unsparingly.

The slight amount of fat was soon overwhelmed by the karon milk, at which point only the sound of it simmering could be heard. As we all listened to that sound, Varkas stopped moving for around thirty seconds.

Then, as if his switch had suddenly been flicked on, he scooped up the contents of the pan with a wooden spatula. He placed the two chunks of fish

coated in shredded bits of black herb and white karon milk atop a clay plate. Next, he took a spatula and scraped off that pitiful coating.

What appeared from underneath was the white meat of a fish that had been heated through. Perhaps because the herbs had protected it, there wasn't so much as a single burn mark to be seen. After moving it to yet another plate, Varkas carefully washed his hands, then cut the fish into diagonal slices one centimeter thick or so.

At that point, he lined them up so that the cross sections were exposed, then used a silver spoon to add something red on top. The substance had come from a small jar, and looked to be a jam made by crushing and simmering arow fruit.

"It's ready," Varkas stated, stepping back from the workstation. "This dish will cool off rapidly, so please hurry and taste it."

"My, what amazing skill! Still, I can't imagine what it must taste like..." Polarth exclaimed as he approached the plate, and we did the same.

"This dish is treated as an appetizer at The Silver Star. Of course, since there is a limit to how many fish I can bring with me, it is only offered once every several days," Varkas stated, removing his white mask. His face was damp with sweat, such that his long dark-brown hair clung to it.

"Well then, let us partake! This really is quite the unexpected treat," Polarth proclaimed while picking up a slice with a silver fork-like utensil. And when he took a bite, his eyes shot open wide. "This... Ah, I suppose I should not offer my impressions before you try it, Sir Asuta."

Grabbing a wooden spoon, I carefully scooped up a bit of the meat, taking care not to drop it.

It really did look just like an ordinary slice of white fish meat. He had declared it would be a grilled dish, but the fish itself never touched the surface of the pan, so it felt more like it had been steamed. Plus, I couldn't make heads or tails out of the way he soaked it in karon milk and spread that jam made from arow, which were like strawberries, all over it. Then there were all those spices he used, which came together to give off an incredibly complicated aroma.

Having thoroughly taken in its appearance, I went ahead and finally tossed

the slice into my mouth.

Instantly, a deep and complex taste burst forth in my mouth.

This is... How can I even describe it?

It was like the spiciness from the herbs, sourness of the arow, and sweetness of the karon were racing around on my tongue in a spiral as they intertwined.

Actually, that spice was coming from a variety of different herbs, and the sourness was coming not just from the arow, but also a lemongrass-like herb. Plus, the sweetness from the karon milk mixed with the sugar (and a small amount from the arow), so it was difficult to tell which flavors were coming from precisely which ingredients.

Then at the center of it all was the fish. The umami from that fish that had been coated in herbs and grilled helped to tie everything together.

He had grilled white fish meat with herbs, simmered it in milk, and added jam on top. I couldn't help but think to myself that there was no way that such a thing could possibly be tasty...but this was clearly a perfected dish.

Between the sweetness, spiciness, sourness, and even slight bit of bitterness from the burnt herbs, it should have been an absolute wreck, but it managed to just barely remain in harmony. I found it difficult to even imagine what sort of calculations went into creating such a taste.

It was tough to judge whether or not it was tasty. But if you asked me if I wanted to try making it, I would immediately reply no.

Even so, I couldn't say it was bad.

Actually, it was definitely good.

But the sensations I was experiencing just weren't clicking together.

Timalo and Roy's cooking never would have gotten me this confused. I would have been able to reach an answer separate from my own impressions, like, "I could see some people finding this tasty" or, "It sure is interesting how culinary cultures can differ."

But I couldn't judge when it came to this dish.

It had an odd, complex, mysterious flavor.

That was just about the only opinion I could wring out.

It was a dish that broke free in a completely different direction from what I knew, and felt truly fitting of being called cooking from another world.

“This dish...” Reina Ruu muttered in a pained voice.

Apparently, while I was overwhelmed by my astonishment, everyone else had given the dish a taste test. And now, Reina Ruu had turned my way with an imploring look in her eyes. “Asuta, please tell me... Is this dish tasty?”

What a truly bizarre question.

In the past, Dan Rutim had asked the same when taste testing my giba curry. But this was different, and Reina Ruu’s voice was brimming with emotions that she couldn’t contain.

Toor Deen was also shooting me a look like she was about to break down crying.

Meanwhile, Rimee Ruu groaned, “Hrrm...” with a serious look on her face. “I don’t really get it for some reason... Oh? You aren’t gonna eat any, Ai Fa?”

“I’m no chef, and I have no interest in the cooking of the castle town.”

There were still a number of slices left atop the wooden plate.

Working up my resolve, I went ahead and held that plate out toward my clan head.

“Ai Fa, if you don’t mind, could I hear your impressions too? I’d like to hear the frank thoughts of a person of the forest’s edge who isn’t a chef.”

She furrowed her brow dubiously, but in the end she picked up a slice without saying a word. Then she tossed it into her mouth, expressionlessly chewed, and swallowed.

“Well...?”

“I have nothing in particular to say. It’s not a taste that I find delicious. Though with that said, I wouldn’t say that it’s particularly bad either,” Ai Fa readily stated, but then she brought her mouth in close to my ear. “To go further, I

can't imagine we people of the forest's edge would have any need for such a taste. If you had happened to create such a dish, you wouldn't have been able to move the hearts of Granny Jiba, Donda Ruu, or myself. Simply walk the path that you believe in, Asuta."

I closed my eyes and forced down the doubts and worries swirling around in my chest, then stared back at my clan head's sour face.

"Got it. Thanks, Ai Fa."

In response, she gave me a silent poke in the chest.

Then, I turned to face Polarth.

"I'm having a bit of trouble finding the words to describe my surprise. Could I hear your impressions, Polarth?"

"Mine? Well, I thought it was simply amazing! Why, I felt it was the very pinnacle of the sort of delicious cooking that chefs in Genos aim for!" Polarth exclaimed with a carefree grin, turning to face Varkas. "Sir Varkas, I have had your cooking numerous times in the past, but never has a dish surprised me as much as this one! To think that something so delicious could be created through free use of the ingredients here in the Turan manor! I truly am impressed!"

"I'm honored by your praise..." Varkas replied, his expression indifferent. But even seeing that, Polarth kept on smiling at him.

"Still, it really is completely different from the sort of dishes Sir Asuta creates. It's true that people of the castle town may well see his work as rough, wild cooking, but it's no mere rural novelty. His dishes are full of such deliciousness that I cannot help but break out in a smile simply by tasting them."

"I see..."

"Yes... If that were not the case, Duke Genos and Lord Leeheim would never have given his skills such praise. And just as Sir Asuta has been surprised by your cooking, Sir Varkas, I believe the reverse shall also prove true."

Despite that statement, Varkas's expression remained unchanged.

Still, Polarth gave a nod with a satisfied look, then turned back my way.

“Well then, now it is your turn, Sir Asuta! I’ll be looking forward to something delicious, of course.”

“Right. I’ll give my all to meet your expectations.”

Reaching into my breast pocket, I pulled out my worn-down white towel.

All I could do at this point was prepare my own cooking. Then I’d just have to see what Varkas’s reaction was after tasting it.

“Reina Ruu, could you prepare a pan, a single-handled pot, a metal skewer, and several plates? Toor Deen, I would like you to ask the people out front for three kimyuus eggs and a container of milk fat, and then for you to get the flame going. Rimee Ruu, you can come with me to help with the other ingredients.”

“Got it!” Rimee Ruu energetically replied, once again smiling. Reina Ruu and Toor Deen both seemed to shake off their unease in their own way, and then they silently got to work. Rimee Ruu then followed me into the pantry, where I started handing the ingredients I picked out to my tiny assistant.

“Hey, what are you gonna make, Asuta? Isn’t it going to be tough without any giba meat?”

“That’s true. But thanks to that, I’ll be able to face him head-on.”

If I asked someone from the manor, I could get kimyuus and karon meat to use. But if I was going to use an ingredient I wasn’t accustomed to either way, then I figured going with something that would have a bit of impact would lead to better results. Not just in terms of the taste test, but for satisfying Varkas too.

Entrusting Rimee Ruu with the task of carrying the ingredients, I set foot in the room with the fish tanks. After capturing a fish of the same type Varkas used, as similar in size and shape as I could find, I returned to the kitchen with it in the net.

“Oh, my! You are going to use a live fish as well, Sir Asuta?!”

“Yeah. I was born in an island nation, so I’m used to handling fish.”

Varkas carefully watched my actions with a scrutinizing gaze.

Handing the net over to Ai Fa, I drew my old man's kitchen knife from my hip. It was the one thing I hadn't felt comfortable leaving in the carriage, so I'd gone ahead and brought it along.

I'll be borrowing this for the first time in a while, dad.

Ever since I bought my meat-cutting knife from Diel, I had kept my use of this knife to a minimum. However, I didn't feel like trying to use a fillet knife that I had never handled before on a task like this.

After drawing the blade from its white hackberry sheath, I placed it atop the cutting board, then I took the net back from Ai Fa. Just as Varkas had done, I first rubbed salt into the fish to remove the sliminess.

Next, I drove the metal skewer through its head, and once it was fixed to the cutting board I slit the stomach. Filleting a fish, even after half a year of being out of practice, was no problem for me at all.

"Hmm, you certainly do seem familiar with the process! I suppose you're showing your true skill as one who has come from overseas," I heard Polarth exclaim in admiration from behind as I sprinkled salt and pico leaves over the fillets. Though they charged for pico leaves in town, the pantry here was, naturally, well stocked with them.

By the way, I didn't peel the skin from the fillets. Since the scales were small like with a char or a rainbow trout, that step didn't seem necessary.

As I was seasoning the fish, I also started boiling two of the kimyuus eggs on the stove Toor Deen had gotten ready. With the third one, I left it uncooked and used it alongside reten oil and mamaria vinegar to make some mayonnaise. Then, I minced up the hard-boiled eggs and mixed them with a bit of aria and the mayonnaise to prepare a tartar sauce.

"Ooh, that seems to be another dish I'm unfamiliar with," Polarth excitedly proclaimed. That earnest enthusiasm of his really helped to drive me onward.

For him, the most important thing was probably to cut off any potential trouble Varkas might cause with his objection. But even aside from that, he seemed to genuinely be excited for my cooking. Of that, I had no doubt.

I know it's a little late to be noticing, but he really is an unusual person, I

thought to myself as I heated up the single-handled pot. Once that was done, I sprinkled fuwano flour over the seasoned fillets, then grilled both sides in milk fat.

What I was making was a freshwater fish meunière.

The smell of the heated milk fat and grilling fish really made for a fragrant aroma. Once I moved the grilled fillets over to a plate, sliced them, and added the tartar sauce on top, it was done.

“Sorry for the wait. This is a dish from my home country called meunière.”



“Hmm, I see. I truly cannot get enough of that milk fat smell,” Polarth stated, once again being the first to reach out. “Ooh, this is...! Ah, almost said too much again. Now then, Sir Varkas, please go ahead and give it a taste.”

The chef expressionlessly grabbed a fork. After we waited for him to take a bite, the women in my group grabbed wooden spoons. And this time around, that included Ai Fa right from the start. I was the last one to give it a taste.

It wasn't half bad.

Thanks to the fuwano flour, the surface was nice and crispy, while the meat inside remained soft and moist. And since it was a freshwater fish, it didn't have any strange odors. It really did go nicely with the butter-like flavor of the milk fat, and it didn't interfere with the taste of the tartar sauce either.

My only real thoughts were that I could have used a bit more time to season it, or that a tau oil-based Worcestershire sauce might have gone well with it. But it really had come together well enough that it could be served just as it was.

“This is your first time handling a freshwater fish from Selva, is it not, Sir Asuta? How were you able to make such a delicious dish in spite of that?” Polarth asked me.

“There were fish similar to this one back in my home country too. But I probably wouldn't know how to handle that big fish that was isolated in its own tank.”

“I'm impressed! I have no complaints, as this is a truly delicious dish. If I were to ask for anything further, though, I suppose it would be in regard to the fact that you did not use any herbs at all, which strays from the customs of Genos.”

“I see. I hesitated over whether or not I should use myamuu and tau oil when flavoring it. But since this way is more intricate, I figured it may suit the tastes of folks from the castle town better.”

“Myamuu and tau oil?! That sounds delicious as well! But this dish truly is fantastic as is! It's every bit as good as that fried kimyuus dish you made before,” Polarth said with a smile like he would melt away, then he turned toward Varkas. “So, what do you say? This is Sir Asuta's skill! It may be

somewhat removed from the customs of Genos, but it is a curious enough taste to cancel that out. If this dish were presented at a banquet, I would have no complaints whatsoever.”

At that, Varkas slowly approached me. With a scrutinizing look still in his eyes, he stared apologetically at me.

“So, this is a technique used overseas...?”

“Yes. It’s a dish from my home country that I learned there.”

“There are many chefs in Sym, Jagar, and even the capital of Algrad who create highly novel dishes. But I have never felt that I fell short of any of them.”

“Is that so? It’s certainly true that your cooking skills are incredible, I’d say,” I chimed in.

But Varkas just kept on talking, unconcerned, as if he hadn’t even heard what I said.

“Naturally, I do not believe that I fall short of you either. You still have room for improvement in terms of flavoring and how you manage your flames.”

“Yeah, that’s certainly true. But I’m sure I’ve done more than enough to show you what sort of chef I am, right?”

“Yes, I clearly understand that,” Varkas replied, drawing in even closer. His lack of expression was eerie, but since Ai Fa wasn’t making a move, he must not have been signaling any bad intentions.

Then, just as I was thinking that, he suddenly grasped my hands.

“I offer a retraction.”

“H-Huh? What do you mean?”

“I retract every single one of my earlier comments.”

His green eyes were staring intently straight at me. Despite his fingers being elegant like a woman’s, I felt a rough, leathery sensation against my hands. They were hands that had been toughened up over the course of many years of working the kitchen.

“I thoroughly misjudged the techniques used by you people from overseas.

You have the right to use whichever ingredients you please. And I would be honored to man the kitchen on the same day as you, Sir Asuta.”

“Th-Thank you.”

“This may just be the first time in five years that I have felt this way...” Varkas stated as he brought his expressionless slender face even closer. “Our ways of doing things are different. And I’m certain what we aim toward differs as well. Actually, that may be precisely what causes me to feel so excited. There’s only been one person who has made me feel that way in the past.”

“C-Could you be talking about a chef named Mikel?”

Varkas’s eyes suddenly narrowed severely like Jiza Ruu’s. “Sir Asuta, could it be...”

“No, I learned under my old man. I’m acquainted with Mikel, but he hasn’t given me cooking lessons.”

“I see. Sir Mikel was the one and only man I saw as a worthy rival. I feel as if I’ve gotten back that rival I lost.”

“Varkas, even if you have no ill intent, could you go ahead and step away from my clan member now?” Ai Fa finally warned him.

After giving one last squeeze of my hands, Varkas withdrew, looking as if he was reluctant to part. “My apologies. It seems I got overly worked up and lost control of myself.”

After breathing a sigh of relief, I went ahead and turned back toward Varkas.

“I’d be honored to man the kitchen on the same day as you too, Varkas. If you don’t mind, how about we both make extra of our dishes on the day of the welcome banquet, so that we can sample one another’s cooking?”

“That’s a very welcome suggestion. I’ll never forget this day I met you for my entire life,” Varkas replied, and then he suddenly broke out in a smile. He had been handsome to begin with, but with that expression on his face, he seemed kinder and gentler now.

“Even so, you’re still young... As you are now, it would be impossible for you to make a dish superior to mine, Sir Asuta,” Varkas declared, still wearing that

soft smile that made him look like a different person entirely.

Chapter 2: A Worthwhile Day Off

1

It was now two days later, the twenty-ninth of the black month.

We were taking the day off from the stalls, so we invited Mikel and Myme to visit the forest's edge around when the sun hit its peak. Naturally, the objective was to learn how to properly smoke meat.

The location was the Sudra house, and the members participating included me, Toor Deen, Lem Dom, Li and Yun Sudra, Reina and Sheera Ruu, and Saris Ran Fou, for eight in total.

"Let me start by saying that I only know about smoking karon and kimyuus... I've never handled giba meat before, so don't go blaming me no matter how poorly it comes out, all right?" Mikel started off with his usual sour look as he took on the role of lecturer. As the representative for the students, I went ahead and gave him a bow.

"Of course. I'm sorry for asking so much of you, but please, teach us what you can."

"Hmph," Mikel snorted, then looked up at the house beside him.

It was an abandoned home that had been offered for our use by the Sudra. The house hadn't been used for seven or eight years, and sat in the middle of a round cleared-out plot of land. We had chosen this one for the smokehouse just on the off chance of a fire, since it had the most open space around it.

"We blocked the existing windows like Asuta instructed and also made a new small one high up. Is that all right?" Li Sudra questioned with a gentle smile.

Mikel knocked on the boards over the windows with the back of his hand, then inspected the outside of the house. "It seems to be a pretty old house, so if the smoke leaks out from anywhere then you'll need to repair it. When you do, you should squeeze clay into the gaps between the boards."

“Just clay? Understood.”

“Is the meat ready?”

“Yes, this way.”

Under Li Sudra’s guidance, we all moved into the house.

Soon after passing through the entrance, we reached the main room, where a great deal of firewood and the necessary tools were prepared. There were three doors farther in, and there was an old stove alongside the right wall. In terms of scale, it looked to be just about the same size as the Fa house.

Li Sudra then led us to the rightmost room, and when she opened the door, we found a number of chunks of meat dangling from vines. That giba meat had come from the Sudra, Fa, Fou, Deen, and Ruu clans. Following Mikel’s instructions, we had already completed the preparations.



After first removing the moisture by pickling the meat in salt, we washed that salt off and then let it dry out. The steps weren't much different from the method used to make jerky at the forest's edge, but since we used pico leaves and herbs during the salting step, they had to be left to sit somewhat longer.

Since this was the initial test case, in addition to the usual thigh and rib meat, we also prepared shoulder and sirloin meat despite that not usually being used for jerky, and even a full hind leg. To top it all off, there was even a bunch of sausages dangling there, which I had finally found time to make this morning.

"Hmph... So you even prepared something like this, eh?" Mikel said in a grumpy voice as he looked up at the sausages.

"Yes. It took a lot of effort, but I'd say it came out about right."

A few days prior, I had learned how to produce sausages from a traveler Nail introduced me to who had been born in Sym.

Ultimately, it was just packing thoroughly ground meat into intestines, but that was easier said than done. Since the ratio of meat to fat was four to one, the texture got softer the more that you kneaded it, but you just had to be careful to not ruin the meat with the warmth of your hands.

In Sym, the process supposedly involved adding a variety of herbs at this stage, but since I didn't know anything about how to do that, I just went with salt and pico leaves. Then, once I was done kneading the minced meat, it was finally time to stuff the sausages. That involved opening a hole in a large cloth and then pushing the tip of a funnel through. The inside of the cloth was coated with giba fat so that the minced meat wouldn't stick to it when you started squeezing.

Next, I set the intestines meant to be the casings for the sausages at the tip of the funnel. I used a giba's small intestine, cutting them to a length of around one meter in advance. There was a bit of a trick required at this point too. That was to have the intestines rolled up compactly rather than stretched out.

After a gentle squeeze of the cloth to force out a bit of minced meat and any air trapped inside, I tugged on the far end of the intestine a bit and then tied it off. At that point, the preparations were finally complete.

As I squeezed the cloth, the intestine wriggled out and extended as they were packed with minced meat. Once the rolled up bit had all stretched out, I tied off the other end, and it was finished.

After that, I twisted the intestine and separated it off at fifteen-centimeter intervals, making the sort of sausage chain I was familiar with. To be honest, seeing it all come together kind of moved me a bit.

There were fifteen of those sausages I had so painstakingly made dangling here in this smokehouse. At around three centimeters thick, they were pretty big. They measured about fifteen meters altogether, and that was just the length of a single giba's small intestine.

"Well then, time to get smoking. Do you have the firewood and herbs ready?"

"Yes. We have grigee wood, lilo leaves, fresh pico leaves, and charcoal."

The boards had been removed from the room's floor, so that the ground was exposed.

The fuel for the fire and the materials for smoking were arranged in a circle and then lit. White smoke started rising up, compounded with the refreshing and stimulating smell of lilo and pico filling the room.

"Seems like you've got a good bit of live grigee wood... The more you dry grigee out, the less extra smell it'll add," Mikel commented, his intense gaze checking the strength of the flames. "This flame is too strong. You'll lose the aroma of the herbs at this rate, so remove a bit of firewood."

"Got it," I replied, following Mikel's instructions using a long piece of wood in place of a fire iron.

"Keep the flames at this level for three hours. Every half hour, you should add the same amount of herbs. And with the level of charcoal you've got there, adding firewood every half hour too should be fine."

"Understood. We should keep the door shut except for when we're doing that, right?"

"Yeah," Mikel nodded, swiftly exiting the room.

After drilling how to regulate the flame into everyone there, I went ahead and

exited the room too. I had ended up dripping with sweat at some point, so I sighed as I wiped my forehead.

“Thank you. I look forward to seeing how it turns out in three hours.”

I placed a sundial in a nice sunny spot and adjusted it so it was pointing toward around noon. That would be plenty to tell how much time had passed.

“So, what do you all plan to do till then...? I can’t imagine you’re living such easygoing lives that you can let that time go to waste,” Mikel asked.

“Right. The plan is to split into two groups which will each handle their own work. One group will man the flames while tanning pelts, while the other will get in cooking practice.”

“Cooking practice...?”

“That’s right. That’s why I asked you to bring Myme along with you.”

Instantly, Myme’s eyes started sparkling as she stood there beside her father.

“So you’re planning on working with other dishes besides just making the smoked meat? I’m so excited!”

“I’m glad to hear it. Actually, I wanted to hear your opinions on the ingredients I brought back for the post town too, Mikel...”

“Hmph. I figured it would be something like that,” Mikel replied, shooting me a glare. “So, what ingredients did you pick up this time? Herbs from Sym? Vegetables from Jagar?”

“I’ve been checking the tastes and scents of the herbs and seasonings on my own, but I would like to ask your opinions on some vegetables and dried goods this time around. I’ve got some packed up in the wagon over there, so could you start by giving them a look?”

The two members of the Sudra clan would be working together with Saris Ran Fou and Lem Dom on tanning the pelts, so everyone else exited the house along with me.

The two wagons were parked there next to Gilulu and Jidura, who were getting along just fine as they munched on leaves. Since Reina Ruu’s group had gone to pick up Myme and Mikel, this was their first time seeing the ingredients

loaded into the Fa clan's wagon.

"I expect that I'll be able to handle the banquet in the castle town pretty well with my own skills, but I did also want to hear your opinion on the ingredients that might end up selling in the post town," I explained as I invited Mikel and Myme into the wagon. "What do you think? All of these came from the pantry in the Turan manor," I asked, bringing out a bit of each of the ingredients.

The dried goods included some sort of seaweed that reminded me of kombu, plus others that resembled shrimp, shellfish, and octopus.

Then there were the varieties of mushrooms. One was like an orange shiitake, then there was what looked like a yellow cloud ear mushroom, and one that made me think of a pure red sea anemone, all of which were dried out. And planted in some compost, we had the ones that were like raw common mushrooms and brown beech mushrooms too.

Finally, there were five types of vegetables, the names of which I had at least asked about while in the castle town.

The green spinach-like one was ro'hyo.

Next, the one that looked like a purple sponge gourd was sheema.

Following that was what seemed to be a great burdock in the shape of a mosquito coil, called ma gigo.

The bright red one shaped like a ginkgo leaf was ma pula.

Then finally there was chan, which looked like a pitch-black ping pong ball.

That was all of them.

After giving a rough glance over those ingredients, Mikel gave a deep sigh. "I never had any dried goods like these in my shop. Can you really eat such a bizarre-looking dried-out creature?"

"Supposedly it was ordered from the capital of Selva, Algrad. It looks a lot like a creature called an octopus back in my home country...though it smells closer to dried squid."

"I was invited to that extravagant pantry just the once. But I turned down the job, so obviously I had no way of trying any ingredients that didn't make it to

market. The only ones I know about are the vegetables and some of the mushrooms.” As he spoke, Mikel’s expression was growing more and more displeased. “So you’re saying all of these could become available in the post town?”

“Yeah. At least as long as Yang or I can figure out how to show people they’re tasty.”

“You just keep on increasing the number of ingredients again and again. It’s like there’s no end to it...” Mikel grumbled, but Myme was looking more and more excited.

“What’s wrong with that?! The more ingredients you have, the more different dishes you can make! I’d love to handle more and more kinds of ingredients too.”

“Like I’ve said, learn to handle tau oil, sugar, and mamaria vinegar properly first. You can bring in more vegetables after that.”

“Hmph!” Myme childishly sulked, but then she realized I was looking and her face went red. “Ah, I’m sorry! That was really improper of me... This vegetable looks just like nanaar, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah, but supposedly it comes from the western portion of Selva.”

Nanaar looked and tasted just like spinach, but what sort of ingredient would this ro’hoyi turn out to be?

“Out of what you’ve got here, you can eat the ro’hoyi and sheema without cooking them.”

“Ooh,” Myme exclaimed, her eyes opening wide as she listened to her father’s words. “You can’t eat nanaar raw since it’s so bitter... I guess this really is something different even though they look the same, huh?”

“Yeah. Okay, how about we give it a taste test?”

After roughly washing off the ro’hoyi in some water from a container, I tore off a bit and handed it to Myme. As I was chewing my own portion, I went to hand some out to the rest of the women in the group...only for a powerful spiciness and bitterness to spread through my mouth before I could do so.

“That’s hot! And bitter too!”

“Y-Yeah. Seems like it’s closer to an herb than a vegetable, doesn’t it?”

Both Myme and I turned to look at Mikel, who shrugged his shoulders with a frown and the look of an ill-tempered instructor.

“When you heat it through, that spice and bitterness disappear. It’s not that you can’t eat it raw, but normally you boil it first in a pot.”

“Then say that from the start!”

Both Myme and I seemed to feel the same way, but there was something else that surprised me. In addition to the spiciness and bitterness, I also got a flavor like sesame seeds drifting up through my nose. And if the spiciness and bitterness vanished when you heated it up, then perhaps it was a vegetable that was closer to arugula than spinach.

“How interesting. So, you can eat this sheema vegetable raw too? I’ve heard it’s used a lot in stews, though.”

“It’s a vegetable from Jagar, so it’s generally boiled with tau oil. Still, plenty of folks out there eat it raw.”

In that case, it made sense to give it a taste test.

However, the sheema had the appearance of a purple sponge gourd, and seemed to have rather tough, bumpy skin.

“Whether you’re eating it raw or boiling it, you generally have to peel the skin.”

“I see. Got it.”

After retrieving my vegetable knife and cutting board from farther inside the wagon, I cut the sheema into slices five centimeters thick or so. Surprisingly, the inside was pure white and juicy. And it didn’t seem to have seeds inside either.

Then, I sliced off the tail end and started making a spiral cut so I could remove the bumpy skin in a single strip...and suddenly, a voice exclaimed, “Wow! What wonderful handling of your knife, Asuta. How do you get so good at that?”

That comment had come from Reina Ruu. However, Sheera Ruu and Toor

Deen were wearing the same looks of surprise and admiration.

It was then that I had a realization: Every last one of the vegetables I had encountered in this world could be eaten along with the skin. The only exceptions were the aria and chatchi, but the skin could be easily peeled off by hand for those rather than needing a knife. So at least when it came to the forest's edge, the very notion of using a knife to skin vegetables simply didn't exist.

"Oh, that's right. That was a real blind spot on my part. In my home country, you needed to skin vegetables like chatchi and nenon with a knife too."

"How amazing. It's almost like magic," Reina Ruu exclaimed. It had been a while since I'd seen her like this, with a look in her eyes like a lovestruck maiden.

"With a bit of practice, you should be able to do it too. The skin you have to peel off this sheema isn't too terribly thick."

"I'd definitely like to learn, then!"

After nodding to her, I sliced the pure-white peeled sheema further into slices about a centimeter thick.

"Well then, how about we all give it a try?"

Everyone present aside from Mikel grabbed a thin slice of sheema from atop the cutting board.

When I bit into it, it tasted a bit sweet, and was super moist. There was no striking spiciness to it like with the ro'hyoi. Instead, it had a very refreshing, crisp flavor.

"Ah, this may be something similar to a vegetable I know called a daikon. It seems like it would go well in boiled dishes."

Cubed giba meat stew and giba soup prepared with tau oil seemed like good candidates to start with. I figured that made sense for a vegetable from Jagar. If it ended up circulating in the post town, then that was sure to make Naudis happy.

"So that leaves the ma gigo, ma pula, and chan. Apparently ma gigo is a

subspecies of gigo, and the same is true for ma pula and pula. So these are all suitable for boiled dishes?”

“That’s right. Actually, grilling vegetables isn’t all that popular in Genos to begin with... Normally you either boil them, steam them, or smoke them.”

“Then how about we try boiling all of them?”

Taking the five varieties of vegetables and a pot to boil them along with a single sheet of dried seaweed with us as we went, we returned to the smokehouse. The group of women who had remained behind had already gotten to tanning pelts.

“We’ll be borrowing the stove for a bit.”

We had prepared a water jug, in case of fire. And borrowing a bit of that water, I started by adding the dried seaweed to the pot. I had already given that a try last night, and found it was good for making a high-quality stock.

The taste really was similar to kombu. On top of that, it had plenty of salt, so I could really sense the nourishment provided by the ocean in it. Just adding it to an ordinary giba stew was enough to give it abundant flavor.

“This has to steep in the water for half an hour first, so we’ll have to wait around for a bit.”

Still, it was definitely easier than stewing giba meat for an hour while taking care not to let it boil in order to extract a stock.

I had no idea just how much would be delivered from Algrad from here on out, but in terms of price, it would be completely reasonable to distribute it throughout the post town. Actually, if it got out that you could use it to so easily make a high-quality stock, it was possible that the castle town would buy it all up first.

“By the way Asuta, what was that Varkas chef from the castle town like?” Myme innocently asked during our break time. “My dad rarely ever praises anyone, but he said so much about that man that he must be an amazing chef, right?”

“Yeah. I don’t really have a firm grasp on his personality, but I’d say he was

amazingly skilled at cooking.”

That was no lie.

I had difficulty comprehending the taste, but just thinking about how much experience he must have built up to create that flavor got me a little excited. I really couldn't help but feel like he was some sort of magician, with how he so casually put together such finely tuned and complex flavoring, which seemed like it could so easily fall apart if the balance was even slightly off.

It seemed that Reina Ruu and Toor Deen felt the same way, as their expressions stiffened up a bit when Varkas's name was mentioned.

I definitely couldn't say it was a dish I had felt was truly delicious. And I didn't want to share that flavor with my family or customers either. Yet in spite of that, Varkas was still someone I couldn't turn a blind eye toward.

“How should I put it...? He makes really perplexing dishes. I could never copy his flavoring...and I wouldn't want to either, but I have to admit, I felt like my confidence took a hit on that front,” I replied to Myme, and then I glanced over at Mikel. “Well, I've already got an idea, but there's a question I wanted to ask... Mikel, for people in the castle town, is the food Varkas makes considered the ideal of proper cuisine?”

“Why are you asking me something like that...?”

“Well, I found it to be a perplexing dish, but I also sensed that at its core it resembled the cooking I was familiar with from other chefs in the castle town. Using a great variety of ingredients to aim for an incredibly complex flavor... That was what Roy had once told me it meant to be a first-rate chef.”

“Hmph, and...?”

“Well, if I had to say, I was taught that the basics of cooking were to bring out the flavor of each ingredient as much as possible, so in a way, my thinking on the matter is the complete opposite. It feels a little strange to me that folks from the castle town still appreciate my cooking in spite of that.”

On top of that, I believed that Mikel's cooking methods were similar to my own. The initial source of the doubt I was having now was the fact that both Mikel and Varkas had been similarly praised around the same time.

His eyes narrowing suspiciously, Mikel grumbled, “Asuta, you seem to be under some sort of misconception.”

“A misconception?”

“That’s right. Only a hundred years or so at most have passed since this town of Genos gained its current level of prosperity. Up until then, it was just like any other poor town where folks were just fending off starvation with aria and kimyuus eggs. Only folks in the castle town ever ate tarapa or tino, and naturally nobody had the funds needed to purchase ingredients from Jagar or Sym.” Mikel leaned forward as he talked while sitting there cross-legged. “On top of that, greedily buying up different ingredients from other countries wasn’t a thing until the previous head of the house of Turan obtained as much power and wealth as he did. Do you really think it’s possible to talk about cooking being ideal or proper cuisine with such a short history?”

“I see... In other words, the cuisine in Genos has undergone rapid changes in recent years, huh?”

“Yeah, that’s right. So even in the castle town, the chefs are just pretending to have the skills needed to handle the majority of those ingredients pouring into the region. There’s only a handful of exceptions like Varkas.”

I figured Mikel had to be included in that handful too.

With that thought in mind, I nodded back. “Right. I think I get the reason why the nobles’ tastes haven’t clearly solidified, more or less. By the way, is the neighboring town of Banarm the same way too?”

“The history of Banarm is a bit longer than Genos’s. But as far as I know they don’t have much interaction with Sym or Genos at all, and the soil is poor, so they can only grow a very limited variety of vegetables there,” Mikel bluntly replied. “Banarm is famous for its fuwano and mamaria. They grow a bit of aria and reten there too, and they have ranches for raising karon. Because of that, I’ve heard their cooking primarily uses karon milk fat and dried milk. Karon dried milk hat bake was a local specialty of Banarm, originally.”

“Karon milk fat and dried milk, right? Thank you. That’s a real help to know.”

“Hmph,” Mikel snorted back. His tone and expression remained just as blunt

as always, but he had figured out what I wanted to ask and jumped ahead to tell me. And I really did feel incredibly grateful for that consideration.

“Varkas said that you were his greatest rival. I’m sure that even though you were aiming for completely different goals, you must have had a great relationship.”

“We didn’t have any sort of relationship at all. Heck, I don’t even know what the guy’s face looks like.”

“Huh? But Varkas said...”

“We visited one another’s restaurants and tried the other’s cooking. But that’s as far as our *relationship* went.”

Before I realized it, I had let a strained chuckle slip out.

“But you still acknowledged one another’s skills. So I think that was a good relationship, even if that’s all it amounted to.”

Mikel stayed silent as he scratched his head of hair, which definitely had some gray coming in. And there was a very warm light in Myme’s eyes as she stared proudly up at her father.

2

Around a half hour had passed while I chatted with Mikel and everyone, so after adding herbs and firewood to the flame in the smoking room, I started heating up the pot with the seaweed.

Just before it reached a boil, I removed the seaweed and tossed in three different types of vegetable. Following Mikel’s guidance, I took the skin off the sheema and ma gigo, while I added the chan, skin and all. When I peeled back the brown skin of the ma gigo, I found slimy cream-colored flesh inside that really resembled gigo.

Fifteen minutes or so later, the vegetables had all gotten soft enough that I could stab a wooden skewer through them, so I doused the flame. For seasoning, I only used some salt I had brought along from the Fa house.

“Yeah, sheema really seems to be a lot like daikon.”

Once I lifted everything up onto a wooden plate, I started by splitting the sheema and ma gigo into enough portions for everyone. When I tasted it, I found the sheema's flavor reminded me pretty strongly of daikon. The seaweed stock had seeped into it ever so slightly, making for a simple yet wonderful flavor.

"I've never tasted anything like this before. I definitely get the feeling that it would pair well with tau oil," Reina Ruu commented, and Sheera Ruu nodded along.

If I let it boil for longer, it would surely become softer and draw out even more of that sweetness. I definitely wanted to try using it to positive effect at The Great Southern Tree.

The arugula-like ro'hyoi had a perfectly fine taste when fully cooked too. The spice and bitterness disappeared just fine, leaving just a bit of flavor reminiscent of sesame seeds, and it was a bit firmer than even nanaar, which already had a pleasant chewiness to it. It might have been an ingredient better suited to boiling in soy sauce or stir frying rather than just boiling it regularly.

Then, there was the ma gigo and ma pula.

When the skin was peeled from the ma gigo, it lost the sliminess of ordinary gigo, and the texture when you bit into it sort of reminded me of taro. It seemed like it would be good in stews and soups too.

Ma pula didn't have the bitterness of pula; in exchange there was a very slight sweetness to it. Pula was akin to bell peppers, while the bright red ma pula seemed like it could serve as a substitute for paprika.

Then last up there was the one I had the hardest time picturing how it would taste considering its appearance: the chan. As I took the initiative and went to bite into it first, I wondered just what in the world this black ping pong ball-looking vegetable would taste like...only to find it had a texture that was somewhat soft and rather peculiar, and the inside was slightly sweet and very moist. It might have been a bit like an extra-chewy eggplant? No, I couldn't say for certain since I didn't have much experience with them, but it might have actually been closer to a zucchini.

With just the seaweed stock and salt for flavor, I didn't feel it was all that

tasty. Still, if it was a vegetable akin to an eggplant or zucchini, I could probably use it with more heavily flavored or grilled dishes.

“They’re all so bland. I can’t imagine coming to like any of them,” Lem Dom stated, then she shot me a glare. “I know, this is just a taste test, right? I’m not trying to complain about your cooking or anything.”

“I didn’t say you were,” I replied with a strained chuckle, then I turned toward Mikel. “Whether or not I can use them for the banquet in the castle town will come down to the menu I decide on, but it doesn’t seem like there will be any issue with making them available in the post town. Next, I guess we should give the mushrooms a try.”

“You can try them if you want, but if you don’t let those dried mushrooms soak in water overnight, they won’t go back to normal. If you just boil them as they are, they’ll be hard and lacking in flavor.”

That made sense, and I figured it was like returning dried shiitake mushrooms to normal in water. In that case, maybe it would be possible to get a stock from them through that process too.

“Ah, and I also got some wine from other countries too. So what about them?”

“Genos doesn’t have any cooking techniques for using wine to add flavor. However, I’ve heard that in Sym and Mahyudra they sometimes boil meat in wine to remove odors,” Mikel replied, stroking his chin as he gave the matter deep thought. “Kimyuus and karon don’t have much of a stink about them to begin with, so there was no need to do anything like that. I don’t know how it is in Mahyudra, but maybe that method of boiling meat in wine and using a mountain of herbs comes from the stench of gyama raised in the mountains.”

“I see. That’s really interesting... By the way, have you ever been to Sym or Jagar, Mikel?”

“Why should I have to go all the way to some other country? You have to have some seriously eccentric tastes to want to travel to another kingdom when you’re not even a merchant,” Mikel grumbled, then suddenly he shot me a firm glare. “Have you even set foot outside of the forest’s edge and the post town yourself? Can’t imagine you’ve managed to find time for something like

that when you're doing business every single day."

"Yeah. As embarrassing as it is to admit, I've never even visited the Daleim or Turan lands. And I've only ever passed through the castle town in a totos carriage, so I haven't walked around there either."

Mikel gave an astounded sigh. "And you've been using nothing but giba meat too. Have you not even seen a kimyuus being prepared before?"

"That's right. Actually, I still don't even know what a live kimyuus looks like..."

When Mikel heard that, he went beyond astounded and landed somewhere around being at a loss for words.

"But you've cooked kimyuus and karon dishes before at one of the inns, haven't you...?"

"Yes. I tried out all sorts of things with the inn owner in order to develop a new menu. He makes them himself now though."

"So you cooked kimyuus without even knowing what one looks like, huh? If you worked in the same restaurant as me, I would've had some choice words to shout at you."

"It is kinda embarrassing," I said, scratching my head before turning his daughter's way. "So then, you must have seen a kimyuus being prepared, right Myme? Was it in Daleim?"

"That's right. My dad took me there two years ago. And we're going to go to Dabagg to see a karon farm sometime too!"

"Ooh, I'm jealous," I replied, at which Myme suddenly leaned forward.

"In that case, why not come with us? Dabagg is half a day away by totos, so we could be back by the following day."

"I mean, it's not like I'm planning to cook with karon or anything," I immediately replied, but it was definitely a proposal that got me excited. Up until now, I hadn't even dreamed of setting foot outside of Genos. As I gave the matter some thought, I turned toward Reina Ruu. "The people of the forest's edge don't go any farther than the post town, right? Is that because it's against their customs?"

“It’s more like there just isn’t any reason to do so. You can take care of any shopping you have to do in the post town just fine... But not that long ago, we had those men from the branch houses go with Kamyua Yoshu outside of Genos, so I don’t think anyone would complain about it if you have a proper reason.”

In that case, a short trip to Dabagg could be possible depending on how things played out. It seemed like a matter that would be worth discussing with Ai Fa and Donda Ruu.

“I think I’d like to try heading to the Daleim lands first, then. I have acquaintances there, after all.”

It went without saying, but I was thinking of Dora and Tara. Dora’s family plowed fields there, and he sold his crops in the post town.

I had wanted to invite them to the forest’s edge sometime anyway, so it seemed like a decent idea to plan a visit to the Daleim lands as well. That was certain to make Rimee Ruu happy too, as she got along well with Tara.

“The only things in the Turan lands are fuwano and mamaria fields, and those belong to the lord of the land, so we can’t approach them. That made getting to see the aria and tarapa fields in the Daleim lands feel like a really important experience for me,” Myme reminisced.

“I see. I’d love to see them too, then. We’ve only ever seen vegetables being sold in the post town before, right?” I asked, seeking agreement. However, the looks Reina and Sheera Ruu were giving me seemed oddly full of mixed emotions.

“Umm... I’m sorry, but I’ve already seen the kimyuus and the fields in the Daleim lands. And I believe it’s the same for you too, right, Sheera Ruu?”

“It is. I was a bit surprised. I never imagined a kimyuus would look like that.”

“Huh?! You two have been to the Daleim lands?!”

“Yes... When you were kidnapped, we were tasked with searching the post town and the Daleim lands.”

Now I finally understood, and I also felt incredibly apologetic. “Right. I really

am sorry for that. And I apologize for getting so worked up when I didn't know how much you had to do..."

"Please don't worry yourself about that. None of it was your fault, after all," Reina Ruu replied with a smile to reassure me. "We didn't have a chance to take our time and observe the fields back then, so if you head to the Daleim lands, we would love to accompany you."

"I see. In that case, I'll talk to Donda Ruu about it. Plus, I'd have to find out in advance if the people of the Daleim lands would welcome us to begin with."

Those who worked in the Daleim fields feared giba, so it was possible they would be more afraid of the people of the forest's edge than folks in the post town were. In fact, that did seem to be the case for Dora and Granny Mishil when we first met.

But ever since we exposed Cyclaeus and Ciluel's crimes, the discrimination toward the people of the forest's edge had lightened up quite a bit. Still, it wasn't like we were accepted unconditionally. There were definitely still some out there who saw the people of the forest's edge as heretics for holding different moral values than the townsfolk, and for being such stolid hunters. Not to mention the fact that the forest alone was seen as the mother of the people who lived there, rather than any of the four great gods. That was just one more reason the townsfolk saw them as incomprehensible.

Even so, there's a lot less thoughtless scorn and fear flying around. If they can see us as more like slightly strange neighbors rather than heretics, it should be possible for everyone to get along.

As I thought to myself, I popped the leftover chan on the plate into my mouth.

Two hours and some change later, the smoked meat was finally ready.

The meat had already shrunk a bit beforehand, but now that we were laying it out atop a cloth, it was clear that it had gotten even smaller and toughened up. The sausages, for example, were now around half as thick as they had been. The intestines had contracted and become wrinkly, while the meat inside had turned a dark reddish brown.

“It doesn’t seem as tough as normal jerky. Though I’d say it’s become a lot denser.”

As I spoke, I picked up a knife. It was the one that I had been borrowing from Ai Fa, which was a memento from her father. The sausages were one thing, but if I didn’t use this one for the jerky, a cooking knife might be damaged.

“For now, why don’t we go ahead and give this stuff a taste test?”

We had six varieties of meat: thigh, rib, shoulder, and sirloin, the hind leg that had been smoked whole, and the sausages.

I started with the safe choice, the thigh meat, shaving some off and moving it to a plate. Jerky tended to get harder over the course of a few days, but at the moment it seemed like even I could chew through it just fine.

“The taste really does seem to have improved a lot,” Reina Ruu remarked in surprise. “It has a much more abundant flavor just from adding a few herbs and putting more effort into smoking it. I’m sure the men will be quite happy with this too.”

“Yeah. It’d probably be nice and tasty if you threw it into a stew as well.”

The flavor was actually pretty similar to the jerky I knew from back home. In the past, the people of the forest’s edge got pretty much all the salt in their diet from jerky, which meant it had to be so salty it would sting your throat. However, the taste of the meat had grown denser, and then there was the aroma from the herbs on top of that, which gave it a very deep flavor.

After that, we went ahead and tried the rib, shoulder, and sirloin meats in turn.

Personally, I thought the ribs and sirloin had a bit of a dicey taste. The accent provided by their fat content seemed underdeveloped. It wasn’t being brought out to its fullest potential, and the chewy texture wasn’t especially pleasant either.

Still, even though the shoulder meat had the least fat of these cuts, I didn’t feel that it had come out as the best one either. And it sure seemed like as the days passed, it would end up every bit as tough as bonito flakes.

As for the smoked hind leg, it got pretty tender as you went further in. With this much volume, it seemed it needed to be pickled in salt for longer in order to more thoroughly remove the moisture. It wasn't as if the taste itself was bad, but making sure it would last was important too.

Anyway, I got the feeling that the block of thigh meat was the most suited to being made into jerky for portable rations in the end.

"Delicious! I don't eat much jerky, but this should be at least as good as stuff made with karon and kimyuus, if not better, right?" Myme exclaimed.

"That's true. But it needs to sell at one and a half times the price of karon. That means it might be out of reach for most travelers."

The young girl's eyes opened wide. "Then why did you want to improve the quality of the jerky? Ah, so it could be tastier for you guys...?"

"That's of course part of it. But beyond that, I figure jerky can be sold in other towns," I replied as I thought back. "A merchant group from Sym that we met in the post town bought a whole lot of jerky from us in the past with the intention of selling it. Wealthy folks and merchants in other towns could end up buying it for the novelty even if it's a bit expensive, right?"

I was definitely concerned that the way things were going, giba meat might end up having its price raised to the same level as karon torso meat. I figured I should search out new ways to sell it, in case that ended up happening.

After I offered that explanation, Myme got a bit of a pained look on her face.

"If giba meat becomes that expensive, it won't be available in the post town anymore, will it? Karon torso costs around double what leg meat does, right?"

"That's true. But the folks in the post town may be wealthier than they are now when that time comes. Actually, this noble I know named Polarth said that should be the case."

Still, we were talking about the far off future. I wanted to try to do everything I could before anything beyond our ability to predict happened.

"Well then, I predicted these sausages should work better than the other types of meat, but let's see how they turned out."

The sausages had shrunk down to around one and a half centimeters thick and ten centimeters long. I sliced the links in half, and since there were ten of us here, used up five links in the process.

When I took a bite of those smoked sausages, I found it had a firm texture that reminded me of salami. Still, the fat kneaded into it gave it an appropriate level of tenderness, and it didn't take much chewing to break it down in my mouth.

The taste from the salt and pico leaves really was striking. And the lilo and other herbs added to its abundant flavor too. It had just as much flavor condensed into it as normal smoked meat, if not more, and just this small amount was enough to seriously satisfy me.

"It sure is tasty! Though I feel really thirsty now."

After nodding at Myme, I turned toward Reina Ruu and the other women.

"What do you all think? It's got a wonderful flavor to it, right?"

"Yes. I'd say it's tastier than the jerky. However, wouldn't my father and those like him object to how easy it is to eat...?"

"Yeah. If there are more opportunities to eat soft meat at dinner and the jerky gets softer too, I figure a lot of hunters will feel uneasy about that. Naturally, I feel the same way too. So I wanted to try it out as something to be sold and also used as an ingredient in meals."

"An ingredient in meals?"

"That's right. If it doesn't need to last for several months, then there's no need to dry it out and toughen it up as thoroughly. There are plenty of ways to use it, whether by decreasing the smoking time, or even just grilling it or boiling it instead." I then pointed toward the smoked rib meat. "And with this stuff, if you dry it out this much, you lose the deliciousness from the fat, but by adjusting the smoking time we can make something different known as bacon. I tried to make some for Shumiral and Balan a while ago with that jerky I gave them, but it came out sort of half-baked. Still, I'm sure I can get it to come out well if I can figure out from scratch how to make bacon the right way."

"You already had things planned out that far when you decided to start

experimenting with jerky, didn't you?" Reina Ruu questioned with a small sigh, then she stared at me with a firm look in her eyes. "Lately, I feel like I'm seeing the gap between our skill levels more and more clearly. I feel like I'm clinging to the back of a totos running wild...but I'd like to try even harder to make certain it doesn't throw me off."

Sheera Ruu and Toor Deen had equally serious expressions on their faces too. Li Sudra watched over the proceedings with a smile, Lem Dom appeared indifferent, and Saris Ran Fou seemed fidgety because she didn't get what was going on at all... And then there was Yun Sudra, who was staring at me with an oddly passionate look in her eyes. After shooting a glance her way, Reina Ruu leaned toward me.

"Asuta, I ask that you continue instructing me. I'll give every last bit of strength I've got in order not to prove a hindrance."

"Thanks. It's very reassuring to hear you say so, Reina Ruu."

Making bacon and sausage, improving the taste of the giba curry, developing a menu for the welcome banquet, taste testing new ingredients... Plus, mixing fuwano and poitan seemed like it would produce some interesting results soon. Thanks to everyone who assisted me, I had been able to expand my research in so many ways.

"But Asuta, these sausages take quite a bit of effort to prepare, don't they? We had a lot of women from the Fou and Sudra gathered today, so we managed to finish it in the morning, but what about in the future?" Saris Ran Fou asked in a reserved tone.

I turned to face her with a smile. "I've been thinking about that. If we work together to smoke enough meat for everyone like we did today, we can minimize the number of folks needed to make jerky. On top of that, I think we should be able to get the necessary number of people if the Liddo, Gaaz, and Ratsu join in."

"Ah, that's true... If just one or two people can smoke this much meat, that should free up quite a few hands."

"Right. And if they don't need to head to the post town to make purchases, that would free up even more."

My words had Saris Ran Fou tilting her head with a confused expression, so I explained. “The truth is, I was thinking of purchasing a new totos and wagon to use for shopping. If we share it with everyone, that should save a lot of time, right? Maybe I can talk to the clan heads and see if that time could be spent helping me out with this.”

“Huh...? You’d buy a totos and wagon for the sake of other clans? But aren’t wagons shockingly expensive?”

“It’s a cheap price to pay for getting help with my work. Making such a large amount of sausage will take an incredible amount of effort. I would never be capable of it on my own.”

The various clan heads surely wouldn’t accept my charity if I were to just buy them a wagon and totos. But I figured if the Fa clan stood to benefit too, I might be able to get them to consider it.

“That’s part of the ‘prosperous lives’ you talk about, right?” Lem Dom chimed in with a shrug of her shoulders. “I’m amazed. You could never think of buying a wagon for another clan if you’re just hunting giba. And if you sell those sausages or whatever they’re called, then an even bigger fortune will come rolling in. It certainly is an outrageous thought.”

“Yeah. We had the price of giba meat unexpectedly go up on us, so it’s become necessary to widen our scope.”

Still, no matter how much we expanded our business dealings, giba meat was essential. Without it, I would have no business at all.

No matter how much of a fortune the people of the forest’s edge amassed, they still couldn’t neglect their hunting duties. As I saw it, my fundamental business principles were built around the question of whether or not they could live prosperous lives without being corrupted.

“It really is something else. The lives of us people of the forest’s edge have changed so completely thanks to a single foreigner,” Lem Dom commented, and then she broke out in a daring grin. “I can’t help but enjoy watching to see if you’ll trip up somewhere, or if you’ll keep on breaking through like a rutting giba.”

“Right. I intend to keep on plunging straight ahead while also making sure I have firm footing.”

And so, our taste testing of the smoked meats came to a close, with a number of topics still left up in the air.

3

Night had fallen.

The day’s dinner at the Fa house also served as a taste test for the new ingredients, so it ended up as quite the luxurious lineup.

First was a specially prepared giba soup, and considering the resemblance between the ingredients I used and the ingredients from back home, it would actually be fitting to call this my first Japanese giba soup recipe. For the stock, I used seaweed and smoked fish, then for ingredients I had aria, chatchi, nenon, and newcomers in the form of sheema, ma gigo, and the brown beech-looking fungus. Or put in terms of ingredients from back home, onion, potato, carrot, daikon, taro, and mushrooms.

I flavored it with tau oil, and chose rib and thigh for my cuts of meat. To match my tastes, I added spicy chitt seeds, which were like chili peppers. With all the new dried goods in the broth, it really did feel a lot closer to the soups I remembered from back home.

Next up, I tried to reuse my grounds from making the stock. I finely chopped up the kombu-like seaweed that I had gotten broth from twice, then paired it with thinly sliced sheema and dried kiki, like a kombu and daikon salad. An extremely simple dish, but the crisp texture that the sheema shared with raw daikon was quite pleasant.

I then added the smoked fish that was like bonito flakes to the vegetable salad, as well as some homemade mayonnaise. It ended up like tuna salad, and seemed like a decent enough way to reuse my leftovers from the stock.

For the meat dish, I kept things simple and made some myamuu giba for the first time in a while. I went with sirloin for the cut, and garnished it with a bit of grilled chan. Though chan looked like a black ping pong ball, when cooked, it

still tasted similar to eggplant or zucchini, so it wasn't difficult to handle. After splitting it in two and grilling it atop a wire rack, I simply poured the myamuu sauce over the top in order to make a sufficient side dish.

"You've gained so many new ingredients, but none of these dishes feel especially original..." Ai Fa commented while heartily chewing away. "I had prepared myself to be fed all sorts of wild dishes for the time being, but it seems my expectations were pleasantly betrayed."

"I see. Well, as long as you like it, I'm glad."

"Indeed. It's good," Ai Fa replied, and then she expressionlessly slurped down some Japanese giba soup. Perhaps because Lem Dom was also present, my clan head had a more serious look on her face than usual, acting like a real domineering husband.

"What about you, Lem Dom? Are you more satisfied now than at the taste testing earlier in the day?"

"These dishes are delicious... This soup in particular is good enough to get on my nerves a bit." Setting her plate down, Lem Dom shot me an intense look. "I didn't especially find these sheema and ma gigo vegetables tasty, and yet I can feel a great strength filling me up inside from this soup. Why is that? Is it from the seaweed and fish that you boiled at the start, perhaps?"

"Yeah. And by using this many vegetables, you can get a really good stock from that alone."

"So the taste gets better if you use lots of vegetables? But if you added sour tarapa or bitter pula to it, it'd ruin the flavor, right?"

"That's true. You're quick on the uptake, Lem Dom."

"Stop talking to me as if you're flattering a child."

This was the fourth time that Lem Dom had stayed at the Fa house, which was happening every other day. Each time, I had talked with her longer, but in exchange, Ai Fa had grown more uncommunicative. It was less that she was ignoring Lem Dom, and more that she didn't like talking so lightly and openly to me when others were watching.

At the same time, Lem Dom kept on doggedly shooting Ai Fa flirtatious glances.

“You know, I really do admire your strength as a hunter, Ai Fa. How are you able to keep on hunting down giba day after day without anyone assisting you?”

Ai Fa had served as a bodyguard while she took a few days off hunting due to her injured back tooth, but until then she had been hunting down giba at the high pace of one per day.

“I believe I already explained that it is the result of me using giba summoning fruit...”

“But it’s not as if just any hunter could see such results from using it, right? Otherwise, everyone would. Wait, you haven’t been doing sacrificial hunting every day, have you...?”

“I only perform sacrificial hunting during periods when there are few giba around.”

“In that case, you really are impressively skilled. You’ve taken down so many day after day while using the tremendously dangerous giba summoning fruit, and yet you haven’t been seriously injured.”

“My father was skilled at using giba summoning fruit... I simply carry out my work as I learned from him.”

“Like I said, that’s just proof of how skilled you are. And your father must have been quite the excellent hunter too.”

With a small sigh, Ai Fa took a sip of fruit wine. She had taken up drinking a bit, but just on the nights when Lem Dom visited.

“You seem to earnestly mean that, Lem Dom, but my father died at a young age out in the forest. Not much older than thirty. Hunters are not called excellent here at the forest’s edge when they die young.”

“That’s not true at all. My father also died two years back at around the same age. But even so, he hunted down a whole lot of giba, and his strength was inherited by his son Deek. If anyone were to call my father a mediocre hunter,

I'd beat them down no matter who they may be."

Ai Fa listlessly shook her head. "I understand your feelings, but I don't care for gossiping about my father. If at all possible, I would like you to refrain from speaking of him."

"Of course. If it upsets you, then I won't speak a single word more on the matter from here on out."

Since Ai Fa tried to build a wall between herself and members of other clans, while Lem Dom was excessively familiar, the two just didn't seem to mesh. Whether that was down to Ai Fa being overly stubborn or Lem Dom being too assertive, it was something I did find a bit of a concern.

If Lem Dom wasn't so open about her affection, she might actually do better with Ai Fa, I thought to myself.

After taking another swig of fruit wine, my clan head then raised a topic herself.

"Lem Dom, it has been eight days now since you left your home. Have you formed ties with Bartha of Masara over at the Ruu settlement?"

"With Bartha? Why are you asking about that?"

"Bartha was also a female hunter, which is why I suggested that she could show you a proper path forward."

"Ah, that's what you meant. Yeah, I tried talking to Bartha since you said that, but it didn't seem like there was much I could learn from her..."

"Why is that...?"

Ai Fa had a piercing light in her eyes, but Lem Dom just shrugged her shoulders as if she hadn't noticed.

"I mean, Bartha's lost the will of a hunter, hasn't she? She even laughed and said she wouldn't go giba hunting herself. Someone who goes into the forest to hunt birds while the giba are asleep isn't the type of hunter I'm seeking."

Ai Fa kept on silently staring.

"Ultimately, Bartha cast aside her life as a hunter and gained a husband and

child. I don't feel like I should look down on her for being a bandit or whatever, but I also don't feel like she's the type of person to capture my heart."

"If that is all you can sense, then you really may not be qualified to be a hunter..." Ai Fa quietly remarked. "Well, it has nothing to do with me. You can just keep on chasing the glory you see in front of your eyes and live however you please."

Ai Fa seemed to have soured on Lem Dom really badly. It had been a long time since I had heard her speak to a fellow person of the forest's edge in such a chilly tone.

I worried that would earn some backlash from Lem Dom, but the younger girl just stared at my clan head with a puzzled look. Then, she set down the plate she had been holding and slumped over with her hands on the floor, looking heartbroken.

"I've angered you, haven't I, Ai Fa...?"

Ai Fa turned around in annoyance, but then she suddenly drew back, looking taken off guard. Lem Dom was deeply hanging her head, as clear droplets fell onto the fur rug.

"Hey, Lem Dom..."

"I'm sorry... I have a tendency to just run my mouth about whatever I'm thinking... I guess I'm just a complete fool who doesn't even recognize what she's lacking..."

"I didn't call you a fool. Please pull yourself together."

"But please believe me... I had no intention of ignoring your advice, and I don't want to deny Bartha's way of life either... I just can't overlap my own life with hers..."

Lem Dom's voice was weak and trembling, and her tears were creating a wet spot on the rug.



“I get it, so try to calm down, at least a little. I really don’t understand you...” Ai Fa wildly rustled her own hair. “Someone who wishes to become a hunter should not cry so lightly in front of others. Even putting that aside, you’re fifteen, aren’t you?”

“Yes... I’m sorry...”

“Fifteen is the age that both men and women are seen as adults. To weep so freely at such an age...” Ai Fa started to say, but then she frowned. Was she remembering when she herself cried in front of me? At any rate, she shot me a glare before turning back toward Lem Dom. “Regardless, do not cry over something like this. It really looks quite ridiculous, considering how big you are.”

“I’m sorry... I haven’t cried since I lost my father and mother, but...when I think of having upset you, it feels so painful...”

“I understand. I spoke without thinking and I apologize, so please forgive me. Now then, there’s still dinner left to be had...”

“Right...”

Lem Dom wiped her eyes with the back of her hand, still hanging her head, and then she started pecking at the remaining food. She was acting like a despondent child, and it made her muscular body look a size smaller.

Just as I was worrying about what to do to fix things, there was a sudden knock at the door. I started to rise, only for Ai Fa to stop me and stand herself.

“Who is visiting at such an hour?”

“The head of the main Dom house, Deek Dom.”

Instantly, tension spread throughout the room.

Lem Dom had lifted her face, and though her eyes were still rather red, she wore an even more dauntless expression than usual.

As Ai Fa walked forward she gently stroked Gilulu’s head—the huge bird was balled up in the entryway—and then she reached for the bolt.

“My apologies for arriving so late at night. Is my clan member here? Or is she

at the Ruu settlement?”

“She’s here. We’re in the middle of dinner, but if this is an urgent matter then I shall allow you inside.”

“You have my gratitude,” a low voice replied, and then a huge figure appeared suddenly in the entranceway. Sure enough, it was the Dom clan head and Lem Dom’s elder brother, Deek Dom.

He wore a giba skull atop his head, was even bigger than Donda Ruu, and was covered in old scars. The look of a wild beast gleamed in his black eyes. It was my first time seeing his gallant figure in roughly two and a half months.

The totos he was leading by hand entered after him and balled up beside Gilulu. The bird was the totos belonging to the northern settlement, and had slightly blackish plumage.

“So you finally showed yourself, my clan head. I figured you would come a bit sooner than this.”

Slowly, Lem Dom rose to her feet. As he shot her a glare, the look in Deek Dom’s eyes grew even more intense. Ai Fa stepped back so that she wouldn’t be in the way, and then solemnly crossed her arms.

“For now, come inside. We don’t have any dinner for you, but there’s fruit wine if you want it.”

“That won’t be necessary. I’ll leave as soon as this discussion is finished.”

Deek Dom just kept on standing in place, not even removing his leather footwear. Instead, Lem Dom briskly walked over his way.

“A discussion, you say? Okay, out with it already. I’m sure you’ve already heard about me from the Ruu clan, correct? So this really is a late appearance from you, considering.”

“I’m not exactly overflowing with spare time. I can’t simply cast aside my work for the sake of my foolish clan member.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. Have things gone smoothly with your attempts to ward off giba?”

“Yes. We should be able to finish the job before the end of the break period.”

Currently, the northern settlement was in the process of setting things up to drive giba away from the area around their houses so that they could welcome women from the Ruu and Rutim clans.

“Lem, what in the world are you thinking?”

“You should have already heard all about it, right?”

“I want to hear it from you. As a member of the Dom house, speaking to her clan head.”

Deek Dom glared down at his sister. In the meantime, I had stood up too and slipped over next to Ai Fa.

“I want to become a hunter. I asked to come to the Ruu settlement with the goal of meeting Ai Fa, the one and only female hunter at the forest’s edge. Naturally, though, I haven’t neglected my work in manning the stove.”

“Why would you wish to be a hunter? You are a woman, Lem.”

“I feel that living as a hunter suits me better than protecting the home as a woman. You must have at least vaguely sensed that much, right?”

“Of course I sensed it. However, I thought you would cast aside that foolish idea.”

“Unfortunately for you, as the years have gone by, my feelings on the matter have only grown stronger.”

Deek Dom looked down expressionlessly at Lem Dom. But despite his lack of expression, his scarred face was so intense that it was hard to believe it belonged to a man who was only seventeen years old. I figured even Donda Ruu’s face had to look a bit gentler than this back at that age.

“You seem to be under some sort of misconception, Lem.”

“A misconception? What do you mean?”

“Ai Fa of the Fa clan is a special case. Despite having the body of a woman, she possesses strength that is generally unimaginable. Not just anyone can become as fine of a hunter as her.”

I was shocked, but Ai Fa’s complexion remained completely unchanged.

At that, Lem Dom snorted, “Hmph! I certainly realize that fact much better than you do. After all, I’ve been permitted to spend quite a bit of time close to her.”

“Then give up on this foolish idea already. The forest’s edge will not accept a woman without the talent for it aiming to become a hunter.”

“How do you know whether or not I have the talent for it, clan head?”

There was now a fire blazing bright in Lem Dom’s black eyes. It was such an intense gaze that it was hard to imagine this was the same dejected girl from before.

“I’m still only fifteen. And I’ve already gained greater strength than most other women. If I could just polish my soul and my techniques, wouldn’t I be capable of living as a hunter?”

“Not possible. And I won’t permit you to neglect your work as a woman for the sake of this foolish plot. Women must protect the home.”

“I refuse. If I have to cast aside my will, then I would be happier dying out in the forest as an inexperienced hunter.”

Deek Dom’s eyes were now blazing away too. Those lights from their black eyes collided, and it felt as if I could see them crackling and giving off sparks.

“Are you saying you would neglect your duties despite being born a person of the forest’s edge, Lem?”

“I’m not. I simply wish to live properly as a person of the forest’s edge in the way that’s right for me.”

“This is going nowhere. The mother forest will never permit your foolishness,” Deek Dom grumbled, and then he turned toward Ai Fa. “Fa clan head Ai Fa. I ask that the agreement to have the Ruu and Fa clans take in Lem Dom to train her in manning the stove come to an end as of this very moment. You needn’t look after this fool any longer.”

All Ai Fa replied with was “Oh?”

Deek Dom paid her no heed. “I will be talking to Donda Ruu after this as well. You have my thanks as the Dom clan head for the past eight days,” he

continued, finishing with a slight bow of his head.

As she glared his way, Lem Dom broke out in a sneer. "Clan head, I don't have any intention of returning to the Dom house just yet."

"And I have no intention of accepting you back either. Until you cast aside this foolishness about wanting to be a hunter, don't come anywhere near the northern settlement, Lem." As he spoke, Deek Dom turned around. Despite his large build, it really was a graceful maneuver. "Until that time comes, I will not acknowledge you as a member of my clan. You can ask yourself and the forest about what your sins are."

"So that's how it is? Then so be it. This may be our final farewell, but take care, Dom clan head Deek Dom."

Taking his black-feathered topos with him, Deek Dom disappeared into the darkness.

Ai Fa closed the door and re-bolted it, then turned toward Lem Dom. "As a clan head of the north, I suppose that was the obvious decision. What do you intend to do from here on out, Lem Dom?"

"Well, I suppose my only option is to find an open house somewhere to spend the night. Fortunately, the Sudra seem to have a number of houses to spare, and they're near the Fa house, so that should work out just fine," Lem Dom replied with a daring grin. "Deek's stubborn, so I already expected this much. Actually, it came later than I expected."

"But now that your clan head Deek Dom has said all that, neither Donda Ruu nor I can shelter you any further. Even if you find an open house where you can spend the night, what do you intend to do for food? Do you have coins?"

"Of course not. And I can't hunt giba as I am now either, so I guess I'll have to head into the post town and look for work."

"In the post town? Are there any businesses that would employ a person of the forest's edge?" I asked in surprise, but Lem Dom just shrugged her shoulders the same as always.

"If not, then I'll scrounge for scraps. I'll find a way to live on without breaking the laws of either Genos or the forest's edge."

Despite the sarcastic-looking grin she wore, there was the same flame as always burning away in her eyes. Ai Fa glared at her a moment longer, before turning her gaze toward me.

“Asuta, you asked the Fou and Ran women to help you out in the morning, correct? How many coins are you paying them?”

“Huh? Ah, two red coins per hour, and the job is two hours per day.”

“Then that would mean four red coins per day, correct? That should be enough to buy not only aria and poitan, but giba meat as well.”

Lem Dom wore a dubious look in response to Ai Fa’s words.

“What are you talking about? Didn’t you just say you can’t shelter me any longer?”

“It would not be sheltering you or granting you charity. It’s only natural that anyone can receive payment for doing a job.”

“But...”

“It was the Dom clan head Deek Dom’s decision not to acknowledge you as a member of his clan. No one can object to that, but just because you wish to be a hunter despite being a woman, it doesn’t mean you are no longer qualified to be a person of the forest’s edge. If it did, I would have long since lost that qualification myself.”

Lem Dom just silently stared back at my clan head.

“Ask your own feelings and the forest whether or not you have committed any wrong. And once you find the answer, then you should speak with Deek Dom once more,” Ai Fa stated before turning away.

Lem Dom firmly shut her eyes, and she slowly approached Ai Fa. Then, her robust arms flew out and embraced Ai Fa around the neck for the first time in a while.

“Thank you, Ai Fa... I am truly, truly glad to have met you...”

“Hmph,” my clan head snorted, but she didn’t brush away the younger girl’s arms.

I was finally able to breathe a sigh of relief. “Well then, how about we continue dinner? And it should be fine to at least let her stay in the Fa house for tonight, right? I’d like to make arrangements for work tomorrow too.”

“Right...” Lem Dom replied in a childish manner, rubbing her cheek up against Ai Fa’s hair.

After around ten seconds of that, my clan head exploded, “How long do you intend to keep clinging to me?!”

And so, that turbulent yet truly worthwhile day off finally came to a close.

Intermission: A Girl Touched by Fate

It was now the thirtieth of the black month. The day my twelfth ten-day contract period began.

“Hmm, so Lem Dom is just going to be helping out with work in the morning, and then spending the night in one of the Sudra’s vacant houses? Sounds like a rough way to live,” Lala Ruu commented while mincing up tino for myamuu giba.

As I similarly minced tino for the stall’s poitan wraps, I replied, “Yeah. But, well, it worked out that we could share dinner and jerky with her rather than paying her coins for her work. So for the time being, I think she’ll be able to live comfortably enough.”

“Still, it’s hard to imagine a fifteen-year-old girl having to live all on her own. I wouldn’t even want to live a single day like that.”

Thinking back on it, Ai Fa was fifteen when she lost her father. Of course, Lem Dom hadn’t actually lost her family, but the loneliness she was feeling had to be unimaginable. She really was strong if she could keep grinning dauntlessly in spite of that.

“Now that I think about it, the Deen and Dom both fall under the Zaza, right? So can’t she stay with you guys?” Lala Ruu called out past me to Toor Deen.

Her eyebrows slumping sadly, Toor Deen replied, “This morning, we heard from our clan head that we were absolutely not to help Lem Dom out. I’m sure that notice was passed around to all the clans under the Zaza.”

“I see. The folks up north sure are hardheaded. You must be feeling uneasy, since you got along well with Lem Dom, right?”

“Yes. Or more than that, I’m worried about her, and it makes me sad.” Toor Deen had a smile on her face, but just like she said, it looked terribly forlorn. She was still a bit timid when it came to members of the clans under the Ruu, but she had really opened up to Lala Ruu.

I could still remember clearly how the two had first met at the Suun settlement, when Toor Deen had gotten burned and Lala Ruu looked after her. Between Lala Ruu and Lem Dom, Toor Deen seemed like she might have something of a tendency to be drawn toward frank and open women.

“Well, it’s not like a woman becoming a hunter is something that is accepted lightly. My dad was cold to Ai Fa for a long time because of it. I can’t really understand wanting to become a hunter badly enough to face all that hardship...”

“That reminds me, Deek Dom went to see Donda Ruu too, didn’t he? How did that go?”

“Hmm? He doesn’t seem to really want to butt into the business of an unrelated clan. That’s why he so readily agreed to letting Lem Dom stay at the Fa house before too,” Lala Ruu said, then she furrowed her well-shaped brow. “Jiza looked a bit annoyed, though. He’s even more hardheaded than my dad.”

As I recalled Jiza Ruu’s face and how he was always wearing a Buddha-like smile, I nodded. “I see.”

More than just being hardheaded, it seemed that he valued the customs of the forest’s edge more than anyone. I had trouble imagining how he must have seen me at this point, considering all I had done to smash the common sense of the forest’s edge to smithereens.

From what I could recall, the last time I talked openly with Jiza Ruu about such matters was right before the clan head meeting... In other words, it had been nearly four months. My intention had been to prove my way of thinking through my actions rather than my words, but Jiza Ruu had said it wasn’t right for a foreigner like me to assert such influence over the future of the forest’s edge. How did he feel now, though? Just like Gazraan Rutim had become the Rutim clan head, eventually Jiza Ruu would take the title from his own father. And at that point, he would become the leader of a hundred or so people under his clan, and would also be one of the three leading clan heads.

When he had eaten my giba cutlets, Jiza Ruu had given the dish praise, and I felt that was definitely his honest opinion about them. However, I didn’t exactly feel like that meant I could take it easy just yet.

“It’s time for us to sub in. Sorry for the wait.” It was around then that Li Sudra and Yun Sudra arrived. Today, they had shown up right when the sun hit its peak.

“Thanks for coming. How were the new jerky and the sausages received?”

“Well, everyone was perfectly happy with the jerky. But a lot of people seemed to feel the soft sausages were better suited to being used in dinner rather than as something to chew on during the day.”

“I see. In that case, I’m actually a bit worried that the custom of eating the tougher old style of jerky may be lost.” A worry that was entirely of my own creation. But I was convinced that eating tough jerky was essential for retaining jaw strength and the toughness of one’s teeth. “Okay, got it. I’ll look into whether or not the sausages can be sold in the castle town, or other towns entirely... Anyway, the stalls are in your hands.”

“Ah, hold on, Asuta. I was actually thinking that I would see how Yun’s work goes today, and if there aren’t any issues, I’ll entrust her with handling it on her own starting tomorrow. What do you say?”

Today was the eighth day since Yun Sudra started her training period. As far as I was concerned, I didn’t have any complaints about how her work was going.

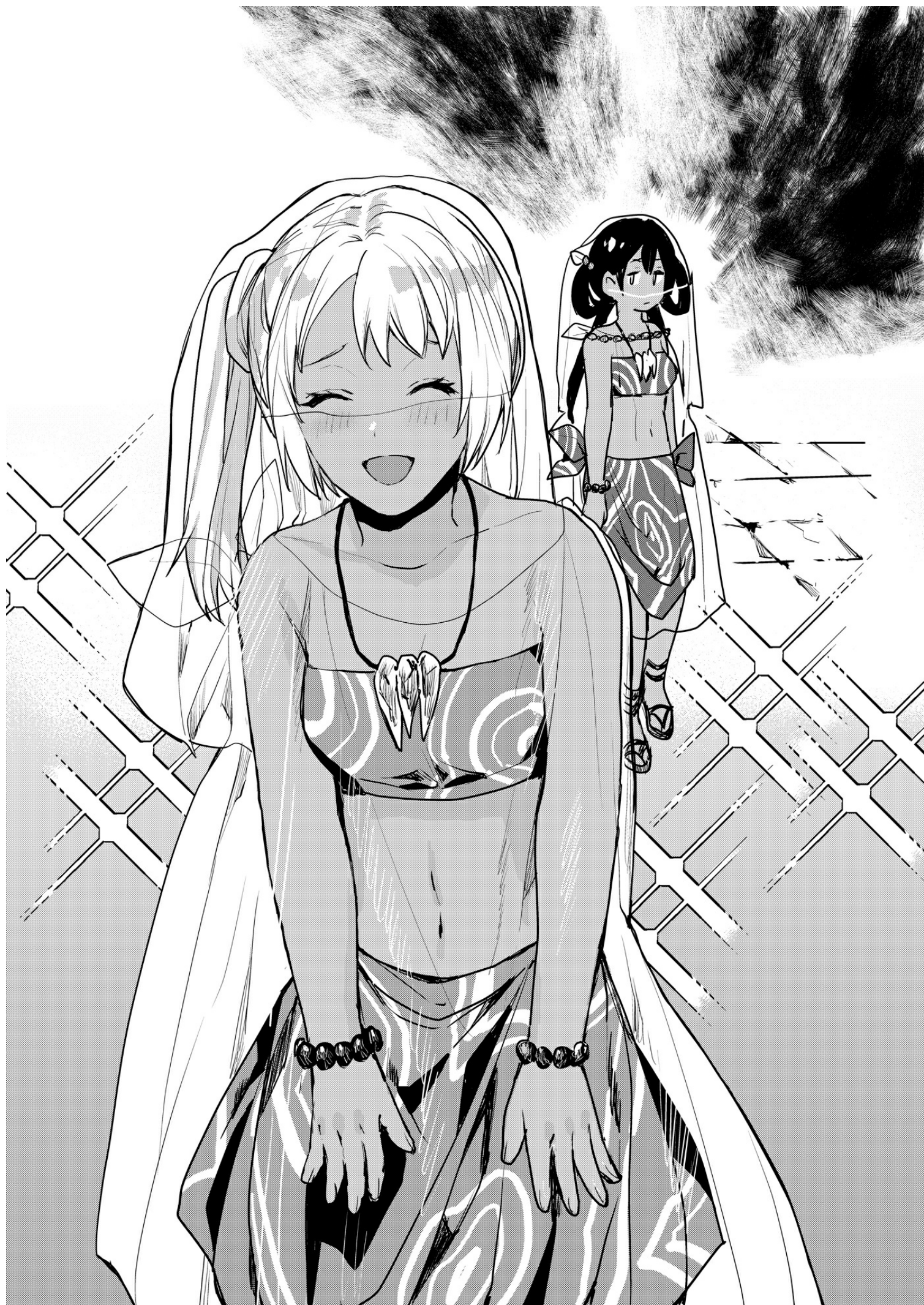
“That’s fine by me. If she has your approval, then she should be good to go.”

“In that case, I believe I’ll spend the day watching Yun work without interfering.”

I nodded, then turned toward Yun Sudra. “All right. Give it your best shot. Knowing you, I’m sure you’ll do just fine.”

“Right! Thank you!” she replied, blushing as she bowed her head of gray-brown hair.

When she did, I ended up locking eyes head-on with Reina Ruu, who had been standing right behind her.



“Asuta, let’s get going to the inns,” Reina Ruu prompted me.

“R-Right. Well then, we’re off.”

After saying farewell to Toor Deen and Yamiru Lea, I left the stall.

As we walked down the crowded street, I thought I spied a tense look on Reina Ruu’s face, but I was sure I was just imagining things.

“Asuta, I don’t really like giving this kind of advice, but...”

“Y-Yeah? What is it?”

“I believe you need to give a bit more thought to how you interact with that Yun Sudra girl.”

“How I interact with her? Hmm, it seemed to me that I’ve been maintaining a proper distance as her employer, but still...”

As we kept on walking, Reina Ruu’s gaze turned my way from the side. “You were born in another country, Asuta. There aren’t many men who are as gentle-mannered as you here at the forest’s edge. I think Yun Sudra may be under some sort of misconception.”

“A misconception? What do you mean?”

“That she mistakenly believes she has feelings for you.”

I really hadn’t expected Reina Ruu to be so frank. I turned toward her, looking a bit bewildered, while her expression remained perfectly calm and levelheaded.

“I mean, I made a conscious decision early on to not get too close to her, so I don’t think you really need to be concerned about that...”

“Then it seems you haven’t been attentive enough. Though, it’s possible that it had nothing to do with your attitude, and that girl just wanted to marry you from the very start.”

As Reina Ruu’s words and gaze grew more and more sharp, I shrank back even further.

“You said you didn’t intend to take anyone as your bride, correct? Those feelings haven’t changed, have they?”

“Th-They haven’t. I still feel the same way.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“Then in that case, you should act less casual than you currently do when dealing with that girl,” Reina Ruu replied, giving a sigh. “I’m sorry for making such uncalled-for remarks. I just believe that if you think of yourself as a friend to the Sudra clan, you should be more careful with your actions.”

“Right. I really do appreciate the advice. And I promise to be more careful from here on out.”

“Thank you...”

Just as I was thinking to myself how awkward things felt, Reina Ruu turned my way with a smile. “Phew, I’ve finally gotten that load off my chest. Let’s keep giving our all to the work ahead of us, Asuta.”

“Y-Yeah, right.” I was honestly pretty flustered, but I immediately grasped how Reina Ruu was feeling. After all, she had been rather extraordinarily fond of me too.

Since I couldn’t respond to those feelings in kind, she had spent a long time in a state of emotional instability, bouncing from being depressed to acting oddly worked up. Then, before I realized it, she became focused on polishing her cooking skills, and we were able to once again have nice, carefree conversations. But in the midst of all that, Yun Sudra had shown up, and Reina Ruu sensed that the girl had feelings for me. So just how did that leave her...?

I tried to act honestly with everyone. So depending on how things developed, perhaps it would be wise to make some time to properly talk with the Sudra clan head, Raielfam Sudra.

“Huh? That carriage belongs to the house of Daleim.”

It was now an hour later, and Reina Ruu and I were standing in front of The Sledgehammer.

From today on, I would be alternating work at The Kimyuus’s Tail with the

Ruu clan every other day. After finishing that job, Reina Ruu had come here to meet up and handle the next bit of work...but a tolos wagon belonging to the house of Daleim, complete with an elaborate emblem, was sitting right outside the inn.

“Why is that here? You didn’t have any sort of arrangement with that Polarth noble, did you?”

“I didn’t. In fact, he shouldn’t even know that we would be visiting The Sledgehammer right now. If he had business with us, I figure he would have just come by The Kimyuus’s Tail or the stalls.”

Well, it wasn’t as if this was the first case of Polarth showing up somewhere unexpected. Figuring he might have been consulting with Nail about ingredients or something, I went ahead and stepped into the building.

“Ah, Asuta, I’ve been waiting for you. Lord Polarth is here as well.”

“Right. Did he have some sort of business here?”

“Yes. He brought someone along with him and ordered food. Normally, I don’t serve your cooking before dinnertime, but he insisted...” Despite Nail suppressing the expression on his face, the look in his eyes told me how inconvenient all this was. “They’ve finished eating now, but when he heard you were coming, Asuta, he said he wanted to say hello, and is currently waiting in the dining hall.”

“I see. Okay, I’ll stop by there first.”

I recalled how Nail had once directed me to a meeting with Mikel just like this. Since The Sledgehammer was a renovated residence, the dining hall was on the small side. In that meager dining hall, I found Polarth and an unusual guest waiting, with two soldiers standing guard behind them.

“Ah, Sir Asuta! It’s been around three days now, hasn’t it? I’m glad to see you looking well.”

Having finished their meal, they now seemed to be treating themselves to teatime, judging by the two clay cups of blackish liquid sitting atop the small table.

“You see, I wanted to let my guest here sample your cooking. But I felt awkward about visiting with guards at dinnertime, so instead I pressured the owner here to serve your cooking midday.”

“I see. So you were after the cooking from the inns rather than the stalls?”

“Indeed. And not just any inn, but this one in particular. It certainly was spicy, but it was delicious as well!”

It was the giba sauté arrabbiata on today’s menu. Since I didn’t hold back on the chitt seeds with the dishes for The Sledgehammer, it must have made for quite the stimulating flavor.

“You see, my guest here was actually born in Sym.”

It went without saying that I had already picked up on that. After all, the person in question had the hood of their cloak over their head despite the fact that they were indoors, and I could spy a dark-skinned chin underneath.

However, they looked short for an easterner. It was hard to tell while they were seated, but they were likely even shorter than I was. Plus, that hooded cloak wasn’t made for traveling. It was much too fancy, made from silk or something.

“This personage is Arishuna Ji Mafraluda, who has been staying in the castle town for the past year. And this is Sir Asuta, the chef from the forest’s edge who made that splendid dish we just ate.”

The person gave a small bow, then calmly pulled down their hood. And sure enough, the face that appeared from underneath had the look of someone from Sym.

Black hair and eyes, dark skin, a high-bridged nose, and thin lips. Their long black hair was braided and hanging down in front of their chest on the right. They wore accessories of silver and gemstones not just around their neck and on their arms, but also on their ears and fingers, giving a particularly exotic feel.

They seemed to have a rather slender build too. Their face, neck, and fingers all looked quite slim. So much so that it felt like if you didn’t handle them with the utmost care, something might snap.



Could it be...? I thought to myself.

The question was immediately answered by Polarth. “You see, she is a remarkably skilled star seer. She has her reasons for staying here in this land, but as she is an official guest of Duke Genos, I ask that you treat her as such.”

So she really was a woman. In that case, she wasn’t overly petite at all. Still, this was my first time seeing a woman from the east.

Well, if someone taller kept their hood up, I probably wouldn’t be able to guess at their gender. So I guess I could have had some women mixed in among my customers up till now.

At any rate, if she was a guest of Duke Genos, I figured that meant I should treat her like a noble.

“Pleased to meet you. I am Asuta of the Fa clan, a person of the forest’s edge. I owe a great debt to your companion Polarth there.”

“The people of, the forest’s edge... But I heard that, you are from overseas. So, were you not acknowledged, as a citizen of the west?”

It seemed like she was at about the same level as Sanjura when it came to her handling of the western tongue. Her voice had a real pleasant tone, low and yet clear.

“I haven’t been, no. From what I was told, since I was not born on this continent I can’t be considered a child of the four great gods, so I am not permitted to officially call myself a citizen of the western kingdom. However, Duke Marstein Genos arranged things so that I can still refer to myself as a person of the forest’s edge.”

Yes, the religious officials of Genos had refused to allow someone of unknown background like me to call himself a citizen of Selva. My official status was that of a visitor from overseas staying at the settlement at the forest’s edge.

“So you have cast aside, your homeland, and now live here in Genos. Then you are, the same as me.”

This girl from the east, Arishuna, stared straight at me with eyes as calm as a moonlit lake. Somehow, it felt like her gaze saw all the way down into the

depths of my very soul.

“Your cooking at the stalls is of course amply tasty too, but I wanted Lady Arishuna here to sample something using ingredients from Sym. Oh yes, you are experimenting with a dish using a great deal more herbs, are you not? Will that perhaps be on offer at the upcoming welcome banquet?”

“Ah, you’re referring to my giba curry. No, I couldn’t figure out how to get it to fit in with the overall menu, so I wasn’t planning on making it. And Banarm has even less of a custom of using herbs than Genos, don’t they? I’ve heard they don’t have much interaction with Sym.”

“Yes, that is certainly true. Even so, I am certain that Sir Varkas will use a great deal of herbs, and the guests from Banarm are also sure to be impressed.”

“I’m sure you’re right. But I’m not personally all that skilled at using herbs, so I want to try my hardest to make everyone happy within the scope of my own abilities.”

“I see,” Polarth replied, stroking his round chin and looking satisfied with my explanation. “Even so, I would still like to taste your dish that uses all those herbs eventually. It will be served at this shop, will it not?”

“Yes. It should be ready to be introduced in the near future.”

“Then when that time comes, I shall venture here once more alongside Lady Arishuna! Good owner, I’m sorry, but we will once again impose upon you on our next visit.”

“Of course,” Nail replied with a polite bow of his head. Honestly, this was pretty mild and harmless as far as selfish actions from nobles went.

“Well then, what about your menu for the banquet? Does it seem like the new ingredients will be of use?”

“Well, there are still a number of dishes I haven’t decided on just yet. But as far as the new ingredients go, I was thinking I’d like to devote my efforts toward seeing what could be used in the post town.”

“Of course, we would be grateful to have you help us out on that front, even more than we’d like to see you use them in the banquet. Whether or not you

use any new ingredients, your dishes all still feel so fresh, Sir Asuta,” Polarth proclaimed with a truly joyful grin. “If you run short on ingredients, do not hesitate to reach out to me. You needn’t pay any coins for whatever you use in experimenting, after all.”

“Thank you for that. And there’s actually one more request I’d like to make... Would it be possible to have a single live fish?”

“Huh?! You intend to use a live fish?!”

“Ah, not for the post town, but for the welcome banquet. I was thinking it would be nice if I could use it for the appetizer.”

“How exciting! Sir Varkas uses a barrel or some such to take fish from the tanks, water and all, so it should at least be possible.”

“I see. Then there’s something I’d like to ask Varkas too...”

When I told him my question, Polarth’s eyes shot open even wider.

“My! Is such a dish truly possible?”

“Back in my home country, we would eat them that way too. But would food like that be hard for folks from Genos and Banarm to accept?”

“Not at all! And if anyone has an issue, they can simply leave it uneaten! At the very least, I certainly wouldn’t hesitate to have some!”

In that case, it sounded like it would be worth giving it a try. But first, I would have to hear Varkas’s reply about whether or not that freshwater char-like fish could be eaten raw.

“My, I’m getting more and more excited for the welcome banquet. Ah yes, and the date it will be held on has at last been set. The tenth of the indigo month. I will look forward to your efforts then!”

“The tenth of the indigo month... So since today is the thirtieth of the black month, it’s in exactly ten days?”

“Indeed. Normally, it is said that the middle of the month, the fifteenth, is an auspicious day for traveling. But after having Lady Arishuna here read the stars to see if an even more fortuitous day could be found, the date for their departure was moved instead to the eighth of the indigo month. And if they

leave Banarm when the sun is at its peak on the eighth, they would arrive around the same time of day in Genos on the tenth. The plan is to hold the welcome banquet for them that evening.”

If we were talking ten days from now, then that luckily happened to line up with my day off from the stalls. This world’s stars or whatever really were considerate.

“Ah, my apologies for getting all worked up and leaving you out, Lady Arishuna. That must have been quite tedious for you.”

“No. It is, no trouble.”

“Lady Arishuna is also set to attend the banquet. We can expect the dishes served for the occasion to be as good as what we just had, if not better, isn’t that right, Sir Asuta?” Polarth said, shooting me a big grin. “Oh yes, I heard that you were having the owner here taste some sort of new dish today? If you do not mind, could we also give it a try?”

“Yes, of course. Actually, I was wanting to have you do a taste test on this stuff anyway, Polarth.” Thinking about it, it might have been really lucky that I had run into Polarth here. At any rate, I went ahead and lifted up the small leather bag I had been carrying.

“Nail, could I borrow a wooden plate and a knife?”

After the innkeeper brought me what I requested, I emptied the contents of my bag onto the plate. Not that there was all that much to show them. Just two links of sausages. I had been distributing them to acquaintances, and by now this was all that was left.

“These were made by stuffing finely minced meat into sausages and then smoking them. I wanted your opinion on whether or not they could be sold in the post town or other towns.”

Polarth appeared a little let down, but when he bit into the slice of sausage I offered him, the look in his eyes totally shifted. “This is delicious! Just from being smoked, the wonderful flavor of the giba meat has been greatly concentrated!”

“Yes, it really is good. Every bit as delicious as gyama sausages,” Nail chimed

in, his eyes narrowing with satisfaction.

Arishuna alone remained silent and expressionless. That was no surprise, as according to the customs of the east, it was seen as shameful to let your emotions show.

“What do you think? I’ve heard that easterners often eat gyama sausages, so I would love to hear your opinion.”

Arishuna’s overly calm gaze turned my way. “It is truly delicious. But I am not, familiar with the taste of gyama.”

“Huh? But don’t easterners eat gyama meat back in their home country?”

“I am a citizen, of the east. But I was born, in the west.”

I didn’t really get what she meant. However, Polarth offered some support on that front.

“You see, Lady Arishuna’s family fled the eastern kingdom. They did not change gods to Selva, but they have wandered the western lands ever since, unable to return to their homeland. For a period, you stayed in the western capital of Algrad, did you not?”

“Yes. Twenty years ago, my family was exiled, from Sym. Seventeen years ago, I was born. And then one year ago now, I lost my grandfather, the last of my family...”

“Lady Arishuna’s grandfather passed away here in Genos. With nowhere to go, she became an official guest of Duke Genos thanks to her star reading abilities, and has been staying in the castle town.”

It was surprising to hear that someone could live such a life. I couldn’t help but wonder just what had happened that resulted in their banishment from Sym...only for Arishuna to speak up, as if having read my mind.

“My grandfather, was a famed star seer. But when he read, his sovereign’s downfall, he earned that sovereign’s anger, and was banished from Sym.”

“Sovereigns are what they call the ruler of a domain in Sym. The nation is split into seven domains, with seven sovereigns between them,” Polarth explained, and Arishuna nodded in confirmation.

“Just as the stars decreed, that sovereign fell. But the new sovereign, perhaps took issue, with my grandfather’s abilities. And so, we were unable, to return to Sym.”

“From what I hear, that is why Lady Arishuna’s family moved to the west and avoided settling in any one place. The only option to provide for themselves was to display their star reading talents, but if their reputation grew enough then they would eventually be sought out by nobles wishing to employ them. It must have been a life of endless hardship,” Polarth said with a solemn look on his plump face, and then he nodded his head. “But for better or worse, the lord of Genos only sees star reading as a small bit of entertainment. No matter what proclamation you make, you have nothing to fear from him. You should be able to relax and keep living your life here in Genos.”

Arishuna silently nodded in response. Then, she stared intently at my face again. “Asuta of the Fa clan, do you not, miss your homeland?”

“Hmm? Well, the details on my end are a bit more complicated, but they’re not important. I plan to live out the rest of my life here in this land. It doesn’t seem like there’s any way for me to return home, regardless.”

“A visitor from overseas, would only need to, depart for Sym or Mahyudra, then pass through, the icy northern sea, correct...?”

“Ah, you’re talking about those people of the dragon god, right? I was born in an island nation, surrounded by the ocean, but I don’t share any roots with those folks.”

Arishuna knit her brows. And when she did, I could clearly see her long eyelashes. “Asuta...are you, a starless one?”

“Huh?”

“I cannot see your star, anywhere at all. Starless ones, do not have stars, here in this world,” Arishuna stated, shutting her eyes. “A starless one, would indeed, be unable to, return home. After all, their home, does not exist, in this world.”

Instantly, my heart started pounding.

Could it be...that this girl knew more about my situation than I did?

“Polarth, I am suffering, from a headache. It seems I have grown, a bit tired.”

“My, how awful! Then shall we return to the castle town...? At any rate, I will inquire as to the live fish posthaste. If that goes well, then either tomorrow or the day after, I shall have the fish delivered in a barrel by wagon.”

“Thank you,” I replied, but my heartbeat wasn’t calming down.

As if refusing any further comments from me, Arishuna pulled her hood back up over her head.

“Well then, please excuse us. Much obliged for your service, good innkeeper. And Sir Asuta, I look forward to the banquet ten days from now!”

“Right. I’ll do my best.”

With that, Arishuna and Polarth left.

As I stood there speechless, Reina Ruu tugged on my sleeve.

“Are you all right? Your face looks rather pale.”

“I’m fine... It’s nothing,” I said, trying to shoot her a smile. But my face felt so stiff that it didn’t go very well. So, I slapped both of my cheeks in order to bring myself back to my senses.

“Wh-What are you doing?! Are you really okay, Asuta?!”

“Oww... I’m fine. That was just to get me back in the right state of mind.”

No matter what Arishuna knew, the path ahead of me remained unchanged. Even if a third party were to tell me there really was no way back home...that despair was something I had already overcome to be standing here now.

I already died once. That may be something no one but me can understand, but it’s still a fact.

The vivid heat from the inferno.

The hellish pain of being roasted alive.

And the feeling of my body being crushed under a mountain of rubble.

I couldn’t believe that suffering was all fake. No, I really had died.

Even so, I’ve been able to live on in this second life of mine.

It was hard to say just what sort of prank by the fates had caused all this, but I had managed to live again with hope in my heart. There was no time for lamenting my fate. I just had to keep on charging forward as long as my strength held out, holding that suffering that I could never forget inside me.

“Well then, how about we head back to the stalls? Now that we have a date scheduled, we’ve got to start seriously working on preparing a menu for the welcome banquet,” I declared, taking one more step forward.

Chapter 3: Various Paths

1

It was now the sixth of the indigo month, six days after my chance encounter with the star reader of eastern heritage, Arishuna. Having slipped away from the stalls just after the sun hit its peak, Reina Ruu and I were now strolling through the post town while carrying a small pan.

Inside that pan was giba curry. I'd been making progress on it simultaneously with preparations for the welcome banquet, and as I was finally satisfied with the taste, I decided to once again hear the opinions of the various innkeepers.

However, we didn't head to any of the familiar inns first, but rather a place called Tanto's Blessing. It was the largest inn here in the post town, and ever since last month, Yang, the head chef for the house of Daleim, had been using their kitchen once every few days.

Apparently, the Tanto in the name referred to the largest river in Genos. I assumed somewhere along the way it met up with the Lanto river that ran through the forest's edge.

"Welcome, Sir Asuta. I've been waiting for you."

Yang was a slim older chef. He was polite and rarely ever smiled, but he was also clearly passionate about cooking. The man was someone pushing toward the same goal as I was, and also someone I felt was worthy of respect.

Yang had been entrusting his stall to someone else lately, so it had been a while since I last saw him. As the man offered me his usual polite bow, his eyes narrowed questioningly. "My apologies, but is that person also with you? She does not appear to be a person of the forest's edge..."

"Yeah. She happened to stop by the stall while we were getting ready to leave, so I figured this would be a good opportunity... This is Mikel's daughter, Myme."

Myme gave an energetic bow. “My apologies for the sudden intrusion. Since I wish to become a chef too, I wanted to come along. But I’ll leave if it’s a problem.”

“I see. So you’re Sir Mikel’s... Ah, I do not mind. I feel honored just thinking about Sir Mikel’s daughter eating my cooking.”

Since Yang had also been developing a new dish, the plan for today was to sample one another’s cooking. And since he was a chef who respected Mikel, for a while now I had been wanting to bring him and Myme together.

Now that I think about it, I haven’t seen Roy at all since he tasted Myme’s cooking. Was he so shocked by her skills that he’s been holed up in a kitchen somewhere practicing ever since? I thought to myself.

Then, Yang gestured to the side. “Please, I’ve prepared seating over there, so you may start by tasting my dish.”

“Right, thank you.”

At that, Myme, Reina Ruu, and I took our seats.

I had visited Tanto’s Blessing numerous times in the past, but still, it always impressed me just how big the dining hall was. It had to be at least double that of The Kimyuus’s Tail, which was a mid-sized inn.

However, just like with other inns, there weren’t many customers around during the day. Generally in the post town, folks ate midday meals at the stalls and then dinner at the inns’ dining halls.

“Pardon me...” a girl’s listless voice stated, as she laid out an appropriate number of utensils. When I turned to thank her, I instead gave a surprised, “Huh? You’re that Nicola girl I was introduced to before, aren’t you? So you’re not just helping out with the stall, but here too?”

“Yes...” Nicola replied in an unfriendly tone, and then she swiftly fell back. It didn’t exactly look like she was enjoying the job.

“What a graceful woman. Is she from the castle town too, perhaps?” Myme whispered in my ear.

“Yeah,” I replied. “If I recall correctly, she worked in the Daleim manor in the

castle town. But is she really all that graceful?”

Rude as it might have been to think so, she seemed more aggressive to me than anything. Or maybe it would be more accurate to say she gave an impression of being brazen.

“Hmm, I didn’t mean her attitude, but more the way she moves and how her skin looks. That’s what reminds me of a noble lady about her... But please don’t pay my opinion any heed. My judgment isn’t exactly reliable.”

She said that, but my judgment was historically terrible.

Thinking back on it, Rimee Ruu had said Nicola looked sad. Maybe she was the sort of girl who gave off a different impression depending on who was looking at her.

“My apologies for the wait. These are the dishes that I prepared,” Yang stated as he returned alongside Nicola, each of them holding wooden plates. They laid out a helping of a soup dish and some vegetables boiled in tau oil atop the table for everyone. But since it was just a taste test, each portion was rather meager.

“This soup uses sheema and chan.”

A familiar sweet aroma tickled my nose. It was the smell of that cinnamon-like herb he had used before at his stall.

In the soup were daikon-like sheema cut into rounds, and zucchini-like chan that had been cut in half. The boiled chunks of dark brown meat had to be karon leg. The lumpy shapes had been boiled quite thoroughly and seemed incredibly tender. And judging from the creamy white of the soup, he must have used karon milk in it.

“For the tau-oil-boiled vegetables, I used a mushroom from Jagar and ma gigo.”

This dish seemed to involve boiling kimyuus breast meat in tau oil along with herbs. And those were supplemented by a brown-beech-like mushroom and the taro-like ma gigo.

“Well then, let’s go ahead and give these a taste test.”

Picking up a wooden spoon, I started by slurping down some of the soup dish.

Despite the scent, it wasn't sweet. With the sourness and tingling spice, it reminded me more of tom yum goong. He must have combined a variety of herbs in order to create it. But when mixed with the mellowness from the karon milk, it wasn't hard to get down in the least.

He had gotten plenty of stock from the karon leg meat, making for a dish that definitely stirred up the appetite. However, I couldn't help but question a bit if the sheema and chan were really a proper fit.

Meanwhile, the boiled tau oil dish had a bit of a very familiar Japanese style to it. In addition to the tau oil, he had unsurprisingly also used a number of herbs. It felt a touch bitter and earthy, certainly, but it wasn't bad. And I felt the mushroom and vegetable he had chosen were fitting too.

However...

I felt a sense of doubt in my mind that I never had before in regards to Yang's cooking. What was this sensation, exactly? It wasn't as if it had come out worse than his previous dishes or anything, but something didn't quite feel right, somehow.

"What do you think? Please, tell me your earnest impressions," Yang insisted, calmly staring my way.

Yang was standing here now because he had also been entrusted with the important task of introducing new ingredients to the post town. Actually, to be more accurate, I had just decided to agree to help Polarth and Torst with this in my spare time between selling my giba cooking since I saw no harm in it, but Yang had been solely devoted to the matter.

"Hmm..." I pondered. "Let's see... To be frank, I think some other vegetables than sheema and chan would be more suited to this soup."

"I see. Then what vegetables do you think would be suitable, Sir Asuta?"

"What do I think? Well, if it were me, I'd use aria and tino...and I might want to add in some chamcham and mushrooms too." Chamcham was an ingredient like bamboo shoots that I used when making giba manju and the like. "And I believe dried seaweed and fish stock would go very well with this blend of herbs. I can't say for certain without trying anything out, though."

“Dried seaweed and fish, you say? I cannot say I have any experience with how to use such ingredients.”

“It’s nothing difficult. And as long as the prices don’t end up being ridiculous, I’d imagine those ingredients would bring joy to the folks in the post town too.”

Yang slowly shook his head, and then once more looked my way. “This is the first time you have given me such specific guidance, so that makes me quite glad. And what about the boiled tau oil dish?”

“I think your combination of mushroom and vegetables here is suitable. However...it’s a little difficult to explain, but I think there may still be room for improvement in your combination of herbs.”

“My combination of herbs, you say?”

“Right. Is it the bitterness and earthiness that’s bothering me...? No, that isn’t ruining the taste or anything, but I sort of feel like there’s some unnecessary flavor mixed in there.”

By explaining it out loud like that, I finally grasped what felt off to me. Without realizing it, I had been comparing Yang’s cooking to Varkas’s.

There was no great difference between their cooking methods, or those of Roy and Timalo for that matter. From what I could sense, they were all more or less aiming for the same taste, the same ideal delicious flavors. And maybe now that I had tasted the perfected version of the flavor they sought, thanks to Varkas, I could see the “holes” in Yang’s cooking.

Of course, it was also possible that I was just completely mistaken. However, I couldn’t stop myself from feeling that Varkas could fill in those holes.

“And what do you two think?” Yang asked, his calm gaze turning toward Reina Ruu and Myme.

The second Ruu daughter set down her spoon and stared straight back at him.

“As a person of the forest’s edge, I don’t believe I can properly judge whether or not the dishes you make are delicious. But as Asuta said, something seems lacking in this combination of herbs, or perhaps there’s something there that shouldn’t be.”

“So it really is the combination of herbs, then?”

“Yes. I can’t say anything for certain, as I have a very limited knowledge of herbs myself...but even so, when I tried that Varkas chef’s dish, I couldn’t help but feel there wasn’t anything lacking or unnecessary in it.”

“None in Genos are as skilled at using herbs from Sym as Sir Varkas, so it is only natural to think that way.” Yang nodded, and then he turned toward Myme.

The young chef’s eyebrows drooped and she looked troubled as she said, “In the Turan lands and the post town, you almost never see dishes that combine more than two different herbs. My father taught me that in order to sell cooking here, it was best not to use overly complex seasonings.”

“I see. Perhaps I was too fixated on using herbs from Sym and strayed from the proper path. It seems these dishes are still in need of a bit of improvement.”

“N-No! I’m still nothing but a chef in training, so please don’t take my words so seriously!”

“No, the words you three have offered have truly resonated with me. I choose to give them weight of my own volition,” Yang said, and then he sighed. “When word got out that a chef from the castle town would be manning the kitchen, that drew a great deal of attention to this dining hall at first, but lately the number of customers seems to be decreasing bit by bit. That, if nothing else, serves as evidence of my lacking skill. I need to work even harder from here on out.”

“No, but...” I started to argue, only for Yang to hold up a hand to stop me.

“It is fine. While it pains me to learn of my own inexperience at this age, at the same time, I also feel glad. After all, it means there is still more out there for me to learn,” Yang said with a smile.

It was an incredibly gentle smile, the kind that this earnest chef rarely showed. And even though he was middle aged, there was a vivid desire to improve shining in his narrowed eyes.

“Still, you seem to have used a great deal of herbs in your dish, Sir Asuta. I’m terribly looking forward to tasting it.”

“Right, then I’ll go ahead and borrow the kitchen.”

Since I was just heating up the completed dish, it took no time at all. Once I handled that alongside Reina Ruu, we divided it up onto three plates.

“Three portions? I assume one is for Miss Myme, but who is the other one for?” Yang questioned as he sat down in a chair with a back. At that, I turned my gaze upon the girl standing there behind him.

“Well, since we prepared extra, you can have some too if you’d like, Nicola.”

The girl narrowed her eyes questioningly. But at Yang’s encouragement, she silently took a seat.

“Wow, what a striking scent!” Myme exclaimed with a smile, picking up her spoon. This would be the first time she had tasted my giba curry. And a moment later, she passionately declared, “Delicious! It’s an unusual taste, but it’s so good! Just how many different herbs did you use in this dish, exactly?”

“In the end, I went with eight different varieties. That was enough to finally recreate the taste I had been aiming for.”

By making a blend with the initial five herbs I had picked out, and three more I had brought back from the Turan manor, I was finally able to perfect my giba curry.

The impression it gave was like a cross between Indian curry and Japanese curry. Though I had actually seasoned it to be paired with baked poitan, it would probably go well with rice too.

Based on Yumi’s impressions, I adjusted it to a medium level of spiciness. In terms of appearance, it was a rather dark brown color, and it certainly did smell spicy.

For vegetables, I employed my standard set of aria, chatchi, and nenon, and I also added chan and the one mushroom I had that was like a common mushroom. On the meat end of things, I used giba ribs and added in just a bit of minced meat. Then in addition to the karon milk, milk fat, and roux made with herbs, I added sugar, salt, tau oil, and myamuu for seasonings, and I dissolved plenty of tomato-like tarapa and apple-like ramam fruit in it. With all that together, I was finally able to give my giba curry the rich yet mellow feel I had

been seeking.

“Whoa, that’s spicy!” Nicola suddenly exclaimed in a critical tone. We all looked at her in surprise. With a sour expression on her face, she bowed her head and said, “My apologies...”

“It is indeed spicy. However, there is a harmony to the flavor that makes it difficult to believe eight different herbs were used. How are you able to utilize them so skillfully, Sir Asuta?” Yang asked, wearing a truly bewildered expression.

“Err, that’s probably because I was aiming to recreate a dish that had already existed back in my home country. I can’t imagine I would have been able to figure out how to combine them without a past example in mind.”

“How splendid. I find it difficult to analyze with such powerful spiciness, but I’m certain this delicious flavor comes from the vegetables and meat stock... Sir Asuta, do you intend to sell this dish in the post town?”

“Yes. It doesn’t really use any fresh ingredients aside from the herbs, but I figured it should help to popularize giba meat.”

“I truly am impressed. Despite having such an intense aroma, this dish truly is delicious. I certainly cannot see it failing to become popular.”

“I’m not so sure. I’m honestly still somewhat worried that the folks in the post town may not accept it, since they aren’t accustomed to complex flavors.”

“This dish’s flavor doesn’t feel complex to me. So much so that it is difficult to imagine you used eight herbs in creating it. It’s simply an intense, delicious flavor,” Yang said, once again breaking out in a smile. “This has been an unparalleled impetus to drive me onward too. I feel truly ashamed to have served you such incomplete dishes earlier. And I intend to push myself as far as I can so that I do not keep falling behind you, Sir Asuta.”

After that, we departed from Tanto’s Blessing.

As we walked along the street, Myme turned my way, brimming with energy.

“I’ve seen once again just how skilled you truly are, Asuta! I want to work

even harder from now on too!”

“Thanks. By this point, you’ve gotten pretty used to handling giba meat yourself, haven’t you?”

“Yes! I believe I’ll be able to complete a new dish soon. When that time comes, could I ask you to taste test it again?”

“Yeah, of course. By the way, do you have any plans to open a stall in the post town?”

“Hmm, I really would like to test out my skills that way...but spending time on business would mean less time to train my skills, which is not a change I’m sure I’m willing to make,” Myme said, and then she shot me a smile. “But contracts for renting stalls are for ten days each, right? So if I can put my worries to rest, I think I would like to try running one for just one cycle.”

“You’re really something. When the time comes, go easy on me, okay?” This was undoubtedly just as big of a deal to me as manning the kitchen at the same time as Varkas.

With a huge grin, Myme called out, “Thanks for everything today! I’m heading back home to keep on practicing!” before taking off running down the street.

After a moment, Reina Ruu sighed and said, “Somehow, I also have a feeling like I just can’t sit still. Do you think Sheera Ruu and I should spend all day training like that Myme girl?”

“I wouldn’t say that. When you go out like this, you might find all kinds of things that could inspire you. But you don’t get that chance if you’re always holed up in the kitchen.”

“I see. Personally, I want to stay by your side all day. Ah, I don’t mean in *that* way or anything!” Reina Ruu said, her face going beet red as she waved her hands in a fluster.

“Ah ha ha,” I chuckled, laughing it off.

“But that really is how I feel. It’s not easy to just come out and say, but I’m so jealous of how Toor Deen gets to spend pretty much the whole day working with you.”

“Right. Well, there’s no need to rush or anything. You and Sheera Ruu have improved so much in just half a year, so things will work out fine as long as you keep trying hard,” I said as we headed for the next inn. “You know, I’ve been thinking... It might be good if you and Sheera Ruu started trying to aim for more originality in your cooking.”

“Originality?”

“Yeah. For example, take the giba sauté arrabbiata served at The Sledgehammer. It’s so spicy that it’s tough for you to eat even a single serving of it, right? Generally, I’d say cooking a dish you don’t find tasty feels like putting the cart before the totes.”

“Yes, but...”

“Of course, this is business, so in a way there’s no helping that. But don’t you think the job would be even more enjoyable if you could make the customers happy in the same way you do your family? Personally, I have a great time day in and day out. And I believe that enjoying what you do feeds back into an even greater desire to improve...”

Reina Ruu held her tongue, a serious look on her face.

In order to reward that seriousness, I tried to put my feelings into words as best I could.

“Even when working the stalls, you season the myamuu giba stronger than you personally prefer, right? But that isn’t my stall anymore. It belongs to the Ruu clan. So rather than trying to imitate my cooking, you should try to sell your own dishes. Or at least, that’s what I’ve started thinking lately.”

“Our own cooking...”

“Right. I believe both you and Sheera Ruu should be skilled enough to handle it by this point. That teriyaki stew you had me taste test before was good enough to be served anywhere.”

Reina Ruu was staring at me intently.

As we walked down the street, I gave her a firm nod. “It would be good to consult with Sheera Ruu about it. After all, you’re the only ones who can decide

which path is right for you.”

“I understand... Thank you. I feel incredibly honored to hear you say all that, Asuta,” Reina Ruu replied back, nodding with determination.

2

After that, we next headed for The Great Southern Tree.

Naudis had been holed up in the kitchen, and when he saw us he greeted us with a smile, saying, “Ooh, I’ve been waiting for you.” Lately, it seemed that he had been manning the kitchen a lot more than his wife. “So that’s the finished dish that uses all those herbs? I’ve been excited all morning to see just what in the world it will taste like.”

“I’m glad to hear it. That’s a nice smell... Are you already preparing dinner?”

“Ah, yes. Well, you see, I actually have something I’d like for you to taste test as well. I went ahead and tried to put together a dish of my own as soon as I could with those new ingredients.”

That news definitely got me excited. After all, Naudis and Nail were both rather skilled at cooking, for residents of the post town.

“I really would like to hear your honest opinion of it.”

He set plates of the boiled tau oil dish down in front of me and Reina Ruu. It contained karon leg meat cut into bite-sized chunks, thinly sliced aria, those mushrooms that looked like orange shiitake, and daikon-like sheema that had been cut into wedges.

There was a strong aroma of tau oil and myamuu about the dish. And with a big helping of a dark brown broth similar to the one used in my meat and chatchi stew poured over top, it really did look tasty.

“Well then, let’s dig in.”

With a wooden spoon, I picked up a bit of sheema and karon leg meat and popped them into my mouth.

I could tell right away that he had used tau oil, myamuu, sugar, and fruit wine.

The dish had an appropriately salty-sweet taste. The karon leg meat seemed really tender too. The leg meat got softer the longer you boiled it, and this really was superb.

To compare it to the recipes I knew, it seemed closest to a Japanese-style stew. The aroma from the myamuu was a bit strong, but it wasn't enough to ruin the dish. While it was fairly simple overall, there was some definite depth to the flavor.

"It's very good. You used the dried fish stock in it, didn't you?"

"Yes, indeed. I did as you said, and that alone was enough to add such depth to the flavor." Naudis, who was even shorter than me, puffed out his broad chest. "And since I was even able to get ahold of sheema and mushrooms from Jagar, I'm truly satisfied with how it turned out. I'm proud to say that it's every bit as good as the cooking I once enjoyed in my father's homeland."

"The meat is fantastically tender, but the other flavors have only seeped into it a small amount. Did you parboil it first?"

"Ah, no, I marinated it in fruit wine first, and then boiled it," Naudis said, breaking out in a wide grin. "I recalled how my grandmother taught me that tough meat softens up when you marinate it in sparkling wine from Jagar. And when I tried it out with the sparkling wine you brought me, it certainly did just that. But I didn't want to waste anything so valuable, so I tried using fruit wine instead."

"Ah, I see. And did you perhaps marinate it with aria alongside the fruit wine?"

The answer was yes.

Now that I thought about it, marinating beef in red wine was a method to soften it up back where I came from too. And I could recall hearing that when you did so, it was more effective if you added stuff like onions, vinegar, and yogurt. Oh, and lately The Kimyuus's Tail had taken to soaking leg meat in karon milk in order to soften it up.

"This is good. I'm not especially fond of karon leg meat, but the flavor is definitely tasty," Reina Ruu chimed in with a look of satisfaction. This might

have been the first time she offered such direct praise regarding the skills of someone from the post town. That just went to show how simple yet delicious Naudis's dish really was.

"While it of course doesn't reach the level of your giba dishes, Asuta, I feel confident it will do just fine at a cost of four or five red coins. I intend to add it to the menu right away, starting tonight."

"Well, it certainly is delicious. I could see it becoming just as popular as the giba dishes."

"I think that's going a bit too far. I cannot possibly imagine beating the cubed giba meat stew, for example, now that the taste has reached such heights after the introduction of ingredients from Jagar."

At The Great Southern Tree, I continued to offer the cubed giba meat stew once every ten days, just like before. The most recent time I made it, I used sheema, chamcham, and that shiitake-like mushroom rather than aria. Naudis had been overjoyed at the time, but I no longer knew how to react.

"Okay, now let's try your dish, Asuta," Naudis said with a serious look in his eyes.

It was time for him to taste test my giba curry, which used a bunch of herbs from Sym. Would folks from the south really accept it? Would Naudis think it was worthwhile to even try selling it to them? It was finally time for all that to be decided.

"This...really is shockingly good," Naudis said after taking a bite of the reheated giba curry. "I thought it was good to begin with, but... Hmmm... Still, you said you didn't want to sell the dish itself, but rather the base ingredients to make it, didn't you?"

"Yes. At least for now, that's my intention."

"Can people like my wife or I really make such an alien dish? We don't have any knowledge at all when it comes to herbs from Sym."

"I don't believe that should be an issue. You just need to toss this into a pot with boiling meat and vegetables," I replied, pulling out a small leather bag from my hip and showing him the curry base.

I had blended together eight different spices, sautéed ariya with milk fat, added fuwano flour, and then finally dried it out so it hardened up. At first I was nervous that the milk fat might cause it to go bad, but after discussing the matter with Nail and his customers from Sym, I determined that by using this many herbs, it should last for at least ten days or so.

“Naturally, when I made this, I used the seasonings and ingredients that I thought would work well, but it should still come out really good with different ones too. I’ll explain the basic steps, but from there you should be able to use whatever ingredients you prefer.”

“Hmm...”

“Sheema might not quite fit with it, but chan, ma pula, and mushrooms in a Jagar-style curry sound like they would be pretty good.”

Naudis gave a sigh, then stared back at me with a determined look in his eyes.

“Understood. At any rate, if there’s a chance other inns will start carrying this dish, then I need to at least try it out. I think I’ll have the customers give it a shot tonight at dinner.”

After teaching Naudis the basics of the recipe, we left The Great Southern Tree. Our next destination was The Sledgehammer.

“Asuta, there’s one thing I just don’t understand...”

“Hmm? What is it?”

As we walked down the now more crowded street, Reina Ruu looked deep in thought.

“I truly thought that dish made by the innkeeper was actually good. I’m sure Sheera Ruu or I, maybe even Rimee, could adjust the flavor to be more to our tastes, but I didn’t have any real issue with it as it was.”

“Yeah. Naudis is pretty darn skilled.”

“Honestly, to me, that innkeeper seems more skilled at manning the stove than that Yang chef. Am I mistaken?” Reina Ruu asked, a deeply thoughtful look on her face.

“Hmm...” I murmured, pondering the matter myself. “I’m not sure. Yang is definitely on top in terms of the knowledge and skills he possesses...but that may actually be hindering him.”

“Hindering?”

“Yeah. For example, you’ve grown really skilled at manning the stove, so you ended up wanting to use some tricks other than just grilling and boiling meat, right? But the chefs in the castle town believe using lots of ingredients makes for a better dish, and I think that viewpoint will only keep growing stronger.”

“Right... I understand that.”

“And as someone born in the castle town, I don’t think Yang has a good grasp of what people from the post town like. I figure he’s just stabbing in the dark, trying to find the ideal taste to meet the expectations of the townsfolk while also taking care not to let the flavor get too complex.”

On the other hand you had Naudis, who had been dissatisfied over how he wanted to use ingredients from Jagar, but couldn’t. And now that that had changed, his passion must have erupted all at once.

“Naudis and Nail have actually eaten cooking from Jagar and Sym, and they’re trying to recreate that for their customers. I figure that’s a lot like how I’ve been trying to recreate the taste of dishes from my home country. When you have that to guide you from the start, you know what sort of ingredients you need and how you should flavor it, which leaves less of the trial and error Yang has to go through.”

That was probably why Naudis and Nail were a step ahead of Milano Mas and Yumi’s mother Sill. Actually, it wasn’t just Milano Mas and Sill, as the majority of the post town was left in a state of confusion over how to handle all those newly introduced ingredients. And perhaps it was the same for the chefs of the castle town, who had to master all those different ingredients, whether they were introduced decades or even a full hundred years ago.

“In other words...Mikel of Turan had his daughter polish her skills with a limited set of ingredients so as not to cause her to experience that confusion, right?”

“Yes, that’s exactly it. And I’m sure Mikel built his skills into a strong foundation first before trying to develop his ideal dishes, rather than getting caught up in the values of the castle town.”

“So what about that Varkas chef?” Reina Ruu asked, the look in her eyes growing all the more serious.

As I thought it over, I replied, “I don’t know any more than you do about him, so this is all speculation, but...I think he’s someone who just adapted especially well to living in the middle of all that chaos. He fully embraced the idea that using all sorts of ingredients makes a meal better, and raised his ideal recipes to perfection that way.”

“He raised them to perfection?”

“Yup. Putting things in terms of tolos, even if we can handle several of them at a time, we still need to manipulate their reins carefully and watch their footings, right? But Varkas feels like he’s standing in the middle of a herd of tolos trying to run off in every direction, grasping all their reins and holding them in place by force.”

Reina Ruu couldn’t help but giggle at my crappy analogy.

“I feel like I sort of get it. Each of those tolos are things like sweetness and spiciness, right?”

“Yeah. Even though one wrong step could ruin everything, Varkas’s cooking maintains an exquisite balance.”

“Right. I get that too,” Reina Ruu replied, giving a small sigh as she fiddled with the tips of her long black hair. “To be honest...I find that Varkas chef a little frightening.”

“Frightening? Why’s that?”

“He’s doing something as a chef that I never could. If it turns out that that’s the right way of doing things for a chef...all of my hard work would be for naught.”

Her feelings about him and mine might not have been that far apart, honestly. However, I had no intention of giving up on my own skills because of it.

“Don’t worry. Cooking isn’t really about striving to see who’s superior. After all, everyone’s tastes are different, right? So we just need to keep trying in our own way to make dishes that we find tasty.”

“Yeah... I don’t think you’re wrong about that,” Reina Ruu said, sounding as if she was trying to persuade herself.

It seemed Varkas had left an even deeper impression on this skilled chef from the forest’s edge than I had expected.

At The Sledgehammer, the curry once again earned open praise.

That was no surprise, considering how much Nail liked it when it was still a work in progress. At any rate, when he tasted the completed giba curry, his whole body started trembling, perhaps because he was restraining himself from breaking out in an expression.

“It’s terribly delicious. I’m sure my customers from the east will be exceptionally pleased. So much so that I worry my other dishes may even stop selling.”

“I think this dish should be sold in small portions, so maybe you could make it part of a set.”

Though I didn’t have much experience with them, I remembered that Indian restaurants often bundled curry and naan with kebabs or tandoori chicken and the like. And I was sure that not only my giba sauté arrabbiata but also the spicy meat dishes Nail made would pair well with the giba curry.

Oh, and about my giba sauté arrabbiata, I had revised the recipe to employ fish stock, dried seafood, and herbs from Sym.

“I’m currently experimenting with karon and kimyuus herb-grilled dishes using the herbs from Sym that you brought me. Though they can’t compare to your cooking, I’m sure they’ll make my customers happy.”

“It was Duke Genos and Polarth who introduced those ingredients to the post town, though. Not me.”

“But you were the one who made it all possible. I have offered my thanks to

Selva and Sym over and over for the good fortune of having met you.”

After Nail saw us off, we next headed for The Kimyuus’s Tail. Since we had planned in advance to run around to all the inns like this, I had prepared dinner in the morning.

Milano Mas was also surprised, saying, “The flavor has improved a whole lot. It’s gotten real spicy, but how should I put it...? It doesn’t feel like it’s running wild in my mouth. And the meat and vegetables are incredibly tasty too.”

“I’m glad to hear you like it,” I said, feeling relieved. The Kimyuus’s Tail was the one place I had been worried about. “So, what do you say to trying to cook this yourselves, including the meat and vegetables? I don’t think it’ll be difficult to prepare.”

I actually hadn’t sold The Kimyuus’s Tail any fresh meat yet. That was because Milano Mas was concerned that if he increased the number of giba dishes on offer, the kimyuus and karon dishes would stop selling. And he figured that they wouldn’t be able to make anything all that good with giba meat regardless.

Even after I succeeded at persuading The Westerly Wind, Milano Mas still hadn’t changed his mind. I figured he was probably concerned that if they served crude dishes, it would hurt the reputation of giba meat.

“But you and Telia Mas can make such tasty dishes with kimyuus and karon now, can’t you? To be honest, I don’t think you two are that far behind the folks at The Westerly Wind in terms of skill. So there really isn’t anything to worry about.”

Even here in the post town, manning the stove was generally seen as women’s work. Nail and Naudis had taken charge of their kitchens in spite of that, out of a desire to offer their customers from Sym and Jagar delicious meals.

Since Milano Mas’s wife had passed away so young, she didn’t have a chance to teach her daughter, Telia Mas, how to cook. That was how The Kimyuus’s Tail ended up with the unfortunate reputation of not having particularly good food.

“If you think I’m trying to trick you, then please just try cooking the giba curry at least once. If you’re not satisfied with the taste, then I’ll give you some more

lessons, so...”

“You don’t have enough free time on your hands for more lessons. And there’s no reason for you to help us so much to begin with.”

I felt another sigh coming on at how distant he was still acting. But still, I figured that was all part of Milano Mas’s charm.

“If it helps to show people how delicious giba meat is, then it doesn’t matter to me how much extra work it takes. And it may not be all that important to you...but The Kimyuus’s Tail is the inn I’ve had a relationship with the longest, so it means a lot to me. I can’t help wanting it to earn just as good of a reputation as the other inns, if not better.”

Unsurprisingly, Milano Mas’s expression remained just as sour as always. However, I still somehow got him to accept my proposal. What clinched it was definitely Telia Mas giving her backing, saying that they should offer the dish.

After giving them the same instructions as the other inns and some curry base to try out, we left The Kimyuus’s Tail.

Finally, we headed for the last inn, The Westerly Wind. There, we demonstrated how to make giba curry on the spot.

I went with a simple selection of three vegetables—aria, chatchi, and nenon—and a bit of excess skim milk. Just adding the curry base to that was enough to create a perfectly satisfactory flavor.

Then using some dried fish stock, I made a bit of mock curry soup. If they didn’t want to buy comparatively expensive dried fish, they could also get a good enough stock by slowly boiling giba, karon, or kimyuus meat.

It earned a very strong reception. Or at the very least, Yumi and Sill sang its praises.

“Yes, I could see this taste becoming a bit addictive. I’m sure some folks won’t like it, but I would love to serve this,” Sill said, glancing over at her husband. But as usual, Sams wore a sullen look.

“The inside of my mouth hurts. Will this stuff really sell?”

“It definitely will! If nothing else, it’s at least tastier than the karon soup we served before we started buying giba meat, right?” Yumi commented, in quite the good mood.

“Tch,” Sams clicked his tongue.

“If you don’t mind, please go ahead and offer this portion to your customers. If they don’t like it, then I’ll go ahead and back down,” I chimed in, even though I felt bad applying such pressure. But if you didn’t act with confidence when dealing with this innkeeper, you would end up pointlessly ruining his mood.

“It’s decided, then. You’re one heck of a businessman, Asuta,” Sill declared cheerfully, sipping down the rest of her curry soup.

Yumi similarly focused on cleaning her plate, and then she suddenly turned my way. “By the way, you’re going to be cooking in the castle town soon, aren’t you? Are you going to serve this giba curry dish there?”

“No, I decided not to since apparently Banarm doesn’t have much of a custom of using herbs. And besides, I developed this dish with everyone from the post town and the forest’s edge in mind.”

“Hmm? You mean for nobles you need a dish that’s much grander?” Yumi replied, sounding rather unamused.

“No,” I answered. “It’s true that I want to tailor the dishes to the tastes of nobles, but it’s not like I set out to make something luxurious. Maybe what I came up with just happened to turn out that way?”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“The prices of ingredients here in Genos don’t line up with things back in my home country. For example, smoked fish is incredibly expensive here, but back where I come from, anyone could buy them with ease. The same was true for salt, sugar, vinegar, and tau oil.”

“Just how well off was your home country?”

“I guess the average person is pretty well off back there, yeah. But more than that, things just had different values. For example...to buy these white clothes I’m wearing, you would probably need a white coin.”

“Huh?! For those rags?! Ah, sorry...”

“Well, these were brand new half a year ago.”

Still, if you equated a red coin to 200 yen and a white one to 2000 yen, that was about how things worked out. As an aside, I got a good deal on this white T-shirt, since it was on sale for 1980 yen.

“From my point of view, it was a real shock to find that a single bottle of tau oil cost one white coin. I mean, aria and poitan go for around the same price as similar vegetables in my home country... At any rate, the costs of things are out of sync. Maybe the nobles would be happier with something that uses expensive ingredients, but I don’t personally feel like I’m making anything extravagant in the process.”

“Hmm, I see... Now that you mention it, this curry dish uses plenty of herbs from Sym, so it’d be normal to consider it pretty luxurious.”

“Yeah. But I want the folks from the post town and the forest’s edge to eat it, not the nobles. It was a dish the people close to me ate back in my home country,” I replied, shooting Yumi a smile. “I’m a commoner to begin with, so the cooking I make is all aimed toward ordinary folks. But it seems that if I do use the expensive stuff, I can satisfy the nobles of Genos with my cooking, so we somehow came to an agreement, and I want to give the job my all.”

“Right. No matter what sort of dish you’re making, you always seem to put just as much effort into it.”

“I guess that’s true. I just try to think about what sort of dish will make the person eating it happy.”

There were dishes out there that were suitable for nobles. And the same was true for the folks from the post town and the people of the forest’s edge too. I was just trying to pick the dishes that would make them happiest out of my repertoire.

“I’m sorry for going off on you there... I just was a bit annoyed at the thought that you would be working harder than usual for nobles.”

“Nothing’s changed on my end. No matter who I’m dealing with, I always give it everything I’ve got.”

“Yeah, I’m relieved... But you’d better not end up a personal chef to some noble, okay?”

“Ah ha ha, I’ve got no interest in anything like that.”

No matter how many coins I might be offered, I definitely wouldn’t choose that path. After all, my home was at the forest’s edge now.

“That’s all, sorry for taking so much of your time. I’ll stop by again tomorrow, so please tell me what people said about the giba curry then.”

With that, my trip around the inns came to an end, and it was finally time to head back to everyone else.

3

We arrived back at the Ruu settlement right on schedule, at half past the lower second hour, where we discovered some sort of commotion going on. Off to one edge of the plaza there was a crowd, made up of women and children since the men were out right now.

As I wondered just what exactly was going on, I hopped down from the driver’s seat and approached while holding the reins...and when they sensed my presence the crowd parted, bringing a strange sight into view. It was Mida, lying down and holding a huge giba atop his stomach.

“Mida! What are you doing?!” Tsvai shouted, leaping out of the Ruu wagon and dashing over. But Mida didn’t respond, as he just remained on the ground breathing heavily. “What’s going on here?! Somebody explain this!”

Three hunters stepped forward in front of the raging Tsvai. Though they were hunters, they were all boys who were on the smaller side: Ludo and Shin Ruu, and the clan’s guest, Jeeda.

“It’s just what it looks like. After carrying the giba this far, he ran out of strength,” Ludo Ruu replied, joining his hands behind his head.

Tsvai shot him a glare. “It looks to me like the giba is crushing him! Why isn’t anyone moving it?!”

“Because that’s Mida’s job. The three of us carried two huge giba ourselves,

you know.”

“What does that matter?! And why is Mida carrying a giba to begin with?!”

“Mida is a hunter, starting today,” Shin Ruu calmly interjected. “But since he grew too tired to run even though the sun was still so high in the sky, he was tasked with carrying back the giba everyone had hunted down. If we help him out now, it’ll mean he was even more useless. Are you really okay with that?”

“But...!” Tsuvai wailed.

Then, Mida and the huge giba started to sway.

“Don’t worry... I’ll do my work...”

Now that he had sat up, I could see that Mida’s whole body was coated in sweat and dirt. And the giba he held had to be around eighty kilos, which made it bigger than I could lift on my own.

“Your strength ran out on you because you ran around recklessly. You’ve got to think ahead at least a little,” Ludo Ruu chastised.

“Right...”

“Can you really carry it? We’ve got to skin it and remove the guts before my old man and everyone else make it back, or there won’t be any point to us having come home first.”

“I’ll carry it... I’m gonna try real hard on my work too...”

Mida rose to his feet, his body trembling as he went.

As she watched him, Tsuvai snorted, “Hmph! If you’re okay now, then hurry up and carry it already. A big lump like you lying on the ground just gets in the way.”

“Yeah... Thanks, Tsuvai...”

“I didn’t do anything you should be thanking me for!” Tsuvai retorted while turning away in a huff, but she didn’t move from the spot. And Yamiru Lea was also quietly staring at Mida from behind me in the wagon.

The former members of the main Suun house were all striving their hardest to live properly as people of the forest’s edge in their new clans. They had to,

considering Tsuvai and Yamiru Lea never manned the stove at all back when they belonged to the Suun clan.

By practicing, they were able to reach the point where they could help me out with the stalls, and Mida's days of tough training had finally brought him to the point where he could hunt giba too. There must have been extraordinary emotions swirling about in Tsuvai and Yamiru Lea's hearts. Even I couldn't help but feel greatly moved by the sight of Mida mustering up all his strength to carry that giba.

As everyone watched over him, Mida staggered to the rear of the main house with the huge beast. And after breathing sighs of relief, we followed slowly after.

"Hey Asuta, Reina. Looks like you guys didn't have any trouble today? Good work," Ludo Ruu called out with a relaxed grin as he walked over to us.

As I stared at Mida's rounded back, I nodded, "Yeah, we didn't have any issues on our end. More importantly, Mida's finally able to enter the forest, huh?"

"Yep, but he just ran around recklessly and wasn't any help at all. He can't hide his presence in the least, so he almost caused some giba to slip away."

Despite his harsh critique, Ludo Ruu was acting as always. Shin Ruu and Jeeda were the same. They didn't seem to want to blame Mida for what had happened. Still, they likely weren't allowed to lend him any aid as more experienced hunters.

Shin Ruu turned to his cousin. "Well, it seems he didn't do anything hunter-like in the past aside from dragging back the giba caught in traps around the Suun settlement. So maybe now that he's finally able to head out into the forest, his excitement got the better of him."

"Considering how ridiculously strong he is, Mida should eventually become a great hunter as long as he applies himself. There's no need to rush."

"That's true. In fact, since he placed in the Ruu settlement's contest of strength, it'd look bad if he didn't become a fine hunter."

While Ludo and Shin Ruu had that back and forth, Jeeda remained silent

beside them. I went ahead and called out to him while pulling on Gilulu's reins.

"It's been a while since I last saw you, Jeeda. Is your shoulder injury all better?"

"Yeah."

"You seem to be doing a great job hunting giba. I'm sure Bartha must be very proud."

"You think?"

Like always, this boy with the unkempt red hair and yellow eyes wasn't very talkative, and he acted like he was in a bad mood. He really did remind me of Darmu Ruu somehow. It might have been how neither of them spoke very much, but had a lot of intense emotions buried inside.

"Hey there, good work everyone. Did you make a killing again today?" Bartha called out, having been waiting for us behind the house. I noticed that she and her son didn't greet each other, but maybe they already did earlier. "You'll be working on the menu for the castle town again, right? Would I be getting in the way?"

"No, of course not."

There were four days left until the welcome banquet. We were finally approaching the final stages of our training for the occasion.

"Well then, we'll see you around. We've got to teach Mida how to skin a pelt and remove the innards, after all," Ludo Ruu told me, and with that, he and the others left for the dissection room.

As for us, we set about handling our own work.

"Now that I think about it, the leading clan heads of the forest's edge were invited to the welcome banquet too. Will Donda Ruu be attending as their representative?" I asked as we prepared to start working in the kitchen.

Reina Ruu was closest to me, and she answered, "No. He mentioned it either yesterday or the day before, but it looks like Dari Sauti will be the one attending. They thought about going with Gulaf Zaza because his clan happens to be in a break period, but Dari Sauti nominated himself instead. He said he

could make time for it after work since the gathering's in the early evening."

"Oh, really?"

"Yes. My father has been eating the leftovers from our test dishes each day, so he's already enjoyed them enough. Not to say that he liked all of them, of course."

"I see. Well, that's only natural, seeing as this food is meant for nobles. Though I hope that Dari Sauti won't feel let down."

Still, Donda Ruu had given his approval to our tireless experimentation here at the Ruu settlement. In a way, this was an act of diplomacy to retain proper relations between the nobles and the people of the forest's edge. Though I hadn't asked the leading clan heads their true intentions or anything, I figured that was what they were thinking when they so quickly approved of me taking the job.

I recalled Donda Ruu grumbling, "What a ridiculous ruler..." while wearing a brazen grin after the previous banquet. It was a daring smile that seemed to say he had found a worthy rival or something.

The nobles of Genos aren't enemies to be defeated. For the people of the forest's edge to keep living lives true to themselves, they have to somehow manage to form a relationship of mutual trust with the nobility.

As I was thinking that, an energetic voice proclaimed, "Sorry for the wait!" as a small girl dashed into the kitchen. It was Rimee Ruu, who had been off duty from her work in the post town today. "Thanks, Lala. I've finally got my work done here, so swap out with me."

"Yeah, yeah," Lala Ruu replied with a shrug of her shoulders, exiting the kitchen. It would cause some issues with their housework if I borrowed the aid of all the women from the main Ruu house, so Lala Ruu would be staying behind for this banquet. We worked things out so that after work in the post town wrapped up, she traded places in the kitchen with Rimee Ruu.

"Huh? You're here too Vina? Do you need something?" I heard Lala Ruu ask from behind. When I turned around, I found Vina Ruu standing in the kitchen door, even though she was also set to stay home.

“Yeah... I have a bit of business with you, Asuta. But are you too busy right now...?”

“Me? No, I don’t mind.”

Having lined up the necessary ingredients atop my work station, I casually walked over to her.

Something seemed different about Vina Ruu, though. She was hanging her head a bit as her fingers fiddled with the tips of her chestnut-colored hair. And she was making a face like she was really anxious about something.

“What’s up? Is something wrong?”

“No... I wouldn’t particularly say that...” Vina Ruu replied, shrinking back as she did so.

Following after her, I exited the kitchen.

“Umm, you served the giba curry to the innkeepers today, didn’t you...? How was it received?”

“The giba curry? Well, it got pretty positive reviews for being such an unfamiliar dish, I’d say. Though for everyone aside from Nail, I figure they half saw it as a curiosity.”

“I see... But you consider it a completed dish, don’t you?”

“That’s right. I can’t imagine the base of the flavor changing without me encountering any new herbs. At this point, I figure the key point is how tasty it can be made using all the components other than the herbs.”

“The innkeepers will be handling everything but the herbs themselves, right?”

“Yup. Though of course I gave them advice on how to make it.”

I really couldn’t tell where this conversation was heading at all. And considering how Vina Ruu was fidgeting, her body shifting around as her eyes were cast down, she looked excessively sensual at the moment.

“Umm, this may be a bit of a strange question...but how do my skills measure up to the innkeepers?”

“Your skills? You mean as a chef? Hmm, let’s see... Well if I’m not mincing

words, I'd say I figure you're just about equal." To be more precise, I'd say she was better than Telia Mas and Sill, but didn't quite measure up to Nail and Naudis.

Even though Vina Ruu had been seen as below average at the Ruu settlement, she really had improved a lot over the past several months. If she kept up the rotation of participating in our study sessions once every three days, she was sure to eventually catch up to Nail and Naudis in terms of knowledge and techniques.

"I see... So I've come that far, then..."

"You have. I'm already asking Reina and Rimee Ruu to help out with the job in the castle town, so I can't also ask for you or Lala Ruu, but it's not as if that came down to an issue of skill level."

Now, I had asked Toor Deen, Ama Min Rutim, and Morun Rutim to help out, and it was true that they might have been more skilled than Vina Ruu. Still, Toor Deen was the only one who really stood out in terms of talent, and I wouldn't have had any issue swapping the eldest Ruu daughter in for either of the pair from the Rutim clan.

"I don't care either way about the castle town, but...well...in that case, could I make delicious giba curry too?"

"Huh? Well, I'd say you should be able to make it just as good as the innkeepers. It's the sort of dish where slipups don't really stand out, so I can't imagine there being a big, noticeable difference, at any rate."

"Right..." Vina Ruu murmured, hanging her head even farther. The look on her face had grown more and more anxious, and her fingers had moved from fiddling with the tips of her hair to her necklace. The light pink accessory had come from Sym and was meant to ward off disasters.

It was then that things finally clicked for me. "Still, if you put in a bit of extra effort, you can definitely improve the flavor. Once the job in the castle town is over, how about I offer you some personal lessons?"

"Don't worry about that... That wasn't why I wanted to talk to you..."

"Oh, really? Well there's still time, so even without me interfering, you should

still naturally improve.”

“What do you mean ‘there’s still time’?”

That had been a definite slip of the tongue on my part. And I could spy an ever-so-faint blush on Vina Ruu’s face.

“Oh, nothing. Anyway, I’m sure you can make curry or anything else you want that tastes good.”

Vina Ruu drew in closer, a reproachful look in her eyes. But then, suddenly, a cheerful voice called out from beside us.

“Asuta, Vina, what are you doing? Are you done with work already?”

Vina Ruu cowered and let out a listless, “Aah!” Ludo Ruu was peeking his head out from the dissection room located beside the kitchen.

“L-Ludo... You were listening...?”

“Huh? I might have picked up some talk about giba curry. Was it something you didn’t want me to overhear?”

“N-No, it wasn’t anything like that...”

“Giba curry sure is tasty! I’ve really started to love it after all that taste testing! And I’m sure that Shumiral guy from Sym will be real happy when he makes it back to Genos too.”

Vina Ruu’s face went even redder, and she shot me and Ludo Ruu a glare before swiftly walking away. As we watched her leave, the youngest Ruu son snickered.

“Jeez, Vina sure can be childish, even if she is twenty. Guess that’s why she still hasn’t managed to get married.”

“That’s not true at all. I think it’s really good of her, how she’s trying to face her feelings head-on.” An obstinate blockhead like me might not have been the right person to say it, but that was how I honestly felt.

It had already been three months since Shumiral left Genos, so we were around the midpoint of his promise to return in half a year. I couldn’t help but wonder what that sincere, kind foreign friend of mine was thinking about right

now as he traveled around.

Holding that thought close, I returned to the kitchen where everyone was waiting.

4

“Thank you for feeding me dinner again. I truly appreciate it.”

That night, Lem Dom visited the Fa house after the sun had completely set. She was holding a wooden tray she had crafted herself, atop which sat a lit candlestick and tonight’s dinner.

“Hey Lem Dom, I know it isn’t all that far, but isn’t it dangerous to be out walking at night? Can’t you come while it’s still at least a little brighter out?”

“My apologies. When I’m training, I tend to forget the passage of time. I’ll do my best to avoid interfering with your dinner plans as much as possible, though.”

“Ah, you don’t need to worry about us...”

“And you needn’t worry about me either. If I run into a giba or a mundt, I’ll just hide up a tree,” Lem Dom replied with a daring grin before elegantly turning around. “I’ll see you again tomorrow. And please give my regards to Ai Fa.”

With a sigh, I closed the door. Then after patting Gilulu on his tilted, questioning head, I returned to the main hall where dinner was waiting.

“So she left? Good work,” Ai Fa calmly called out. As I sat down in my own spot, I looked over at her.

“It’s been seven days now since Lem Dom left her clan. Just how long does she plan on living like this?”

“I couldn’t say. Only Lem Dom herself knows what she’s thinking. It isn’t something outsiders should involve themselves in.”

“I get that, but aren’t you still worried about her? I mean, Deek Dom’s every bit as stubborn as she is. If neither of them bends, Lem Dom will end up never

returning to her clan.”

“That is what it means to aim to become a hunter despite being a woman... In my case, my mother was opposed until the bitter end,” Ai Fa said, a somber look in her eyes. “Still, I might have been more fortunate than Lem Dom, considering how my father raised me to be a hunter...but at any rate, you cannot become a female hunter at the forest’s edge without overcoming such suffering.”

“It doesn’t seem like Bartha had to face any of that. But, well, I can’t say I know much about Masara.”

“Masara has its own customs, as does the forest’s edge. There is no point in comparing them... Let’s hurry up and eat before the food gets cold, Asuta.”

“Ah, yeah. Right.”

With that said, though, my dinner was almost finished already. Ai Fa’s plate was nearly empty too.

“What did you think of tonight’s dinner? I’m sorry for having you do nothing but taste tests for a while now, so I worked extra hard to make it good,” I asked, getting myself back on track, only to earn a glare for some reason.

“Do I look like I’m dissatisfied to you?”

“No, you look very much the opposite.”

“Then stop asking that every single night.”

Since tonight’s dinner was hamburger steak for the first time in a while, that really might have been a thoughtless question.

“Well then, what about the taste test from last night? Since it was a meal meant for nobles, I doubt you were quite so happy with it.”

“Not so. I’ve never complained, even when you offered that kind of food for dinner, have I?”

“But it’s not like you loved all of them, right?”

In response to my question, Ai Fa gave a cute tilt of her head.

“Well...if nothing else, I don’t feel much need for that appetizer and the sweet

dish.”

“Right, guess that’s no surprise when it comes to the raw fish and the dessert. Though Rimee Ruu seems really fond of sweets.”

“And then there’s that poitan dish. At first I was surprised you were making something so bizarre...but after a few days, I can’t say I especially dislike it.”

She was referring to a dish I had been developing for a while now. I had been trying out a whole new way of eating poitan, which involved blending it with fuwano and adding kimyuus egg. Since it seemed appropriate, I was planning on unveiling my new recipe in the castle town.

“I have no issues calling the meat and soup dishes delicious. As for the vegetable dish...well, I cannot see any strong reason to hate it, I suppose,” Ai Fa added, thinking as hard as she could on the matter. “As a whole, I would say it was enjoyable. Still, the meat dish seems even more complicated than the giba cutlets... And how should I put this? I can’t imagine wanting to eat it every day. Perhaps it would be fitting for banquets here at the forest’s edge, though.”

“I see. I didn’t have any plans for making those dishes here at the forest’s edge either. And if I were to make them, I’d want to revise them to better fit the tastes of the people who’d be eating them.”

“Then I see even less of an issue,” Ai Fa replied, placing her now empty plate down atop the rug. With that in mind, I figured I had a decent enough chance of satisfying Dari Sauti with the food at the welcome banquet.

But at any rate, that night’s dinner came to a smooth close. As I cleaned up the utensils I had used, I called out, “Oh, right. Now that I think about it, what’s your opinion about that one thing? We somehow managed to get Donda Ruu’s permission.”

“You mean the idea of heading outside of Genos?” Ai Fa asked back as she similarly picked up her utensils, her eyes shining like a cat’s in the dark. “I’m surprised Donda Ruu approved. If you head to that Dabagg place, you won’t return for two days, correct?”

“Yeah. Donda Ruu was real reluctant at first, but supposedly Reina and Rimee Ruu managed to convince him after a few days. But he said he wants to have

the same number of hunters as chefs guarding us, minimum.”

I had expressed a desire to go observe a karon ranch in Dabagg to Ai Fa and Donda Ruu. After she set her utensils down beside the stove, my clan head stood there in front of me with a frown.

“So how many chefs wish to visit that town? I believe there was Reina, Rimee, and Sheera Ruu.”

“Yeah, and if you approve, I was thinking of discussing the matter with the Deen clan too. So that would make for five of us.”

“Can you truly get five hunters to accompany you when it isn’t even a break period?”

“Well, Jeeda and Bartha are apparently locked in. They aren’t from the forest’s edge to begin with, so there’s no need to worry about them neglecting their giba hunting duty or anything. And having those two from outside Genos to guide us on the journey makes it feel a lot safer,” I replied, recalling what I had heard during the day at the Ruu house. “And supposedly Dan Rutim and one more member from his clan will join in. Remember, Dan Rutim and that novice hunter who was injured along with him will already be guarding us for the welcome banquet, right? Since they’re both still recovering, that makes them a good fit for leaving the forest’s edge.”

“In other words, you’re saying they’re still injured. Can you really leave guard duty to them with that in mind?”

“Even if they are injured, I can’t imagine bandits or whatever being any match for hunters of the forest’s edge. And besides, supposedly Donda Ruu selected them personally.”

Ai Fa crossed her arms and gave a displeased pout.

“Even so, that’s still only four. That’s one short of matching the number of chefs.”

“Right. Donda Ruu kind of assumed you’d be coming along...but can you really not take two days off from hunting after all?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. As if I could ever let you leave town on your own,” Ai Fa

shot back, scratching her head.

“But you don’t like taking time off hunting because of us chefs, right?”

“I have been hunting down more giba than is necessary for a hunter. Ever since the end of the break period, I have been taking down roughly one a day, and yesterday I even caught two.”

“Yeah, it really has been an incredible haul. I mean, since there are only two of us in the Fa house, hunting down just one every five days would be plenty,” I agreed, looking back at Ai Fa while feeling both anticipation and unease.

With one more big frown, Ai Fa asked me, “Is heading to that Dabagg place really so important to you? That is the one point I just can’t understand.”

“I think it’s essential. Maybe I won’t be using karon meat all that often in the future, but milk, milk fat, and dried milk are all important ingredients, so it should be a good experience for all of us.”

And if everything worked out, it was possible even Mikel and Myme could join us. I figured just having Mikel along would make the journey that much more meaningful.

Besides, there was also an element of research to it, seeing what sort of cuisine there was in the town closest to Genos, what they thought of the people of the forest’s edge, and whether or not giba jerky and sausages could be sold there. The goal wasn’t just to satisfy a passing curiosity on my part. If it was, Donda Ruu never would have allowed his beloved daughters to leave Genos.

“In that case...” Ai Fa started, her voice clearly sounding displeased. “You have my approval too.”

“You mean it? And you’ll accompany us too?”

“Of course.”

“Hooray! Thanks, Ai Fa! I really owe you one!”

At that, Ai Fa’s pout vanished, and she shot me a confused look.

“Does it really make you that happy?”

“Of course it does. To be honest, I half thought you would refuse! Besides, I

never imagined we would be going on an overnight trip together. Even if it's ultimately for work, it still makes me really happy."

Ai Fa's brow deeply furrowed. A moment later, she abruptly grabbed my head with both hands. "That feels unfair somehow, Asuta."

"U-Unfair? What do you mean?"

Ai Fa's face pressed in close, and then she rustled my hair. "First you look all worried like a child, then suddenly you're making such an adorable face..."

"A-Adorable? Me?"

"It's so unfair that it annoys me."

"Owww! Not so rough, boss!"

"Quiet, you," Ai Fa grumbled as she released my head.

Just as I was feeling relieved, those slender arms containing the strength of a hunter wrapped firmly around my torso.

"Gyah!" I shouted, but she didn't let go. I felt a tingle of premonition run up my spine, that she might seriously break my ribs.

"I'm glad you're not worrying..."

"Aggggh... Huh? Did you say something just now?"

"You had a terribly pained look in your eyes on the day that Sym girl who was accompanying Polarth made those strange comments to you. But that shadow no longer seems to be hanging over you."

That Sym girl... The star reader Arishuna.

My body now half supported by Ai Fa's arms, which had mercifully loosened up, I told her, "I'm fine. She just reconfirmed something I already knew, so it's nothing to worry about. And now that I think about it, the star reader from the Silver Vase said he couldn't see my star either."

"Sym fortune telling is of no concern to me. You exist here before me now, and that's all that matters." Ai Fa's sweet-smelling hair brushed up against my cheek. "I believe that you feel the same."

"Yeah, and I won't betray your trust."

Had I really been letting my feelings show that much? If so, I regretted making Ai Fa worry.

“Being tossed around by your selfish whims is nothing compared to that. Still, it’s quite unfair of you to make me feel that way, Asuta...”

“I get it, I get it. But could you please not injure my ribs any more than you already have?”

With a “Hmph,” Ai Fa tightened her grip around my body.

Though my bones were creaking just a bit, even that pain brought me joy.



Chapter 4: The Welcome Banquet

1

It was now the tenth of the indigo month, the day of the welcome banquet.

Since we had taken the day off from working at the stalls, we were able to leave the forest's edge and arrive at the gates to the castle town just when the sun hit its peak. That made for a pretty early departure, but it allowed us a lot of wiggle room in the schedule. Delays wouldn't be acceptable when it came to a dinner party for nobles.

At any rate, we had to cook for twenty-three people today. That was ten more than the last time around. And since we were talking about making six different dishes for each of those guests, it was quite the undertaking. To compensate, we increased the number of chefs on our team from the four we had for the previous banquet to seven. But more chefs meant even more meals to prepare too. When adding in the four who would be joining us as guards, that came up to thirty-four in total. And then on top of all that were the portions for Varkas's group to sample, so we had to make even more still.

"We've been awaiting you. Please, step into this carriage."

Under the guidance of a guard who had been waiting at the gates, we got into a totos carriage belonging to the house of Daleim. We were only bringing giba meat, poitan flour, and my cooking knives with us, so it was a light load.

"Humm, it's been about three months now since my last trip to the castle town, eh?!" Dan Rutim, head of the group guarding us, made that ridiculously loud announcement as he stepped into the carriage. Actually, it was kind of hitting me too now, the realization of just how long it had been since that meeting with Cyclaeus.

Since one of the members of the guard group was from the Sauti clan, he would be arriving with Dari Sauti, meaning there were ten of us at the moment. On the chef side you had me, Reina Ruu, Sheera Ruu, Rimee Ruu, Toor Deen,

Ama Min Rutim, and Morun Rutim. Then, guarding us were Ai Fa, Dan Rutim, and Deem Rutim, who was the only one of the group I was meeting for the first time.

“Why the serious face, Deem Rutim? It’s not like we’re going to cross blades with the nobles or anything. No need to be that on edge,” Dan Rutim advised the boy with a hearty grin.

Deem Rutim did seem to be kinda stiff as his eyes constantly scanned the area around us.

“But we’re still dealing with nobles here, and it’s impossible to know what they’re thinking, isn’t it? So don’t we need to be ready for anything and everything?”

“Yes, and that’s exactly why you won’t last if you stay so tense. You just need to be prepared to handle anything that may occur while acting normally.”

“Right,” Deem Rutim nodded back, but sure enough, he still wore a stiff expression. The boy was just thirteen, and had a small build too. He was slimmer than even Ludo Ruu, and had a pretty childish face.

From what I heard, two months back he had several ribs broken by a charging giba. Half a month ago, he was finally able to move again properly, and currently he was in the middle of training to regain his strength as a hunter.

As for Dan Rutim, even though he was full of energy, he still had to rely on a cane. Thinking about it like that, Dan Rutim’s dislocated ankle and injured muscles might have been a more serious injury than Deem Rutim’s broken ribs.

“Apologies for the wait. We have arrived at the Turan manor.”

Half an hour later, the door at the rear of the carriage swung open. This was my fifth time now, so I was used to the sight of the huge brick building.

Just like half a month ago, Chiffon Chel was the one to greet us, saying, “Welcome to the Turan manor... Allow me to first guide you to the bathhouse.”

After the seven of us chefs and Ai Fa (who was dragged in by Rimee Ruu) cleansed ourselves, we moved to the kitchen.

There were two guards standing in front of the kitchen again today. Since she

had cleaned herself too, Ai Fa ended up tasked with guarding us inside the kitchen. Meanwhile, Dan and Deem Rutim remained outside along with the guards.

As soon as the guards opened the door, we were awash in heat and the aroma of herbs.

“Has Varkas’s group already started cooking?”

“Yes... Sir Varkas has been in the kitchen since the break of dawn...”

Apparently, Varkas intended to spend nearly the whole day preparing his dishes. Bracing my nerves, I stepped into the kitchen, where I found the man himself and two assistants working away busily at the far end.

So there are only three of them, huh? That certainly would take time, yeah.

After setting our luggage down atop the closest workstation, we went over to greet them.

“Sorry for bothering you when you’re so busy, but I look forward to working together today, Varkas.”

Only Varkas’s eyes moved to glance up at me as he focused on a boiling pot. Sure enough, he was wearing the same long-sleeved white outfit and a mask with holes for his eyes, nose, and mouth again today.

Astoundingly, his two assistants were dressed up in identical costumes. But one of them was small like Reina Ruu, while the other was tall like someone from Sym, so there was no mistaking them for Varkas.

“I look forward to working with you as well, Sir Asuta. You seem to have brought along quite the crowd...”

“Yeah, and it’s just the three of you on your end?”

“No, there is one more manning the flames in the smoking room. Tatumai, what time is it?”

“It will be half past the hour shortly,” the tall masked figure answered in a strangely hoarse voice.

“Then I will also head to the smoking room. Shilly Rou, you man the flames

here.”

At that, the small masked figure silently moved our way. From how slender they appeared, I got the impression they might be a woman.

“My apologies, but I’ll be stepping away. Sir Asuta, will you be using that work station?”

“Yes, that’s the plan.”

“Very well then. I also believed it best that we cook as far from one another as possible so that the aromas will not interfere with one another,” Varkas stated rather curtly before swiftly departing. Still, he seemed to be working away quite intently.

The rest of us offered a bow to his helpers, Tatumai and Shilly Rou, before we returned to our own workstation.

“Well then, how about we hurry up and get started too? First up is securing our ingredients.”

Since we had told them in advance what we would need, everything was assembled in the pantry. After picking out the freshest-looking vegetables from the lot, the seven of us carried everything out.

Once all the ingredients were gathered, the first task was cutting the vegetables. Naturally, we had hammered out a solid step-by-step plan for this over the course of the last few days.

“I heard about them before, but what truly odd appearances they have. It’s a bit eerie, not knowing what someone’s face looks like,” Ama Min Rutim whispered while slicing up aria. Though this was her first time in the castle town, she didn’t seem at all intimidated.

“But that guy is an incredibly skilled chef, right? They say it’s hard to decide whether or not his cooking tastes good, but it all sounds really interesting to me,” Morun Rutim added from my other side as she skinned chatchi, her eyes sparkling. She and Rimee Ruu had gotten all excited in the tolos carriage, but now she was just smiling as she worked, with her usual cheer.

If I had to say, it was Reina Ruu and Toor Deen, who had already been shaken

up by Varkas's cooking, who were looking the most tense. Meanwhile, Rimee Ruu and the two Rutim women were innocently humming along as they moved on to chopping up nenon.

The combination of deadly seriousness from Reina and Sheera Ruu and everyone else seeming so relaxed was very reassuring for me. Satisfied with what I was seeing from them, I kept on working as usual while trying to maintain an appropriate level of focus.

They sure seem to be making a real strange dish over there.

Varkas's small assistant, Shilly Rou, was stirring the pot entrusted to them, occasionally adding some firewood to the stove. And the tall one, Tatumai, just kept on cutting up vegetables atop the work station. Since Varkas had gone to the smoking room, it must've been to check on something being smoked inside, right? Or was he using the flames to do something else? I couldn't help but look forward to the moment I would get to taste their dishes.

Roughly an hour after we started working, when it was about time to light the stoves, a knock from outside the kitchen interrupted us.

"Asuta, there's a girl here who wants to talk to you! Says you know her! If you've got the time for it, then go ahead and pop your head out here!" Dan Rutim shouted through the thick door, rather than one of the guards. I entrusted the prep work for the stoves to Sheera Ruu, then headed over to the door with Ai Fa.

"Hey, Asuta! Sorry for bothering you when you're busy."

"Oh, Diel? What are you doing here?"

Diel was the daughter of a metalwork trader from Jagar. Similarly to the other times we'd met in this manor, she had on a nice blue dress and wore accessories in her short hair. And as always, Labis was standing there in wait behind her.

"Eh heh heh, you see, I'll actually be attending tonight's dinner party too. Which is to say, I asked the second son of the house of Daleim to get me in!"

"Ah, so that's how you did it? I haven't seen Polarth for the past ten days, so I

had no idea.”

“Yeah. I mean, not only is this a chance to eat your cooking, I’ll even get to make connections with the nobles of Banarm, so there’s no way I could let this chance slip by me. And since I managed to get invited, I wanted to drop in and say hi,” Diel said with a totally carefree grin. With the dress she was wearing and her hair pulled to the side by her accessories to show a bit of her forehead, she looked more girly than usual.



“So you’re plotting to strike up business dealings with the folks from Banarm too? But don’t you have trouble handling nobles?” I asked, making sure to whisper the back half there.

Diel came in close too so the guards didn’t overhear. “More than that, I flat out hate them. But work is work and I’ve got to see it through, or I don’t know what I’ll tell my dad later.”

“I see. Well, good luck. And I’d love to hear your impressions of the food afterward too.”

“Of course. I’m looking forward to it,” Diel said with a grin, poking me in the chest.

Then, her gaze turned toward Ai Fa, who was standing next to me.

“Ah, you do know I didn’t hit him just now, right? So don’t shoot me that scary glare of yours.”

“I can tell that much just by looking...” Ai Fa briefly replied before glaring my way too out of the corner of her eye. She was even stricter than most when it came to the custom of the forest’s edge that said men and women who weren’t family weren’t supposed to touch one another.

“You’re quite the energetic girl, aren’t you? What were you again, the daughter of some noble or something from Jagar?” Dan Rutim interjected.

Diel turned his way and smiled. “I’m no one all that important. I’m the daughter of Grannar, a metalwork trader from Jagar, and my name is Diel. And you, big guy, are a hunter of the forest’s edge, right?”

“Indeed. I am in fact a person of the forest’s edge, and the former head of the main Rutim house, Dan Rutim. I had heard that folks from Jagar avoided our people just as much as the townsfolk.”

“Ah, I can’t say I had all that great of an impression of the people of the forest’s edge either before I met Asuta. But it’s been eighty years now since you all left Jagar, so when you think about it, what’s the point of making a fuss over something like that now.”

“I see. Well, I really ran my mouth about Asuta’s cooking before I tried it, so I

guess I'm not all that different."

It was a strange feeling, seeing this pair I was so well acquainted with having such a casual conversation. But they both had such bright and open personalities that they seemed to get along surprisingly well.

"By the way, what are you doing here so early, Diel? It's still only around the second hour, isn't it?"

"Ah, well, yeah... I figured I'd say hello to Lefreya too," Diel replied, awkwardly scratching the tip of her little nose. "I was able to apologize to you, so it just makes sense for me to apologize to her too, right? Like you said before, I tried to help you in some ways... But in the end I was too indecisive, and that wasn't fair to either of you."

"You're still worrying about that? You're surprisingly lacking in nerve, aren't you?" Ai Fa questioned, her expression more or less back to normal. "You simply provided aid to help indict a criminal. It would be one thing to feel shame at turning a blind eye to a crime, but I cannot understand wanting to offer a criminal an apology."

"Oh, shut it. I've got all sorts of stuff to deal with on my end too, you know."

Diel had said before that she couldn't really bring herself to hate Lefreya. And since she had ended up having to deceive the noble girl on the night I was saved, she probably still had some feelings to work through about what happened.

"Well, whatever. I'll be seeing her on my own, so let's just drop it. And Asuta, I'm looking forward to the banquet!"

"Right, I appreciate it."

Diel and Labis then departed along with Chiffon Chel, who was guiding them.

As we watched them leave, Dan Rutim stroked his chin and said, "Hmm... I know it's a little late to be saying it now, but it's really something how such a pretty young girl doesn't show any fear toward us hunters of the forest's edge."

"You think so? Well, she's spent a lot of time around Ai Fa and Ludo Ruu."

"I see. It's been years since I last talked to anyone from town, so it felt really

fresh to me. No matter how much I may have heard from the women about how things had changed, it just didn't feel real to me till now."

The hunters of the forest's edge tried to head into town as little as possible, to avoid scaring the townsfolk unnecessarily, so though Ludo Ruu and the others had made frequent trips to guard us, Dan Rutim hadn't had a chance to join in since the meeting with Cyclaeus.

Thanks to that, most of the men are like him, and have only ever heard how things are in the post town second hand. That may make it tougher to really reach a point of mutual understanding. That was a concern that had been lingering around in my head for a good long while now.

Still, this was no time to be worrying about stuff like that, so after Ai Fa and I said farewell to Dan Rutim, we headed back into the kitchen.

"You took a while, Asuta, so we went ahead and started on the soup dish because we couldn't wait any longer." It was Rimee Ruu rather than Sheera Ruu who was stirring the pot atop the stove as she said that.

I approached her with a smile. "Sorry about that. You took over for me, right? Did things with the stock go okay?"

"Yeah, since Reina and Sheera Ruu handled it."

The veggies, mushrooms, and giba meat tossed into the pot were boiling away with the stock made from dried fish. If those two had handled it, then there wouldn't be any problems on that front.

"Well then, while that's boiling, I suppose we should get to work on the poitan dish. Rimee Ruu, Ama Min Rutim, could I ask you two to man the flames?"

When they energetically accepted the task, I shot them another smile before turning toward the workstation.

Today's poitan dish required quite a bit of effort to make. Facing the poitan flour we brought, fuwano flour from the pantry, and a pile of kimyuus eggs, I went ahead and grabbed some measuring cups. After all, getting the proportions right was crucial.

“Your family got stuck eating the test dishes every single day, so what did people end up thinking about it at the Ruu house?”

“Well, impressions were split so heavily that it was almost funny. If I had to say, more of the men disliked it while the women tended to enjoy it,” Reina Ruu answered while cracking a kimyuus egg. “But Ludo seemed extremely taken with it, while my mom said she prefers ordinary baked poitan. Ah, and Sati Lea liked it a lot.”

“Sati Lea Ruu, huh? She really liked the okonomiyaki too, didn’t she?”

“Yes. I’m sure Sati Lea is fond of poitan in general. Aside from the gooey stuff you get when you boil it, of course,” Reina Ruu replied, showing her first smile of the day. “So for the past several days, we’ve been preparing normal baked poitan for dinner too. That dealt with any complaints we were hearing... Thinking about it like that, I’d say it was more that they were upset they couldn’t eat ordinary baked poitan rather than disliking the dish.”

“Ah, gotcha. Well, the dish does have a totally different feel to it than baked poitan.”

“That’s true. Oh, and Granny Jiba really enjoyed it too. It must be a lot better than baked poitan soaked in soup.”

That was good to hear. It was definitely true that it was a good bit softer than baked poitan, so with a bit of effort, it could serve as a dish well suited to Granny Jiba. And it seemed the stubborn men were displeased when they thought the dish was a replacement for baked poitan, but that disappeared once it was treated as a separate dish. Even though baked poitan was only introduced to the forest’s edge a few months ago, it had seemingly become an indispensable part of their cuisine.

“At any rate, it seems worth having put in the effort to develop it. At some point, I’d like to unveil it in the post town too.”

“Right. It could turn out to be as surprising to folks as giba curry. At the very least, it definitely surprised me.”

As we had that exchange, we steadily progressed on our prep work. And the same seemed true of Varkas’s camp too. However, in the end it seemed his

assistants really were just that—assistants, and nothing more. Varkas appeared to be guiding their every action, and that meant he was moving about the kitchen several times more than they were. Plus, that third assistant had never returned from the smoking room. And Varkas appeared to be making frequent trips there too.

Then, roughly four hours after we had started working, there was another knock on the kitchen door. When I went over there in response to Dan Rutim's summons, I found Polarth and Arishuna waiting for me.

"I see you're working hard there, Sir Asuta. Is your cooking going smoothly?"

"Yes. We haven't run into any real issues as of yet, so we intend to wrap everything up by the time that was agreed on."

"I see, I see. That's good to hear... However, a problem has arisen on our end. It seems our guests from Banarm will be arriving rather late."

"Huh? Really?"

"Indeed. From what I've been told, they lost several tolos when they were attacked by a swarm of poisonous insects along the way. Though the humans were unharmed, they were unable to pull their carriages due to a shortage of draft animals."

So such accidents could occur even on a short two-day trip by tolos, huh? That was something I couldn't overlook, considering we were planning a trip to Dabagg.

"Well, they tried to prepare for such an eventuality, but they were truly unfortunate. That kind of poisonous insect rarely ever appears during the day... Regardless, in the end, a number of their attendants had to turn back to the previous town to procure tolos, so they lost nearly half a day. Initially, they had been scheduled to arrive today around when the sun hit its peak, but now they should make it just around sunset."

"I see. That certainly sounds rough."

"Indeed. So in order to allow them time to change out of their traveling clothes, we would like to hold the banquet an hour after sunset. My apologies for the sudden shift, but we only just received word via a messenger ourselves."

“I don’t mind at all. But you can’t use a sundial once the sun has set, right? So how should I measure the passage of an hour?”

“Hmm? Ah yes, you’ve only had sundials to work with, haven’t you? At times like this, you use an hourglass. I would imagine Sir Varkas should have one prepared for his cooking.”

Now that he mentioned it, I had spied a variety of unfamiliar devices atop his work station. If hourglasses existed, then I would definitely want to purchase one to use as a kitchen timer.

“And my apologies, but could you inform Sir Varkas of this matter as well? From what I hear, he gets incredibly angry when you summon him from the kitchen while he is cooking.”

“Understood. I’ll let him know.”

“Oh, and there is something Lady Arishuna wishes to tell you as well.”

My gaze shifted over to Polarth’s side. Arishuna’s face soon came into view as she slowly removed her hood.

“It’s been some time. So, you have some business with me?”

Arishuna looked straight at my face with those eyes I couldn’t read any emotion from. It seemed she really was a bit shorter than me, maybe around the same height as Ai Fa.

“I wish, to apologize...”

“Apologize? You mean to me?”

“Yes... I spoke of your star, without you asking. That was, careless of me.” As she spoke, Arishuna’s face remained perfectly expressionless. And I couldn’t pick up any emotion from her low, clear voice either. “My grandfather was banished, from Sym for reading, his sovereign’s star. It can be frightening, to know one’s fate... I did not read, your star, but I spoke, on how you were, truly unique. I believe I acted, quite carelessly.”

“Ah, that’s what you meant. Please, don’t worry about it... I was a bit surprised, but I’m not upset at you or anything,” I replied in as bright of a tone as I could manage, considering Ai Fa was standing there next to me.

However, Arishuna remained just as expressionless as always.

“You do not, hate me?”

“Hate you? Of course not! I’m more impressed than anything at how incredible your ability to read stars really is.”

“So you will not blame me, even though you were, so hurt...?” Arishuna questioned, casting her gaze downward while still remaining expressionless. “I caused you, unnecessary suffering, through my carelessness. For that, I apologize to you, from the depths of my heart.”

“L-Like I said, please, don’t worry about it. I really am fine.”

“Well, I suppose Lady Arishuna cannot help but be concerned about it, considering the incident with her grandfather. It is fortunate that you are such a magnanimous fellow, Sir Asuta,” Polarth interjected as if to mediate. “Still, I keep my distance from oracles and the like, myself. My apologies, but I have no interest in having someone else decipher my future. I believe it would be best if you only displayed that skill of yours for those who seek it out, Lady Arishuna.”

“Yes. I deeply regret, my actions.”

“Then that should reconcile matters! Ahh, as the one who brought you two together, I’m truly glad this didn’t end up as a serious incident.” Polarth sighed with a smile, his gaze suddenly shifting sideways. My eyes followed his, and found that Dan Rutim had been watching over our exchange with a look of great interest.

“Ahem, do you have some sort of business with me, O guest from the forest’s edge?”

“No, I was just impressed at how friendly you seemed to be, for a noble. You *are* a noble, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I am the second son of the house of Daleim, Polarth.”

“Ah, so you’re Polarth?! Then you’re that noble who played a big part in rescuing Asuta!” Dan Rutim loudly exclaimed with a broad grin. “I’m the previous head of the main Rutim house, Dan Rutim. Asuta is an irreplaceable friend of mine, so I was thinking I really needed to offer my gratitude to you at

some point, Polarth!”

“I’m grateful to hear it. But it is the fault of all the nobles of Genos that the previous head of the house of Turan was allowed to act as he pleased. I am not worthy of your gratitude.”

Now it was a chance meeting between Dan Rutim and Polarth.

Though they both had plump builds, one of them was one of the foremost hunters of the forest’s edge, while the other was a noble of Genos. I couldn’t really see any common traits between them aside from their bellies jutting out.

Still, the sight of the two of them earnestly smiling at one another was definitely soothing just to look at, somehow. Well, I didn’t know how it would be for other people, but it at least felt that way to me.

“Um...could I have a moment of your time?” a new voice interjected. Turning to look, I saw Reina Ruu timidly peeking out through the gap in the door. “I’m terribly sorry for interrupting your conversation. I’m the second daughter of the main Ruu house, Reina Ruu...”

“Ah, so you are Reina Ruu? Sir Leeheim of the house of Saturas truly acted with terrible discourtesy toward you the other day.”

It had been half a month now since Leeheim trying to give Reina Ruu an expensive necklace had led to a bit of an argument. The ones to smooth that over were none other than Marstein and Melfried of the ducal house of Genos and Polarth himself.

Reina Ruu now stood there with both hands joined together in front of her and her head deeply bowed. “But I was short-tempered, and I’m truly sorry for that fact. I’m incredibly grateful for how you helped protect the bond between the nobles and we people of the forest’s edge.”

“Ah, no, it was Sir Leeheim who was lacking in prudence. I believe that we informed Sir Donda Ruu of our conclusion on the matter as well.”

“Right... But even so, that doesn’t change the fact that I let my temper get the better of me... Is that Leeheim man here today?”

“Yes, he was invited to participate.”

“In that case, would it be possible that I could have a chance to apologize to him after the banquet?” Reina Ruu asked with a serious look on her face.

However, Polarth tilted his head and replied, “Hmm, so that’s what you were getting at...? Yes, I understand your intentions. However, it was determined that Sir Leeheim was entirely the one at fault. There is no need for you to apologize.”

“But if I were to do so, wouldn’t it at least somewhat soothe his feelings?”

“I don’t believe so,” Polarth said with a somewhat strained smile. “If such an apology were to go poorly, Sir Leeheim could start making a commotion and say that he wasn’t truly in the wrong. After all, he has a tendency to act overbearing if you are not careful in how you handle him.”

“So if I apologize, it could cause more unnecessary trouble?”

“Yes, that’s precisely it! After receiving lectures from every direction, I am certain he must be itching to vent his frustration. If you were to then go and bow your head to him, there is a real risk he would insist that he was entirely in the right.”

That certainly sounded like quite the immature reaction.

When Reina Ruu replied, “Right...” I couldn’t quite make out the expression on her face.

“And, well, that’s why I believe that the smoothest way to settle things will be for you and Sir Leeheim to not see one another. No matter what attitude you may take, he could easily react badly.”

“All right... I understand, and will abide by your advice,” Reina Ruu said with another bow of her head. “I want to try my hardest not to let my temper get the better of me in the future, so I beg your forgiveness. And my apologies for interrupting you in the middle of such an important conversation...”

“No, think nothing of it. And give my regards to Sir Donda Ruu.”

After Reina Ruu disappeared behind the door, Polarth gave an exasperated sigh.

Looking down at the man, Dan Rutim rubbed his shiny head. “Hmm, I suppose

there really are all sorts of nobles too. It's probably best that I keep away from anyone with a character like that."

"That's true. The thought of him angering the hunters of the forest's edge is enough to cause me to shudder," Polarth replied, and then he turned my way and exclaimed, "Well then! I suppose we shall go ahead and take our leave... Ah yes, and I heard from Yang about that dish using all the herbs! When I accompany Lady Arishuna into the post town again in the future, can I count on you to let us try it out then?"

"No problem. And I'll be counting on you too."

With that, Polarth departed along with Arishuna, who had pulled her hood back up. With a sigh, I turned to face Ai Fa.

"So that's the star reader..." my clan head stated as she watched them disappear through half-closed eyes with a piercing glare. "It's not that I think she is an especially bad person or anything like that...but I simply cannot see any meaning or value in star reading."

"Oh, right, now that I think about it, that one comrade of Shumiral's said something about you falling under the cat star. Well, I figure when it comes to fortunes, there's no issue with just listening to whatever's convenient to you."

"Hmph. Fate is something to be carved out through your own strength," Ai Fa grumbled, only for Dan Rutim to break out in a hearty chuckle.

"It can be hard to read the emotions of folks from the east, but that girl seemed to be apologizing from the bottom of her heart, don't you think? I don't know what she said, but why not just go ahead and forgive her?"

"Quite. I had no intention of laying any blame on her from the start."

Somehow, it really made me happy to hear Dan Rutim say that. Somehow, I felt that there were similarities between the people of the forest's edge and both the jovial folks from Jagar and the untalkative citizens of Sym, so I generally had a favorable impression of both of them. And even if we had an unusual first meeting, Arishuna was no exception.

"I figured just standing in front of a door would make for a boring job, but I've gotten to see some pretty interesting stuff today. It seems that beyond the

forest's edge there are all sorts of things unfolding that are worth taking a look at."

"I'd say so, yeah. Every day of work for me has been really enjoyable."

"Right! Now that I've handed over my position of clan head, I figure maybe I should help the women with their shopping and so on while I'm on break."

I couldn't help but feel that this was a wonderful change in mindset on his part. After all, up until now, Ludo Ruu was pretty much the only man I ever heard express interest in the post town. And I could definitely see a cheerful and earnest guy like Dan Rutim serving as a bridge between town and the forest's edge.

While I was thinking about that, I returned again to the kitchen, just in time for Varkas to step out of the door to the smoking room.

"Ah, Varkas, could I have a moment of your time?"

When I delivered Polarth's message, the older chef replied, "I see," in a muffled voice, and his green eyes narrowed. "But if the banquet will be held an hour after sunset, that means it will be rather late when we finally finish. In which case, shall we finish our own meals first? With that much time to spare, it should be possible to sample one another's dishes as well."

"Ah, that sounds good. It would be pretty rough, having to watch over all the guests while our own stomachs are empty."

"Then that is what we will do."

With those brief parting words, Varkas swiftly got back to cooking. But that final look I saw in his eyes... Well, it was hard to say for certain because of the mask, but it looked to me like he was excitedly smiling.

Was Varkas looking forward to trying my cooking too? For me, I was as excited, if not more so, to hear his impressions of my food as I was to hear the thoughts of the guests.

And so, despite those minor interruptions, our work progressed smoothly.

It was now sunset, at the lower sixth hour. In the room nearest to the kitchen, we were gathered to eat our dinner before the guests would be having theirs.

There were two large oblong tables, with fifteen of us seated around them: seven chefs from the post town and four from the castle town, as well as the four hunters guarding us now that the man from the Sauti clan had arrived. Though the majority of those present were people of the forest's edge, Varkas's group showed no signs of being intimidated.

The all-important food was waiting on a neighboring table for its time to shine. There was a huge variety of dishes, but many of them wouldn't taste as good if they got cold, so quite a few were currently covered by lids and being kept warm over a charcoal heater.

"Since our faces were covered in the kitchen, allow me to at least introduce everyone by name," Varkas stated in a calm tone, wearing some sort of vague expression on his face, like before. "This is Tatumai, who coordinates my cooking assistants."

The tall older man with dark skin bowed his head. Around half of his long black hair had gone white, and he wore it tied off behind his head. He looked overly skinny, his eyes were black, and his deeply wrinkled face didn't show any expression whatsoever. His skin was just as dark as the people of the forest's edge, so maybe he really did have some Sym heritage.

"Next to him is Shilly Rou."

This one was a short, slender woman.

She had her long dark-brown hair pulled up, her eyes were reddish brown, and her skin was the general shade I had seen from westerners. She was probably a pure-blooded citizen of Selva. Ah, and she looked to be around my age. The force of will I could see in her eyes was especially striking.

"Continuing down the line, you lastly have Bozl. They are all my pupils, who I will one day entrust with the kitchen of The Silver Star."

That man who had spent nearly the whole day working in the smoking room was every bit as big as Dan Rutim. On top of that, he looked to be a southerner. He had stiff dark-brown hair and a mustache, large wide-open green eyes, and

white skin that looked a bit sunburned. The stern look about his face reminded me of a former regular of mine, Aldas the construction worker. Though southerners tended to be short, you still sometimes saw really big guys from Jagar.

“Now then, let us go ahead and give this cooking a try before it gets cold. I hope that you will pardon us for being unable to provide a satisfactory amount.”

“Even just a single bite is enough for a taste test, so no worries.”

After the people of the forest’s edge said their pre-meal chant, we set about serving the dishes.

First up came the appetizer. When the wooden plate with the unusual dish atop it was placed in front of him, Dan Rutim loudly proclaimed, “Ooh! So this one uses raw fish, does it?! I never even imagined the day would come when I would eat something like this!”

“Right. I hope that it’s to your liking.”

What I had prepared was a carpaccio using that char-like fish. It was accompanied by parboiled ro’hyoi and raw aria, and had a dressing overtop. The dressing was something I had prepared specifically for this dish too. Its base was mamaria vinegar and reten oil, to which I added pico leaves, myamuu, juice from a lemon-like sheel, stingingly spicy chitt seeds, and an herb from Sym that was similar to a bay leaf.

Ro’hyoi was spicier and more bitter than the arugula I was familiar with, but parboiling it made it a lot easier to eat. I had sliced the fish into pieces thin enough to be about half a bite each.

Naturally, there was no custom of eating raw meat at the forest’s edge, so even though Ai Fa and the members of the Ruu clan didn’t complain when I had them try some test samples, they didn’t seem happy about it either.

The amount of food on the plate was just a meager serving, though.

“Hmm, it certainly has an unusual taste.”

The members of the guard group didn’t need to wait for the dish from

Varkas's side, and they all scarfed down the appetizer in a single bite. The hunter from the Sauti who had showed up around sunset alongside Dari Sauti was furrowing his brow as he chewed on the fish.

"Our appetizer is a fish-based recipe as well."

Varkas had personally served up his dish, though solely to the chefs present.

When I saw it, my eyes opened wide. Atop the clay plate that was roughly the size of my palm sat a truly modest-looking dish.

"Normally, there would be nine of these per person. Since there are seven of you, I was only able to prepare one for each person."

"I see. Well, that's no issue at all."

It really was a mysterious dish. It consisted of a thin one-square-centimeter chip, atop which sat a little dollop of an apricot-colored paste.

The chip was likely made by stretching fuwano dough out thin and then baking it. It looked to only be around one or two millimeters thick. Since he had called this a fish recipe, that paste must have been minced fish...but at a glance, it just looked like a transparent, glistening jam to me. I thought I could see some kind of tiny seeds mixed into it too.

"Well then, let's dig in."

It might have been bad manners, but I went ahead and picked the appetizer up with my hand and took a bite. Even though it was only a small portion, a truly complex flavor and aroma spread throughout my mouth.

"So, you used raw fish for your appetizer too, huh?"

"Yes. I finely diced a rillione fish and then kneaded it together with tau oil, reten oil, arow fruit, and sarfaal herbs. The fuwano bread below it contains karon milk fat and panam honey."

Rillione must have been that char-like fish I had also used. As for sarfaal, it was undoubtedly an herb that was similar to mustard. It wasn't all that spicy, so he must have used it without adding any additional liquid. Still, that mustard-like scent was clearly at the core of the aroma. Then he mixed in the saltiness from the tau oil and the sourness from the arow, as well as reten oil to give it a

smooth texture.

I thought that the crispy fuwano chip was perfectly fine too. There were no issues with the taste from the milk fat or honey, and it was a similar taste and texture to a sweet pie crust.

However, what sat atop it was a fish paste. Though it was a much simpler taste than the dish using herbs and karon milk that I had tried out before, it was still definitely a combination I never would have personally considered.

“I decided on this dish when I heard you were using raw rillione for your appetizer, Sir Asuta,” Varkas calmly stated. “Fish are not eaten in Banarm either, so such cuisine should likely seem quite novel to them. Still, even if they have a custom of eating raw karon, they may well avoid the thought of doing the same with raw fish. Normally, I would think a cooked fish would be most fitting for the appetizer.”

“Huh? Then why did you go with this recipe, Varkas?”

“As I said, it was because I heard you had chosen a raw fish offering, Sir Asuta. But if two chefs were to present similar-looking dishes simultaneously, the guests from Banarm could end up mistaking that for the custom in Genos.”

After being taken aback for a moment, I bowed my head and said, “Sorry for that.”

“You have nothing to apologize for. I made the decision to do so myself.”

He didn’t criticize my thoughtlessness or try to console me. He just kept things vague instead. It really was impossible to tell exactly what he was thinking deep down.

Still, what would he think of the taste of the carpaccio I had prepared? After all, Varkas’s group had all cleared their plates at some point, it seemed.

“It was very delicious. I felt the pico and the spiciness of the chitt clashed ever so slightly, but I don’t imagine any other chefs here in Genos could flavor a raw fish with such precision.”

Naturally, Varkas and his three cooking assistants remained expressionless.

Meanwhile, the chefs on our side didn’t have much interest in raw fish, so

they seemed to have difficulty figuring out how to appraise Varkas's dish. Since it didn't seem like either side would be saying anything further, we hurriedly went ahead and served up the next dishes.

"Hey Asuta, you can't expect us to eat these little portions one by one all the way till the end, right?" Dan Rutim asked in a concerned voice.

"Right, after this I plan on bringing out a number of dishes at once. Is that all right with you, Varkas?"

"Of course. I leave the format of the meal to our guests from the forest's edge."

We went ahead and started off with the soup and poitan dishes. After removing the lids from both pots, all sorts of aromas started filling the room.

Nobody was surprised by our soup dish. However, when the poitan dish was set before him, Dan Rutim loudly questioned, "What is this stuff? Is it really poitan? It doesn't look like it at all, Asuta!"

"Well, it was made by mixing poitan and fuwano, then kneading in kimyuus egg and reten oil."

It was no surprise that Dan Rutim was so taken off guard. After all, everyone who saw the dish for the first time, be it Ai Fa, the members of the Ruu clan, and even chefs like Reina and Sheera Ruu, all stared at it in wonder.

The dish in question was the poitan and fuwano pasta that I had finally completed after nearly a month of working on it.

Both poitan and fuwano were similar to wheat flour, but neither matched the ingredient exactly. In particular, the amount of gluten and the resulting viscosity, and how much they expanded differed a bit from the flour I was familiar with.

Poitan flour got all dried out if you just baked it as is, while it solidified if only mixed with water. As for fuwano flour, while it could be baked up nice and springy, it was overly viscous. It had me seriously scratching my head for a long time now over whether it was possible to blend the two pseudo-wheat flours properly to end up with something suitable for making noodles.

Honestly though, I was trying to make something more like soba or udon.

However, that ended in failure. I had actually managed to make something similar to udon before the pasta, but it wasn't suitable for the people of the forest's edge. Not because of the taste, or anything. Actually, it was because they weren't able to slurp noodles. Ai Fa had looked so sad when she asked me, "What in the world is this dish, and how do you eat it?"

When I thought about it, I remembered one person back in my home country who couldn't slurp noodles either: a classmate in middle school who had returned from living abroad.

He had lived somewhere in South America up till then, and had no experience with eating noodles using chopsticks. The first time we visited a ramen shop, the look on his face was just like Ai Fa's, and he said pretty much the same thing she did.

The guy was able to get the hang of slurping noodles after a bit of practice, but the people of the forest's edge were even worse off, because bottom line, they didn't use chopsticks at all.

Well, at least Ai Fa had eventually learned to handle them in her own unique style, so while she struggled, she managed to eat her food that night. Still, it would be quite an undertaking to teach everyone at the forest's edge how to both use chopsticks and slurp noodles. I could just see Donda Ruu tossing his chopsticks aside halfway through the meal and just drinking it all down in one go, broth and all.

I didn't exactly know much about cuisine in the castle town yet, but at the very least I'd never seen noodles in the post town either, so even though I had developed a way to make udon, it just didn't seem suitable for selling. In light of that, I decided the first style of pasta I made should be some sort of spaghetti instead.

With spaghetti, you could eat it without having to slurp noodles. Though I had never seen anything resembling a fork outside the castle town, I was able to prepare a utensil that would work well enough by cutting notches into a wooden spoon. I came up with the idea figuring it might work as a stepping stone toward learning to slurp noodles.

Once I figured out the ratio of poitan and fuwano, making the pasta itself wasn't all that tricky at all. However, it did require a good bit of time. First I mixed in egg and a bit of reten oil and salt with the two types of flour, kneaded it till it got soft, then let it sit for several hours to remove the moisture. Next, I sprinkled a bit of flour over it and flattened it out, and after a bit more moisture had seeped out, I cut it into noodles. If it was sticky on the ends, I added a bit more flour at this stage too. That was enough to make a perfectly serviceable raw pasta, after which I just needed to let it dry out completely.

This time around, I served my pasta with a cream sauce. The dish also included the spinach-like nanaar, the cabbage-like tino, and the brown beech-like mushroom from Jagar. Lastly, I added some thick slices of giba rib bacon made using the smoking techniques I had learned from Mikel.

As for the cream sauce, I had seasoned a broth made from seaweed with salt and pico leaves, along with a nutmeg-like herb for flavor. After that, I sprinkled it with some gyama dried milk I had reduced to a powder. Since I had heard that the people of Banarm used karon dairy goods, I had ultimately chosen this creamy pasta out of my repertoire.



Then for the soup, I went with minestrone. Tomato-like tarapa served as the base for a soup with a ton of vegetables in it. The ingredients included aria, chatchi, nenon, tino, zucchini-like chan, paprika-like ma pula, the common mushroom-like thing I still didn't know the name of, and giba sausage.

In place of bouillon, I used the broth I had made from dried fish, then added salt and pico leaves, that herb that was like bay leaf, mamaria fruit wine, and finally tau oil and sugar for a bit of subtle flavoring. Since I had made tarapa-based soup plenty of times in the past, Ai Fa had no issues accepting the dish.

The real issue was the cream sauce pasta. The Ruu men didn't seem to enjoy it all that much, so I stole a glance wondering what the guards thought of it...just in time for Dan Rutim to loudly proclaim, "Hrmm! This meat is delicious! It's rich in flavor like the dried meat I received from the Ruu clan before, and it's even tastier than ordinary meat!"

"I'm glad to hear it. What about the poitan?"

"Hmm, I'm finding it just a little hard to eat. I've got no issues with how it tastes, but it's all slippery and keeps sliding off my spoon."

Morun Rutim was sitting next to him and had seemingly taught him how to eat it, but he appeared to have trouble getting the knack of it in such a short period of time. Was the frustration the main reason why the men weren't too fond of it?

"So that's still an issue, huh? Well then, how about eating it like this?"

Based on a conversation with Reina Ruu from earlier in the day, I had brought along plenty of extra poitan flour and used it to prepare some thin baked poitan, out of a concern that pasta alone wouldn't provide enough carbohydrate intake. Once Dan Rutim tried sandwiching the pasta and the other ingredients in the middle, his face lit right back up again.

"Ooh, this is good! I like this slippery poitan much better this way!"

"Really? I think it's tastier the normal way, though," Morun Rutim retorted.

"The taste may not be any different, but I don't care for eating stuff bit by bit! Isn't food so much more enjoyable when you stuff your cheeks full?"

“That’s just how *you* like things, dad. Ah, but it may be good to try dipping baked poitan in this soup, actually...”

The father and daughter pair from the Rutim really seemed to be enjoying a nice, friendly meal together.

As for the members of Varkas’s group...half of them were actually showing a reaction now: the girl from the west, Shilly Rou, and the large man from the south, Bozl.

“This...is tasty. And it’s my first time eating such a dish too,” Bozl stated in a deep, throaty voice. His rugged face wore a look of intense surprise.

Next to him, Shilly Rou sat there silently. If I had to describe her expression, I’d say it had grown stern.

“This meat especially! So this is the giba meat I’ve heard so much about, is it? You smoked it over herbs, didn’t you?”

“That’s right. It’s smoked meat made to emphasize taste rather than preservation.”

“Well, it’s delicious. And the sausage used in the soup dish is just as good too. To think such a high-class ingredient was overlooked for decades... It really is something else.”

I was a bit concerned by Shilly Rou’s silence, but Bozl seemed a lot like the other folks from Jagar I was familiar with, not putting on airs at all.

“You are Sir Asuta of the Fa clan, correct? Was this dish truly made from poitan?” the tall old man Tatumai asked. Varkas’s group seemed to be having no issues whirling the pasta around their three-pronged utensils and eating it.

“It was. Or to be precise, it’s a mix of around seven parts fuwano to three parts poitan. And then I added kimyuus egg and reten oil too.”

“I see. This dish is almost like shaska.”

“Shaska?”

“It is a grain gathered from the mountains and central plains of Sym. It’s eaten in long and thin strips like this.”

“Is that so? Then do folks from Sym have a custom of slurping dishes like this?”

“Yes, when it’s served along with hot broth. But when shaska is baked or boiled, it’s eaten by wrapping it around like this.”

So this old man really did have blood from Sym, then? In that case, Varkas had assistants from the west, south, and east all working under him.

Does that mean Varkas is well versed in the cuisine of Sym and Jagar too? I think I might be a bit jealous if he is, I thought to myself as I turned to look at the other chef, only for an unwitting “Huh?” to slip out of my mouth. The plates of pasta and minestrone sitting in front of him were both completely empty.

“Y-You already ate all of it, Varkas?”

“Yes. It was very good.” With scrutinizing eyes that were the same green color as Bozl’s, he stared back at me. “If you do not mind, I would appreciate you eating my dishes before they get cold, Sir Asuta.”

“Ah, right. Sorry about that.”

While I was distracted by Dan Rutim, the women had all finished their portions. Though Reina Ruu and Toor Deen had worn indistinct expressions before, they now looked just as serious as they had during the previous taste test with Varkas. Seeing their reaction, I hurried up and gave the soup and fuwano dishes a taste myself.

The soup was a familiar creamy white dish. It used both karon milk and a bunch of herbs, making for a truly complex aroma.

As for the fuwano dish, it had the appearance of a bread twist. However, it was ever so slightly pink. It had a clear sauce over it, giving it a glistening shine too.

I went ahead and started with the karon milk soup.

I thought I had steeled myself properly...but I was still left awestruck.

Varkas’s true nature had been restrained with the appetizer, but here it was on full display. It really was an incredibly complex taste. Just how many different herbs had he used here? I could taste spiciness, bitterness, and

sourness in the dish. But above all else, it was sweet, and there was plenty of umami in it too.

The sweetness likely came from karon milk, milk fat, and sugar. And the umami, of course, was from the meat, vegetables, and countless seasonings. When I tried feeling around in the soup with my wooden spoon, I was able to come across karon meat and chamcham.

The karon meat was shockingly tender. It definitely had to be torso rather than leg meat. It was even softer than the karon meat in the dish Naudis had served me the other day, to the point that I didn't even need to chew it to break it down.

On top of that, the texture of the bamboo shoot-like chamcham was quite pleasant. The fibers from the meat and the chamcham intertwined, until it almost felt like you could mistake the vegetable for the actual meat.

Beyond that, there were three varieties of mushrooms and two different vegetables in the soup. Pseudo-shiitake, cloud ear, and common mushroom; daikon-like sheema; and potato-like chatchi were all there in the dish.

Every last one of those ingredients had wonderful textures. That shiitake-like mushroom had been rehydrated and had the same chewiness as any high-class meat. And the cloud ear and common mushroom equivalents were nice and springy too... As for the sheema and chatchi steeped in flavor, they were quite soft from being boiled right to the brink of breaking down, and soon combined with the rest of the soup in my mouth.

I could sense intuitively that the amount of time he heated each ingredient for must have differed. Though he had boiled the meat and vegetables to the point that they nearly broke down, he had carefully adjusted the flames to emphasize the texture of the mushrooms and chamcham. It had to be the result of carefully examining each ingredient one by one and experimenting to determine how long each needed to be cooked.

And of course, the strange flavoring was worthy of special mention. Though there was even some bitterness in the mix this time around, it was still all in perfect equilibrium. If the bitterness were to be removed, the remaining sweetness, spiciness, and sourness would run wild and ruin everything...or at

least, that was how it felt to me.

Aah... What a seriously strange flavor.

I had had numerous opportunities to try dishes that emphasized karon milk and herbs before now. Yang had served me one just the other day, and then there was Roy and Timalo's cooking too. In all likelihood, karon milk soup was seen as a tried and true dish here in the castle town.

Also...this taste was probably what they were all aiming for.

This dish had what their cooking lacked, and it lacked what was excessive in their dishes too. I couldn't help but think so, even though I still wouldn't say it was perfectly delicious without any reservations.

"I created the stock for this soup using kimyuus bones, seaweed, and six varieties of herbs...and I marinated the karon breast meat in a combination of mamaria vinegar and fruit wine."

"So you pickled it, huh? I didn't sense any sourness from the meat itself, though."

"I used significantly more fruit wine than vinegar. The sour flavor should have dissolved in the stock."

It was definitely not a dish I ever could have come up with. I felt an uncontrollable stirring in my chest as I reached out for the fuwano dish.

It was like a pink twist roll. As I thought to myself how strange its shape was, I observed it carefully and found he hadn't merely twisted fuwano dough, but rather combined a number of different strands together to make a braid of sorts. Since it was coated in a clear sauce, I went ahead and used utensils similar to a fork and knife rather than grabbing it with my hands.

Spread rather densely throughout the inside of the roll were these translucent milky white chips. Steeling my resolve, I took a bite, only for an unexpected taste to spread through my mouth. It was the scent of the ocean that had drifted up to my nose, and it felt similar to shrimp. Had he dried and sliced up some sort of sweet shrimp-like crustacean, then?

"I combined the fuwano dough with ground maroll meat and shells, which I

then mixed with dried fish broth and baked it. There is minmi fruit kneaded into the dish as well.”

“Minmi? You mean that expensive fruit from Jagar?”

“Yes. Unripened minmi that hasn’t yet grown sweet.”

Minmi was a very expensive fruit akin to a peach. I had thought for sure those chips were made from that maroll crustacean, but I had been completely off the mark. Instead, it seemed he had actually flavored the fuwano dough itself here. The minmi fruit was just there to give it a bit of texture. And it was then that I finally realized that the dish had a finer texture to it than ordinary baked fuwano. It was so soft that you could mash it up in your mouth without even using your teeth.

If this dish didn’t include the minmi fruit, eating it might have been like eating a ball of flour. However, the texture didn’t stand out enough to draw your attention. And then there was that clear sauce... In all likelihood it had been made by combining milk fat with a variety of different oils, and it served to counteract the flouriness of the dish and allow it to slide smoothly down the throat.

As for the taste, aside from the slight saltiness from the dried fish stock, it actually wasn’t all that strong. Still, the scent from the crustacean sure did fill my nose. This one had a gentle, delicate flavor to it, completely unlike the soup dish.

“You didn’t use any herbs in this dish, did you?”

“I did not. If I were to use herbs in all my dishes, it would give the tongue no time to rest,” Varkas replied as he slowly rose to his feet. “There are three dishes remaining. We should finish up this taste test before too much time passes.”

3

We ended up bringing out the vegetable and meat dishes together.

For my vegetable dish I went with a caprese salad, while I had decided on Milan-style cutlets for my meat dish.

“Ooh! Are these giba cutlets?!”

“Yes, but I did something a little different with them.”

While it was probably a little late to be saying so, my theme this time around was Italian-style dishes. The Tsurumi Restaurant centered mainly on western dishes, but even aside from that, my old man just loved Italian cooking.

“Japanese cooking and Italian dishes are a lot alike. I’m not saying they taste similar, but in the way they think about cooking,” my old man had once said.

Japan and Italy were both sea nations that were blessed with plenty of ingredients both from the water and the mountains, and their climates were similar too. My old man’s pet theory was that they handled ingredients similarly in some ways as a result.

Well, it might have just been that he liked it, with no need to look for any such deeper meaning. I was personally quite fond of tomato sauce, and had once served a rather wild piccata dish to Lefreya, so perhaps that was something I had inherited from him.

Since I had heard folks from Banarm were fond of dairy products, I hit upon the idea to use Italian cooking rather than Japanese, Chinese, or western-style Japanese dishes, so my menu would emphasize milk fat and dried milk. But if that was the way I wanted to go, I didn’t have too many choices for my meat dish. With my limited knowledge, all I could come up with were Italian-style hamburger steak with tarapa and dried milk, piccata, and the Milan-style cutlets I ultimately went with.

On top of that, Polarth and Leeheim were already familiar with my giba burgers with tarapa sauce. It would probably put a damper on things for nobles like them if I served up something so similar to what was sold at the stalls in the post town. So, considering the favorable reception given to my giba tatsuta age last time around, I decided to go with the Milan-style cutlets.

However, I didn’t exactly know the proper way to make them. I couldn’t tell you the long official Italian name for the dish either. Ultimately, I just had to aim for Italian-style cutlets using the same reference points I did for the piccata.

There were two big things that made this dish different from my usual cutlets:

the dried milk sprinkled over the coating, and the use of milk fat in the frying oil.

The cut I went with was naturally sirloin. After carefully cutting the tendons, I tenderized the fibers. After giving it some base-level seasoning with salt and pico leaves, I covered the meat in flour and kimyuus eggs, then breaded it with baked fuwano crumbs. The flour was mixed with a bit of the mustard-like herb Varkas had taught me was called sarfaal. I also added ground gyama dried milk to the baked fuwano crumbs I was using in place of panko.

Next, I fried it in reten oil with added milk fat. Since reten oil had a similar aroma to olive oil, it was a great fit with the dishes this time around.

I left it up to the guests to decide whether they wanted to use sheel fruit juice or tarapa sauce. But thanks to the abundant aroma from the sarfaal and milk fat, I figured some of them might decide it didn't need any sauce at all.

To accompany it, I carefully sautéed up some ro'hyoï, nenon, and that brown beech-like mushroom in milk fat. In the end, I'd say it came out every bit as good as my usual giba cutlets and giba tatsuta age.

As for my vegetable dish that would be presented before the meat dish during the actual welcome banquet, I had gone with a caprese salad. It was a simple dish in which I used tarapa and dried milk. First I thinly sliced up those small sweet tarapa sold in the castle town, then made similarly thin slices of karon dried milk, and laid them out in a line of alternating, overlapping slices, dried milk and then tarapa, back and forth. Karon dried milk was a lot like a plain mozzarella cheese, which made it a good fit for the dish.

To add a bit of color, I gave it some parboiled ro'hyoï too, and then poured my specially made dressing overtop. I used less mamaria vinegar and myamuu than with the carpaccio, and finished with panam honey for a touch of subtle seasoning so that it would have a somewhat gentle flavor overall. In the actual banquet it would be served between the cream pasta and the cutlets, so I had chosen it to act as an intermezzo.

"Ah, this is tasty," a voice loudly proclaimed from the end of the table. But rather than Dan Rutim, it was the Sauti man who said that. The large young hunter with a homely face shook his head with a look of great admiration. "All

of the dishes are delicious, but this one is really something else. The Sauti women have received a few lessons from the Rutim, but they can't match this at all."

"Hmm... I think the giba cutlets I ate before were tastier, though," Dan Rutim chimed in with a frown. "Why is that? It's still delicious, but it feels like something's lacking. Just what is going on here, Asuta?"

"I'm sure it's because I didn't use giba fat to fry them. Since the people of the forest's edge have eaten giba for so many years, their fat is probably more to your tastes than reten oil or milk fat."

This time around I was mainly aiming to serve nobles, though, so I used reten oil instead. After all, karon milk fat didn't blend well with giba lard.

"I see. Well, this is a meal made for nobles, so there's no reason for me to go complaining."

Even as he said that, though, Dan Rutim's frown remained fixed in place. But I figured I could wash away his displeasure just by showing him the special dish I had prepared.

"Well then, I figure it's best for you people of the forest's edge to not eat such a huge amount of fried food, so why don't you have some of this to make up for it?"

It was a dish I had prepared solely for the people of the forest's edge. I knew perfectly well that a single cutlet wouldn't be enough to satisfy the formidable appetites of the men in particular.

When he saw the plate Ama Min Rutim was bringing around, Dan Rutim was overjoyed. It likely went without saying, but the dish in question was giba ribs.

"The kitchen here has a furnace, so I wanted to try baking the ribs in it. There's more than enough, so feel free to grab seconds."

"Asuta, you tease! You should have said so from the start!"

"Being disappointed at first means you'll be even happier in the end, right?"

Having already done my research, I knew that the Milan-style cutlets hadn't been especially well received by the Fa and Ruu clans. It seemed that giba

cutlets were a special dish for the people of the forest's edge, what with the way that frying giba meat in giba fat condensed that delicious giba flavor. Even Jiza Ruu had admitted they were tasty.

But I was sure folks from the castle town would prefer the Milanese cutlets, which were made with milk fat and dried milk. My decision was driven by my recent realization that nobles had cooking that was suited to them, and the same was true for the people of the forest's edge.

"Sir Asuta, could I also try some of that dish?" the southerner Bozl's deep voice called out from the opposite side of the table. "This fried dish is incredibly delicious. I've been left dumbstruck with shock ever since I tasted it."

"Thank you. I'm honored to hear you say that."

When I held out the plate of ribs to him, Bozl broke out in a big grin. Despite his fierce appearance, his smile was totally earnest. Any time a southerner smiled, I couldn't help but think how charming it was.

"Please go ahead and try my cooking as well, Sir Asuta..." Varkas then chimed in.

Looking over, I saw that his plates were once again empty. I still had yet to even see the man take a bite.

"Right, I'll do that now... Would you like to try some of these ribs too, Varkas?"

"Yes, I would be glad to."

After offering Varkas some ribs, I went ahead and turned toward my own plates, containing the vegetable and meat dishes.

In terms of appearances, the vegetable dish was the one that really drew the eye. There were green, red, and yellow fibers wrapped up into a shape that was all round and poofy. It definitely was a dish with a bizarre appearance.

Looking closely, it was made of thinly sliced strings of vegetables that were then gathered together into a nice little sphere around the size of a ping pong ball. Their density was so low that it felt like you could see right through them, and a little wind would be enough to send them flying.

Though I was being figurative by calling them strings, they had to be so thin that you'd measure them in millimeters. And those reds and greens all had varying shades, giving it the appearance of a colorful decoration. However, there didn't seem to be any sort of sauce or dressing over it. Was it a dish where he just thinly sliced raw vegetables and herbs into strips and then bundled them all together?

Timidly, I picked one up with my own personal chopsticks. Despite how soft it looked, the shape didn't break down at all. It just bent slightly where I was applying pressure.

When I tossed it into my mouth and chewed...an aroma every bit as extravagant as the dish's coloring burst forth.

He really had used herbs after all. It was stunningly striking. And it had a crispy texture that reminded me of shrimp chips. Apparently they weren't raw, but rather smoked.

The flavor from the vegetables wasn't very distinct. It was almost as if I was eating an aroma that had taken shape. Sweet, spicy, bitter, sour...a bunch of scents were racing around my nose in perfect harmony. It made sense that it didn't need any sauce or dressing with that kind of flavor profile.

Still...can you really make a dish like this without seasonings?

As I had that thought, I tried focusing the nerves in my tongue, but I really couldn't pick out the presence of sugar, salt, vinegar, or anything else like that at all. He had made something this sweet, spicy, bitter, and sour using only vegetables and herbs.

It wasn't the sort of dish where you questioned whether or not it was tasty. It was just plainly unreal. In fact, it was difficult to believe it was made by human hands, only using primitive firewood-fueled stoves and the like.

Then, there was the meat dish.

Actually, it was more of a fish dish. But which of those four types was it? Since it was thinly sliced, I couldn't tell what it originally looked like.

Nothing looked especially odd about this one. The white meat of the fish was wrapped in a dark brown coating. Despite there being no signs that he had used

any oil, it had an appearance similar to fried food.

The green leaf spread out underneath it must have been boiled ro'hyoi. And the red bits sprinkled over top were probably chitt seeds. Compared to the other dishes up till now, this one was definitely the least showy. However, judging by what I could see of the fish's cross section, it didn't seem to have any moisture left in it at all. If it was completely dried out, I had trouble seeing how it could be something I would call delicious, even as flattery.

Still, Varkas wasn't the sort to present any kind of dull dish, especially considering the meat dish was the main course. So though I had been thrown off by the vegetable dish, I worked up my resolve and took a bite.

And the taste that spread through my mouth...

"Ooh, yummy!" a voice energetically proclaimed from my side. Rimee Ruu was holding some of that sliced fish on a metal skewer, a beaming smile spreading across her face. "This dish is really, really good! I'm not sure about the others, but I love this one!"

"Yeah," I agreed after swallowing.

Then, I turned back toward Varkas.

"I believe that folks from the castle town and the forest's edge each have their own differing tastes. And as someone born in another nation entirely, it's hard for me to find the words to describe your cooking...but it's no exaggeration to say that I find this fish absolutely amazing."

"I'm honored," was all that Varkas had to say in response.

Reina and Sheera Ruu both looked to be at a loss for words. And the same was also true for Toor Deen. Ama Min and Morun Rutim both looked surprised, but even they were sighing in satisfaction.

It seemed that every last one of our seven chefs found the dish delicious. Despite the fact that they didn't like complex tastes or perhaps didn't even understand them, these people of the forest's edge had accepted it as good.

Naturally, I had no objections either. While I found that vegetable dish impossible to analyze, this fish dish was incredibly tasty. It didn't deviate from

my personal tastes either. While I was certain he used all sorts of herbs to make it, it was all in splendid harmony.

It really was incredibly mysterious, how it didn't aim in any particular direction and had all sorts of opposing tastes running along different lines, but with a firm core converging in the middle of it all.

Sure enough, I couldn't sense any moisture or fat from the fish itself. However, the vibrant brown coating made up for that. Seriously, just what in the world was up with that coating? It was only around five millimeters or so thick, with a crispy outermost layer, while below that it had a light crunchiness, then the surface touching the meat had plenty of moisture and fat. It was as if it had hundreds of layers only micrometers thick all stacked atop one another.

The umami of the meat was wonderfully condensed. The fish taste was solid too, and didn't get lost at all in the kaleidoscope of other flavors.

"For that dish, I seared a gilebuss fish over the course a day," Varkas calmly stated. "I used eight herbs and twelve different ingredients, coating it every half hour with sparkling wine from Jagar that had the alcohol content removed. Personally, I see it as one of my greatest creations."

"Twelve different ingredients, huh...? You used kimyuus egg and fuwano flour, right? Then salt, sugar, tau oil, and milk fat...and I believe I sensed the taste of ramanpa too."

"Correct on all fronts. The others were arow and minmi fruit juice, panam honey, squeezed juice from a dried kiki, and boiled mamaria vinegar."

"And then you added eight herbs to the mix, creating this complex yet delicate flavor."

By using fuwano flour and egg, he was able to create a coating that made it seem as if the fish had been fried. With a shake of my head, I clasped my hands together tightly, as I felt like they were about to start trembling.

"My compliments to you. This meal...at the very least this fish course, is clearly better than the meat course I prepared."

"What?! That's quite the statement, Asuta!" Dan Rutim interjected, leaning forward and looking angry. "Didn't you say you couldn't judge whether cooking

from the castle town was good or not?! And yet you admit your loss?!”

“I don’t think cooking is about winning or losing. I just feel that Varkas’s dish is tastier than the cutlets I made.”

Letting out a strange “Hrngh” sound, Dan Rutim energetically turned toward his daughter. “Morun! Let me try that too!”

“Huh? But I was taking it slow to savor it,” Morun Rutim protested, and yet she held out the plate for her father without hesitation. Dan Rutim grabbed it with his hand and popped a bite of fish into his mouth.

“I see... It really may be tastier than those cutlets that don’t use any giba fat,” he admitted, turning his bulky chest and belly away. “But normal giba cutlets definitely wouldn’t lose! And besides, I think this rib meat is even more delicious!”

Having heard that, Ai Fa now turned toward Rimee Ruu. “Rimee Ruu, my apologies, but could you share some of that dish with me?”

“Yeah, I don’t mind!” the young girl replied, holding out her plate with a smile. There was a custom that you shouldn’t eat food someone outside of your family had bitten into, but that didn’t apply when it came to little kids under ten.

When Ai Fa took a bite of Varkas’s main course, she nodded with a serious look on her face. “Yes, this certainly is good. Unlike the previous dishes from the castle town I have tasted, I find it delicious. In fact, it could even be better than giba cutlets,” Ai Fa stated, and then she calmly turned my way. “But I feel that hamburger steak is the most delicious of all, Asuta.”

“Right... Thanks.”

Neither Ai Fa nor Dan Rutim were the sort to lie because they didn’t like someone. Actually, nobody at the forest’s edge would do something like that. So they meant what they said. Hamburger steak was the dish most to Ai Fa’s tastes, and for Dan Rutim it was ribs.

“But that’s not how you feel, is it?” Ai Fa stated, seeing right through me. “In that case, your only choice is to continue training. Keep polishing your skills until you yourself are satisfied.”

“Yeah. That’s just what I intend to do, naturally.” In order to work up my resolve, I went ahead and stood from my chair. “Well, it seems like everyone is mostly finished, so let’s wrap things up with the final course. I hope that they’re to everyone’s liking.”

The last dish I had prepared for dessert was a quasi-pudding. Unfortunately, I lacked the knowledge needed to prepare Italian sweets like tiramisu or panna cotta, so I ended up having to compromise right at the very end.

On top of that, I didn’t even know how to make proper pudding either. In fact, I didn’t even know if it was possible to make it without a refrigerator. Ultimately, this was more of a mock pudding adapted from a recipe for steamed egg custard.

With steamed egg custard, you could use a steamer to make it. My plan was simply to use karon milk and sugar instead of the soup stock used in Japanese savory custards, so I’d end up with something approximately correct. But, well, it wasn’t exactly like I had any fixed standards when it came to making sweets.

Even so, it wasn’t as if I cut corners when making it. Since it was a simple dish that just involved diluting a beaten egg and steaming it, I did a bunch of experiments with the flavoring and texture.

After the pudding itself was fully steamed in a clay container and I poured caramel sauce made from sugar over it, I topped it with fresh cream and arow jam. Normally I would want to serve it chilled, but there was no way to do anything about that. Since the pudding itself wasn’t overly sweet, the cream and jam served to add more sugar to the mix. In the end, I felt it hadn’t turned out half bad, even served at room temperature.

“Yay, pudding!” Rimee Ruu excitedly proclaimed. She and Toor Deen, as well as Yun Sudra who wasn’t present, had really enjoyed the mock pudding when they taste tested it.

“Hmm, it’s not a flavor I’m accustomed to, but it’s still delicious,” Dan Rutim commented, looking to be in a good mood. Since Deem Rutim and the Sauti man didn’t look all that displeased either, Ai Fa might have been the one who was least fond of the dish.

As for the dish Varkas had prepared, it was another one with a really strange

appearance. Honestly, they looked like marshmallows in various colors. However, when I gave one a poke, I found that it wasn't soft. Instead, it felt hard like a cookie. Though the colors were all a bit indistinct, there were white, yellow, red, and blue ones.

When I took a bite, a gentle sweetness filled my mouth. I had chosen a white one, and from the peach-like flavor, it must have used minmi juice. The texture was like a slightly soft cookie, with only the surface being crisp.

"There are plenty of chefs out there who use strong flavoring for their sweets, but I find gentle flavors like this to be more fitting. This dish is made using kimyuus egg whites."

In that case, perhaps it would be proper to call them meringue cookies.

"The white is minmi, the yellow sheel, the red arow, and the blue uses the juice of a scarce fruit called amansa."

"Amansa? I'm not familiar with it."

When I gave it a try, I found it had a rich and refreshing flavor similar to a blueberry. Overly rare and expensive ingredients weren't sold in the post town, so I had no way to get my hands on them. And this amansa fruit apparently fell into that category.

At any rate, it felt like this dessert was gently comforting me after I was so thoroughly shaken by Varkas's main course. Or maybe it was more than a feeling, and it was actually soothing my tongue after the shock from all those herbs. I figured that was Varkas's thinking, at least.

While I was considering that, Varkas had apparently finished my steamed pudding, and his green eyes were now idly looking my way.

"You also used kimyuus eggs in this dish, didn't you? The white substance is the fat from karon milk, the brown sauce is dissolved sugar, and then I believe you boiled arow fruit along with sugar and honey."

"Amazing insight. Do you like it?"

"Yes. And not just this dish. Everything you prepared was delicious, Sir Asuta," Varkas calmly stated, setting down his empty plate. "You're just as skilled as I

hoped... No, even more so. You are a truly wonderful chef. It's quite astounding, considering your youth."

"I'm honored. And I was impressed by your skills all over again, so if I didn't betray your expectations then I'm glad to hear it."

"I am truly glad as well. You really could become a worthy rival for me, Sir Asuta."

While Varkas's eyes remained expressionless, they took on a gentle shine. But just then, an unfamiliar voice cried out, "What are you saying?!"

When I turned in surprise to look, I found a brown haired girl standing there with anger written all over her face. It was Shilly Rou, who had remained silent up until now.

"It's absolute nonsense, calling someone so young a worthy rival. I can't just ignore such absurdity!"

"Such comments are ill-mannered of you, Shilly Rou. Did you not experience Sir Asuta's skills yourself just now?" Varkas didn't seem shaken in the least, and that appeared to stir up the girl's fury further.

"It's true that this Asuta chef is exceedingly skilled. No mere half-baked chef could possibly stand up to him. But even so, there's no way that he measures up to your skill level, Varkas!"

"If that's what you truly think, then you should be ashamed of your own ignorance, Shilly Rou."

"But why?! Even...even I can cook better than that man!"

Varkas expressionlessly shook his head. "That is precisely the ignorance I spoke of. Sir Asuta, how many times have you handled rillione fish now?"

"Huh? You mean the fish I used for the appetizer, right? Since I also received one to experiment with, this would be my third time."

"I see. And I believe you said that it was just two months ago when you first laid hands on herbs from Sym, and it has been merely half a month since you first used chan and ro'hyoi."

"Y-You certainly know a lot about me."

“Yes. I inquired about everything with Sir Polarth, as a matter of course. And you had not even set foot in the castle town until three months ago. From what I was told, you were cooking with just the shabby ingredients on offer in the post town up until then.” After saying that, Varkas slowly turned back toward Shilly Rou. “I understand that Sir Asuta did not have too much difficulty because similar ingredients existed back in his home country, but even if they were like one another, they most certainly were not identical. Even so, do you still insist that you possess the same level of skill as Sir Asuta, Shilly Rou?”

“B-But...!”

“Even if we are to assume you possessed a level of skill near Sir Asuta’s, that would still not be something to be a braggart about. I’m ashamed in you.” Varkas’s tone and expression hadn’t shifted. However, the words themselves caused Shilly Rou’s face to go pale.

“Master Varkas, I ask that you leave things at that. Shilly Rou is still only seventeen, after all,” the tall old man Tatumai interjected from his seat between them, turning toward Varkas. “I believe that young people need to have something of a rebellious spirit. And furthermore, her anger is grounded in her respect for you above anyone else, so I believe it is harsh to criticize her so.”

“That’s true,” Bozl chimed in with a somewhat strained smile. “Besides, Shilly Rou is the only one of us who could possibly measure up to Sir Asuta. It’s no surprise she couldn’t just turn a blind eye to your words, Sir Varkas.”

Varkas looked over his three apprentices in turn, and then turned back toward me.

“At any rate, I hope that you will forgive my apprentice’s rudeness, Sir Asuta.”

“Ah, no, please don’t worry about it.”

“Indeed! When you’re young, it’s far better to be brash than timid, don’t you think?!” Naturally, that bit of banter had come from Dan Rutim.

Still, his frank statement definitely helped to ease the tension that had sprung up. The relaxed atmosphere we’d enjoyed so far returned to the room. However, Shilly Rou alone had her lips tightly pursed, bitter tears welling up in her big eyes. And those eyes weren’t staring at Varkas, but rather were glaring

my way with open hostility.

4

Exactly one hour after sunset, we headed to the hall where the banquet was being held.

After carrying the completed dishes to a room adjoining the banquet hall, the first course to be served up was the appetizers. If we weren't bringing the dishes directly from the kitchen then I didn't see the need to serve them to the guests one by one, but, well, this was how they did things in Genos.

The group that would be heading into the banquet hall included me and Ama Min Rutim, Varkas and Shilly Rou, and Ai Fa and the Sauti man to serve as bodyguards. We also borrowed the help of some pages, who were bringing a serving cart with utensils. Just like last time, Ai Fa and the other hunter stood by the door and watched over us as we worked.

"Ah, excellent work, everyone. Allow me to introduce you to our guests from Banarm. These are the chefs who manned the kitchen to prepare tonight's dinner, Varkas of The Silver Star and Asuta of the forest's edge." The man who welcomed us was none other than Duke Marstein Genos, who I hadn't seen for around two months and ten days. The ruler of Genos had long brown hair, a pretentious mustache fitting for a noble, a slim and youthful appearance, and a gentle manner overall...and yet, it was always difficult somehow to get a good read on him.

The nobles from the previous banquet were also present: Polarth from the house of Daleim, Leeheim from the house of Saturas, Lefreya and Torst from the house of Turan, Melfried from the ducal house of Genos, and Welhide from the house of Banarm.

The only other guests I recognized were Diel, Arishuna, and Dari Sauti, which left more than ten unfamiliar faces. But next to Welhide there were two men wearing the same sort of red formal attire as him, so I figured they must belong to the envoy group from Banarm. Then there were six additional middle-aged men and four young noblewomen.

“Well then, it’s already become quite dark outside, so shall we go ahead and get this banquet started?”

Apparently, they had already completely finished introductions, so we went ahead and started setting out the food quickly and efficiently. First up was my carpaccio and Varkas’s appetizer with the small chips and fish paste.

“These appetizers use rillione fish.”

Rather than leaving it to the pages, Varkas handled the task of serving his dish himself, alongside Shilly Rou. Though the girl had seemed to be on the verge of breaking down in bitter tears not that long ago, her face was now as composed as a theater mask as she worked.

“Ooh, I had heard rumors about such things, but you really can eat fish in Genos, can you? And this one is most certainly quite shocking. A dish that uses uncooked fish?” the older man seated beside Welhide said with a smile as he stroked his well-maintained mustache. The somewhat obese man beside him was looking at the two dishes with great suspicion.

“There’s nothing to worry about. The fish were brought here to the Turan manor from far off towns while still alive, so they are as fresh as a karon slaughtered just this day. Isn’t that right, Varkas?”

“Quite right indeed, Duke Genos.”

“Well then, let’s hurry up and get started. I haven’t had your cooking for several months now, so I’ve been greatly looking forward to it.” Perhaps noting how hesitant some of the guests were, Marstein took the initiative and reached for Varkas’s dish. “Ah, this is delicious. Even the head chef of the castle cannot hope to compete with you when it comes to cooking fish, Varkas.”

“I’m honored by your generous words.” The indistinct aura about Varkas didn’t change in the least, even when standing before Duke Genos. But now that Marstein had kicked things off, the guests all started eating the dishes one by one.

“Ooh, your dish is also excellent, Sir Asuta. There cannot be many chefs in Genos who can prepare fish so skillfully.”

Surprisingly, that comment had come from Torst. Polarth, meanwhile, was

chowing down and seemed quite satisfied, while Leeheim...he clearly looked to be in an even worse mood than the last time I'd seen him.

The last time I had laid eyes on Leeheim was during that whole quarrel with Reina Ruu. Just as Polarth had said, his anger didn't seem to have receded at all over the course of the past half month. If Polarth hadn't warned me, I would have asked Reina Ruu to help with the serving rather than Ama Min Rutim, which definitely could have been problematic.

At any rate, all the other guests looked quite satisfied. However, not one of them was speaking up. It was probably just like with the taste testing—many of them were eating raw fish for the first time, so they found it hard to put their feelings into words.

I guess it's the novelty of the experience winning out over the taste? It really might not have been suitable as an appetizer, just like Varkas said, I thought to myself, while the pages brought in the next dishes.

"This is a soup prepared with karon milk and karon breast meat."

"My soup dish uses tarapa and giba sausages."

With that, that karon soup with its complicated flavor and aroma was served alongside my minestrone. The first one to speak up this time around was Diel.

"Yes, this is quite tasty. The tarapa soup and giba meat are both delicious." Her whole voice was sounding more ladylike than normal, even beyond just her tone. Though, at the exact moment I thought that, Diel's eyes narrowed into a glare aimed at me from across the room. Her intuition might have been as sharp as that of a person of the forest's edge.

"So this is the giba meat I've heard so much about, is it? Hmm, it certainly has an unusual shape," the older noble said as he stared curiously at the plate of minestrone. It seemed that he wasn't familiar with sausages.

"Still, aren't giba those beasts that are considered symbols of calamity here in Genos? Is there really any value in eating such a thing instead of karon?" the plump noble by his side asked.

Instantly, Welhide furrowed his brow and replied, "This is part of a banquet Duke Genos had prepared for us. It is far too rude to say such things, so..."

“Ah, no need to get so worked up. How about I go ahead and give it a taste first?”

Maintaining a gentle smile, the older noble thrust his three-pronged utensil into a giba sausage. His healthy-looking teeth bit into it. He chewed several times with his broad jaws...and then his eyes shot wide open.

“Ooh. This...is delicious. And it is shockingly tender as well. This is smoked giba meat?”

“Yes. First I packed minced meat into an intestine casing, then I smoked it, and finally boiled it.”

“Hmm, it truly is amazing. This meat is certainly every bit as good as karon.”

“That can’t be right,” the plump noble grumbled, grabbing hold of the plate of minestrone. But before long, his eyes also shot open in shock.

“What do you think? I wasn’t lying, was I?” Welhide triumphantly declared, and then his gaze turned my way. The earnest and enthusiastic young noble seemed to be the same as I remembered. It honestly made me feel a bit self-conscious, thinking of how this young noble had been spreading the news of how delicious giba cooking was around his hometown of Banarm.

“My, it really is delicious.”

“I can’t believe it. Is this truly giba meat?”

“Even putting the giba meat aside, this whole dish is simply wonderful.”

The noblewomen were excitedly chatting away. All of them were young ladies dressed up in gorgeous attire, and they didn’t seem to hold any official posts. So were they ultimately invited to the banquet just to liven things up?

“But it certainly is not as if this other dish falls short of it, don’t you agree?” an unfamiliar noble in a neighboring seat chimed in. Instantly, the banquet hall was filled with voices appraising which one was better.

“Both are delicious. Asuta, your skills have grown so much over these past few months that they hardly seem recognizable,” Marstein declared in a gentle yet clear voice. “What do you think, leading clan head of the forest’s edge Dari Sauti? I hope that you are able to enjoy this banquet even more than the

previous one.”

“Well, this dish definitely has an unusual taste, but it isn’t hard to get down at all,” Dari Sauti stated, at which point the room suddenly got a lot quieter.

It seemed hunters of the forest’s edge really were treated differently by nobles, and those under them as well. Dari Sauti possessed a larger frame than anyone else present, and when you added in the sword at his hip and the giba pelt he wore, I could certainly see how plenty of the lords and ladies would feel intimidated.

“This is also my first time eating Asuta’s cooking since our last shared banquet, so I’m very surprised myself at how much he’s improved.”

“I see. The settlement at the forest’s edge is wide, so does that mean not just anyone can enjoy Asuta’s cooking so easily?”

“That’s right. People in the post town have been eating it every single day, but those of us whose houses are far removed from the Fa clan aren’t able to. Something I can’t help but regret a little when eating such delicious food,” Dari Sauti said with a smile. He looked like a really gentle guy with that expression on his face. Well, he had an especially calm and mild nature for man of the forest’s edge to begin with.

But still, he didn’t smile even once at the previous banquet. Guess that goes to show how much his distrust toward the nobles has lightened up.

Or perhaps he was intentionally trying to put on a friendly face. Even if he wasn’t on the level of Gazraan Rutim, he seemed to have a solid understanding of the art of socialization.

“Well then, now for the next dish,” Varkas stated, presenting a fresh plate. “This fuwano dish has maroll meat and shells kneaded into it.”

“My dish uses fuwano and poitan and is called pasta.”

This time around, the hall filled with voices full of wonder. There seemed to be a great deal of surprise at the strange dish I had presented—my giba bacon cream pasta. Visually, my dish definitely left a stronger impression than the twist rolls.

“You eat this by twisting your three-pronged utensils around to wrap it up. If you support the underside with a spoon, that should make it a little easier.”

With a commotion still filling the air, the guests began digging into their pasta.

From somewhere in the crowd, Polarth loudly called out, “Ah! This is delicious! Delicious, but unlike anything I’ve ever had! I’ve been trying not to speak up too much. Considering my deep friendship with Sir Asuta, I thought it best to allow others to form their own opinions...but I cannot simply keep silent after tasting this!”

“My. You acting so well-behaved just causes those around you to worry something is wrong, Polarth,” a noblewoman with an especially extravagant appearance chimed with an amused chuckle. Youthful and gorgeous, her yellowish-brown hair was done up high, and she wore a flowy pure-white dress. The gemstone-adorned necklace she wore sparkled brilliantly under the candlelight. “Still, this certainly is a scrumptious dish, unusual though it is. Did it indeed come from your home country, Asuta of the forest’s edge?”

“Yes. The ingredients are all from Genos, but this dish comes from my homeland.”

“While you are a person of the forest’s edge, you are also a visitor from overseas, correct? How wonderful. I would love to have you serve as a chef at my manor,” the young noblewoman stated.

However, an emotionless voice soon retorted, “Do not speak such foolishness.” Melfried’s chilly gray eyes like moonlight were calmly fixed on the woman. “You should refrain from saying something like that when you know full well what occurred between Asuta of the Fa clan and the house of Turan. Try to keep your position at least somewhat in mind.”

That was an entirely reasonable statement, but it didn’t exactly feel like something to be bringing up in front of Lefreya. I worriedly glanced over her way, but she looked perfectly composed as she wound up some pasta.

“Oh? I simply said what I truly felt. Is it really so unforgivable? It is not as if I suggested taking Asuta away by force.”

“As I said, such thoughtless statements are—”

“Since you act so stiff and formal, things wouldn’t be in balance if I wasn’t uninhibited, would you not say?”

Caught off guard, I looked back over at the noblewoman. How exactly could she speak so bluntly toward Melfried? Just as I started pondering that thought, Marstein ended up providing the answer with a smile.

“My apologies for surprising you like that, Asuta. This is Melfried’s wife, Eulifia.”

“Ah... Is that so?”

“Indeed. Though she’s only my daughter-in-law, people strangely seem to think she’s more similar to me than my own son, which can cause some trouble now and again.”

“My, I don’t believe I’m anywhere near as wicked as you are, Duke Genos,” Eulifia replied with a pleasant laugh. She must not have actually had any ill will behind that attitude. The other nobles soon were all chatting away with smiles of their own.

“But Eulifia, Asuta has earned a reputation as the greatest chef in the post town with his skills. If he were to end up serving nobles, that could garner further animosity from the people. You should suppress your desires in order to maintain the peace in Genos.”

“Is that so? Then perhaps I should also make purchases from his stalls in secret like Polarth does.”

“Eulifia,” Melfried stated, a sigh mixed in with his voice. His wife really must have been quite the woman to make a coolheaded man like him sigh.

“It is not as if I go there in person *every* time...” Polarth chipped in. “Still, this is a splendid dish. More than that, it feels as if these two fuwano dishes are drawing out the flavor in one another, but you two cannot possibly have arranged that in advance, correct, Sir Asuta and Sir Varkas?”

“Arranged it? Of course not...” Varkas expressionlessly replied.

“I see,” Polarth said with a broad grin. “Still, Sir Asuta’s creamy dish and Sir Varkas’s baked fuwano seem to pair quite well. I feel fortunate to be able to eat

both dishes together.”

I was a bit surprised to hear that, but, well, it was all just a matter of chance. However, when Polarth said that, I got the feeling that Shilly Rou was glaring at me for just a moment. Had she distorted his words to take it as him saying Varkas and I were both equally skilled?

At any rate, half of the six courses were now finished. Next up, it was finally time for the vegetable dishes. And this time it was Varkas’s offering that drew everyone’s eyes.

“Oh, my... This is just as unusual as the previous fuwano dish.”

It was the one made by slicing thin strips of vegetables and herbs, and its aroma was overwhelming. We had been served ones that were around the size of ping pong balls, but now that they were being served for real, their size was more like tennis balls. It seemed the dish really was an original creation of Varkas’s, as everyone but Lefreya were raising their voices in wonder.

“How mysterious!”

“It is like eating an aroma itself!”

“How exactly did you go about creating such a dish?”

Things were steadily heating up throughout the banquet hall. But even as the guests chatted, things pressed onward and the next dishes were brought out: Varkas’s amazing basted fish, and my giba meat Milan-style cutlets. The nobles of Genos and the guests from Banarm were all in a tizzy as they ate our dishes. Though I personally felt I came up short of Varkas in regards to our meat dishes, fortunately nobody ended up complaining. But as the only one familiar with the taste of normal giba cutlets, Dari Sauti had a bit of a complicated look on his face.

“Aah, delicious! They are all so good, are they not, Lady Arishuna?” Polarth asked.

After remaining silent all this time, Arishuna nodded back. “Yes.”

Though her expression hadn’t changed at all, I had stealthily been watching her and saw that she had cleared every plate from the appetizers up to the

meat dishes.

“Everyone seems like they’re really enjoying themselves, don’t they? Even though we’re right in the middle of the city of stone, it feels like I’m looking at a banquet at the forest’s edge,” Ama Min Rutim whispered to me.

It was true that things were getting lively enough to make that comparison. Of course, considering how the events at the forest’s edge just burst with energy, this felt very modest in comparison...but everyone’s excitement was clearly coming across.

Marstein was wearing a satisfied smile, and Welhide and company were intently focused on cutting meat. It went without saying that Polarth was getting all worked up, but several unfamiliar noblemen and women were proving every bit his match. Aside from a few exceptions like Melfried, Arishuna, and Dari Sauti, everyone was clearly bursting with joy.

“These are the final dishes, the sweets meant for dessert.”

Now my kimyuus-egg-based steamed pudding and Varkas’s meringue cookies that similarly used kimyuus egg were served. And the nobles all kept on smiling right up till the very end.

“Ah, what a truly splendid meal. It certainly was worth coming all the way from Banarm,” the older noble said as representative for the envoys. “Just what I would expect from a city known for its delicious food like Genos. It’s enough to make my head start aching, thinking about what food we could possibly prepare to satisfy you all when you visit Banarm.”

“Well, Banarm has cuisine all its own. Personally, karon dried milk hat bake is a favorite of mine,” Polarth tactfully chimed in with a broad smile.

The banquet seemed to be in full swing. Once we left, they would probably start drinking, just like they did at the forest’s edge. But at any rate, my job seemed to be done. And so, I was standing there beside the wall along with Ama Min Rutim, waiting for Marstein to dismiss us. But then, a young man’s voice complete with a sarcastic-sounding laugh rang out clearly.

“Still, the difference in skill was quite apparent this time around. The greatest chef in Genos is undoubtedly Varkas of The Silver Star.”

The one to say that was none other than Leeheim. Now that I thought about it, this might just have been the first time I had heard him speak tonight.

“Oh, so you preferred Sir Varkas’s cooking, first son of Saturas?” the older noble innocently questioned.

“Of course I did,” Leeheim replied, his mouth twisting into a sneer. “The novelty of giba meat won out at the previous dinner party, but you cannot overcome such a vast difference in skill with only that. But, well, I suppose I should say it was handled well enough, since it did not get in the way of Varkas’s cooking.”

“That is surprising to hear. Personally, I felt that it was by no means inferior.”

But Leeheim pressed on. “To say such a thing seems a touch ill-mannered. After all, chefs do have their own sort of pride in their work.”

Somehow, I got the feeling that Leeheim’s words were dripping with more malice and animosity than was necessary.

Getting a bit worried, I glanced over at Ai Fa, who was standing beside the door. Fortunately, though, she was just shooting a chilly stare at Leeheim’s profile.

“Sir Leeheim, are you not the one who acted rudely? Today’s event is a welcome banquet, and was not meant as a place to compare tastes,” Torst interjected, seeming somewhat confused. However, Leeheim didn’t stop talking.

“I simply stated my earnest feelings. And I had no intention of insulting the chef from the forest’s edge. It is only natural to arrive at such a result when sharing a kitchen with the greatest chef in all of Genos.”

“Oh? Personally, I was rather surprised by how things turned out,” Eulifia now chimed in, looking amused rather than perplexed. “After all, if this *were* a taste comparison, then I would have to give my support to Asuta of the Fa clan. Truly surprising, is it not?”

“Surely you jest! I cannot possibly imagine that is how you truly feel.”

“Oh, but it is. I would give the victory to Varkas for the vegetable and meat

dishes, but aside from those I felt that Asuta's cooking was more delicious."

"Eulifia, we are not comparing tastes, so there is no need to make such judgments."

"It isn't as if I started it. And I just said what I was truly feeling."

Once again, a commotion started to spread through the room.

It was starting to feel like it would be best for me and Varkas to leave.

Though I was certainly interested in their opinions, more than that, I didn't want to earn any more of Shilly Rou's displeasure. And I felt it best we distance ourselves from Leeheim too, as he was clearly trying to provoke us people of the forest's edge.

"If we were to judge the dishes one by one, I would place them as perfectly equal," Welhide stated, not having the slightest clue as to what I was thinking. "Sir Asuta's fuwano dish was simply splendid, while I was truly, deeply surprised by Sir Varkas's vegetable dish, so I would place them equal in that way as well."

"Hmm, I would have to give more wins to Sir Varkas overall... However, the soup and the giba meat in the fuwano dish were magnificent. I would find it incredibly difficult to assign a victor."

That had come from the plump noble. Now that those two had gotten it started, the nobles I didn't know started voicing their impressions.

Polarth, meanwhile, held his tongue as he smiled inscrutably. And though Diel looked perfectly calm and composed, she kept stealing glances my way with pursed lips.

"My support goes to Asuta," Lefreya stated, speaking up clearly for the first time. "Perhaps it is because I am accustomed to eating Varkas's cooking, but I felt that all of Asuta's dishes were more delicious."

"Ah, but..."

"With that last dessert..."

It got difficult to make out what any one person was saying at that point. As he watched with great interest over the commotion that I didn't think belonged at a banquet like this one, Dari Sauti stroked his chin.

“This has certainly gotten out of hand. Now that it’s come to this, let’s go ahead and get it all out there,” Marstein said with a strained chuckle. The ruler with a mysterious air of authority about him seemed to have given up on something. “Varkas and Asuta, I’m terribly grateful for the unparalleled work you did. You will receive your payment later, so I ask that you go ahead and take your leave.”

“Of course,” Varkas and I replied, both bowing.

Around half of the guests signaled looks of goodbye, while the rest were all fixated on arguing, seemingly not having even realized what Marstein said. While feeling their enthusiasm hot on our backs, we exited the dining hall.

“It certainly turned out to be quite the turbulent banquet.” As we stood there in the carpeted hallway, Varkas’s expressionless face turned my way. Beside him, Shilly Rou was biting her lip and looking down at the floor. “Were it just either of us alone, I cannot imagine there would have been so much confusion. In all likelihood, there was an issue with the menus we presented.”

“Our menus?”

“Yes. Though both of us prepared dishes meant to give the tongue a rest, the other side’s dishes negated that. With no time to rest for either heart or tongue, their confusion was only natural.”

“Yeah, I suppose that can happen.”

“It is entirely plausible. After all, I felt similar bewilderment during our taste testing,” Varkas stated, and then he stared straight at my face. “Your strength exceeded my expectations. I am certain the four great gods sent us here to the same land in order to help polish one another’s skills, Sir Asuta.”

“I-I’m honored, but that might be a bit excessive.”

“It is not excessive in the least. It is the truth.” Varkas stole a glance at Ai Fa and quietly said, “My apologies,” before suddenly grasping my fingers with both hands. “Please take care of yourself, Sir Asuta. You are incredibly precious to me.”

“Right, and I think you’re important to me too...”

Though I was concerned about Ai Fa and Shilly Rou's gazes, I went ahead and said how I truly felt.

I had learned a bit of discretion through my various failures, but at my core I was someone who hated to lose. And yet, even with the premise in mind that there was no winning or losing when it came to cooking...I simply couldn't overlook this mysterious chef who could make food that was tastier than mine.

"I don't know when we'll next meet, but I want to keep on striving to make dishes I can be satisfied with. So I hope that someday you'll try my cooking again."

"And I also intend to keep on experimenting so as not to disappoint you... To speak honestly, I wish that I had been born into this world at the same time as you." After giving my fingers one last tight squeeze, Varkas let go. "Chefs lose their strength as they grow older. I truly do wish I could have met you in the same era, at the same age... You may just be more fortunate than I am, Shilly Rou."

"Maybe," the girl replied in a stifled voice.

"Well then, please take care. And if you ever have business in the castle town, please stop by my restaurant."

"Thank you. You take care too."

With that, Varkas left, a smile in his eyes, if not on his lips.

Sighing heavily, I turned toward Ai Fa and Ama Min Rutim. "Looks like we finally finished the job, so how about we head back to the forest's edge?"

"Indeed. Rimee Ruu may have already fallen asleep," Ai Fa replied with a strangely gentle look in her eyes.

Ama Min Rutim was smiling kindly too. "Asuta, thank you so much for choosing me to help man the stove today. I wish to return to the forest's edge as soon as possible to talk to Gazraan."

"Gazraan Rutim? What are you going to tell him?"

"Everything I learned today. I'm sure he will be able to better connect what I'm feeling to the future of the forest's edge." Ama Min Rutim gently closed her

eyes and said, “I can see now. Even nobles are all just people like us.”

“Yeah... That’s exactly right.”

Ama Min Rutim was really wise, so it was entirely possible I didn’t truly understand what she was feeling. But I was certainly able to wholeheartedly agree without any doubts.

And so, our second job in the castle town finally came to a close.

Intermezzo: Maidens in the White Garden

“Yay, the bathhouse!” Rimee Ruu energetically exclaimed as she stepped into the stone room filled with white steam.

As she slowly followed, Ai Fa stifled a sigh. Unlike the young girl, she wasn’t especially fond of this bathhouse thing.

Isn’t cool water far more pleasant for cleansing one’s body? Who in the world thought up this custom of using hot steam to clean off sweat? Ai Fa thought to herself, but she needed to clean herself here in order to set foot in the kitchen where Asuta would be working. Yet even though it was her third time using the bathhouse, it still didn’t stop her feelings from weighing her down.

“Wow, it really is all white with steam! It’s like we’re giba manju being cooked in a steamer!”

“That’s certainly true. It really is a strange feeling.”

Morun and Ama Min Rutim were both using the facility for the first time, and they sounded like they were enjoying themselves. Reina and Sheera Ruu appeared just as relaxed as always, while Toor Deen was wriggling her body and looking somehow embarrassed.

“S-Still, it’s a bit embarrassing getting naked in front of people who aren’t family... I may not be too fond of using this bathhouse...”

It went without saying, but everyone present was in the nude. They removed all their clothing at the entrance to this room, then pushed through the white fog wearing only what they were born with. And since they had said they didn’t need any guidance or assistance, it was just the seven women of the forest’s edge in the room.

“First, we have to let our bodies be properly steamed. Then the dirt on our bodies will rise to the surface and we rub ourselves with this flat stick.”

Rimee Ruu was teaching the pair from the Rutim clan how to use the bathhouse. After all, the young girl had used the place the same number of

times as Ai Fa.

The white steam had a good bit of heat to it. It didn't seem all that different from what rose from a pot over a stove. And this stone room was sealed tight, so the heat was trapped inside with no way to escape. Thanks to that, the women's dark brown skin soon grew damp.

"Why exactly have you been stealing glances at me for a while now, Morun Rutim?" Ai Fa asked, only for the girl in question to freeze in surprise beyond the fog.

"H-How did you know? You haven't looked this way at all..."

"It would be impossible for me not to notice a gaze directed at me from so close. That much is only natural for a hunter."

"I see. I'm sorry if I offended you or anything," Morun Rutim said with a flustered bow.

"No," Ai Fa replied with a shake of her head. "I wasn't particularly offended. However, I do find it a bit difficult to be at ease when I am being glanced at. If you have something you wish to say, then why not go ahead and come out with it?"

Ai Fa and Morun Rutim hadn't had all that many opportunities to speak to one another. However, it had been quite some time since they first met, before Asuta started running his stalls. She had a very cheerful personality and yet possessed a firm will, which made Ai Fa quite fond of her. And now, Morun Rutim was staring at Ai Fa with rapt attention. Somehow, that gaze made the Fa clan head feel restless.

"It's not that I have something to say. My eyes were just drawn in by the sight of you..."

"Drawn in by me? Is that some sort of joke?"

"It's not a joke. It's normal to be drawn in by someone so pretty."

It was against the customs of the forest's edge to praise the appearance of a member of the opposite sex without reason. However, Ai Fa had no grounds to complain when it came from a fellow woman.

“And you’re not just beautiful, your body is hiding the strength of a hunter too. Having both is amazing. You’re so beautiful, strong, and brave... No other woman can compare.”

“Stop that. You’re making me feel awkward.”

“Sorry. But you think so too, don’t you Ama Min?”

With a gentle smile, Ama Min Rutim nodded. “Yes. There are plenty of women out there with beautiful appearances. But Ai Fa, how should I put it...? You’re special somehow. You possess undeniable beauty as a woman, and yet you’re also as tough as a hunter... And I think that gives you a charm that no one else possesses.”

“Yeah, I feel the same way. And it’s probably because of that charm that so many men asked to marry a hunter like you,” Morun Rutim said, and then she sighed with a strangely pained expression. “It’s stupid to be jealous of others, and yet...I can’t help but be jealous of you. You could win over the heart of any man.”

“What are you saying? Any men who want to marry me have exceedingly strange tastes.”

“That’s true... Ah, not about only strange men falling for you, but how you could win the heart of any man,” Ama Min Rutim said gently while looking over the head of her sister-in-law. “But people all have their own sort of charm. Ai Fa has her own appeal, and you do too, Morun. So there isn’t any need to be jealous at all.”

“But I look just like my dad Dan,” Morun Rutim mumbled in a strangely earnest tone.

After being taken off guard for a moment, Ai Fa unwittingly let a chuckle escape her. When she heard that, Morun Rutim’s eyebrows drooped.

“How could you laugh at me? You think so too, don’t you?”

“No, just the opposite. I laughed because it was just so completely unexpected,” Ai Fa explained while feeling ashamed for carelessly letting her emotions slip out like that. “I’ve never thought that you and Dan Rutim were alike at all. Well, now that you mention it, I recall how you got very angry and

chewed out the Suun women for wasting food.”

“I remember that... So you’re saying I looked just like my dad then?”

“Indeed. Your spirits may well be similar. But I never thought you looked alike in the least.” Since this seemed to be an important matter for Morun Rutim, Ai Fa didn’t hold back in speaking how she felt. “I consider Dan Rutim an irreplaceable friend, and I respect him from the depths of my heart. Up until now, I haven’t had many opportunities to talk to you...but still, you’re so earnest that I can easily tell that you’re his child. It’s utter foolishness for a charming girl like you to envy someone such as me.”

“I think so too. As a person, you’re just as charming as Dan and Gazraan, Morun,” Ama Min Rutim added, making Morun Rutim blink in surprise. There was something in those big round eyes of hers that was reminiscent of Dan Rutim. But though she was on the plump side, she wasn’t at all like the round bundle of muscle that was her father.

“It is a sin at the forest’s edge to speak falsely, isn’t it...? Thank you, Ai Fa. And you too, Ama Min.”

“I didn’t do anything worthy of being thanked. I simply spoke the truth.”

“Indeed. I’m certain a great many men would love to marry a pure and good-hearted girl like you,” Ai Fa stated, and Morun Rutim’s already flushed cheeks went even redder. Then, the girl timidly looked at the Fa clan head.

“Um...Deek Dom visited the Fa house, didn’t he? What was he like, exactly?”

“What was he like? Well, he appeared to be hurt by the matter with Lem Dom. However, there didn’t seem to be any issues with his strength as a hunter.”

“I-I see. So you think Deek Dom is an incredible hunter too, don’t you?”

“Of course. In all likelihood, he is every bit as strong as Donda Ruu and Dan Rutim. He has had my attention for some time now.”

“Huh?! A-Ai Fa, weren’t you into gentle men like Asuta?”

Now it was Ai Fa’s turn for the blood to rush to her face.

“Wh-What are you saying?! I meant that I cannot overlook such a strong

hunter! It has nothing to do with liking him!”

“O-Oh, I see. I’m sorry, I thought you were saying you had fallen for Deek Dom as a man...”

“I may be a woman, but I am a hunter... I have no intention of getting married, so I will not have my heart stolen by any man.” Thanks to the steam, Ai Fa’s face felt excessively hot.

When Sheera Ruu took a look at Ai Fa, she broke out in a smile. “I’m glad I’ve gotten to see so many more sides of you today, Ai Fa... In the past, you always hid your feelings like someone from the east.”

“That was because there was a great deal of discord between myself and the Ruu clan... It required a fair bit of time to reforge proper bonds.”

“Yeah, and I’m so glad that we managed to patch things up between us,” Sheera Ruu said, her smile brimming with affection.

Ai Fa thought Morun Rutim might have been a charming girl, but Sheera Ruu seemed even more desirable as a wife. In the past she had a weak aspect about her that stirred up Ai Fa’s desire to protect the girl, but lately she had started showing the strong core behind that gentle exterior, which only made her feel all the more charming.

Then, Ai Fa noticed Reina Ruu beside her wearing a somewhat complicated expression. With her blue eyes, she was shooting the Fa clan head a questioning look.

“Okay, now we can wash up! Asuta must be getting tired of waiting!” Rimee Ruu energetically exclaimed after remaining quiet for all that time. She was holding a wooden scrubber shaped like a spatula, and was staring right at Ai Fa with a sparkle in her eyes.

“Hold on. I do not need any help, Rimee Ruu.”

“Huh? But it’s hard to scrub your own back right, isn’t it? I’ll be careful not to tickle you too much today!”

“I told you, I don’t need any assistance! Look after Ama Min and Morun Rutim instead! It’s their first time here!”

With a cute pout and a “Tch!” Rimee Ruu turned toward the pair from the Rutim clan.

With a sigh of relief, Ai Fa withdrew to a corner of the room. Reina Ruu followed after her, holding a wooden scrubber of her own.

“What is it? I don’t need any assistance.”

“No, but would you mind having a bit of a talk while we clean ourselves?”

It seemed that Reina Ruu did have something she wanted to discuss with Ai Fa after all. As the Fa clan head grabbed a scrubber off the wall for herself, she replied, “Very well. It’s quite unusual for you to want to talk to me, though. What do you wish to discuss?”

“Well, I’m not really sure how to say this, but...” Reina Ruu started hesitantly while scrubbing away at her smooth upper arm. “Umm... Ai Fa, what do you think of Yun Sudra?”

“Yun Sudra? You mean that girl who started working the stalls in place of Li Sudra, correct? I haven’t talked to her enough to form any sort of thoughts about her.”

“Is that so? The Sudra clan is located near the Fa house, isn’t it?”

“Indeed. But she has been visiting the Fa house in order to assist Asuta in his work. I’ve seen her in the morning and around sunset a few times, but I’ve never had a need to speak with her.”

“I see. You’ve seen her and Asuta working together though, haven’t you?”

Ai Fa more or less sensed what Reina Ruu was worried about now. In all likelihood, she was referring to the looks and expressions Yun Sudra directed toward Asuta. It was easy to pick up on that much just from watching the two of them together occasionally.

And Reina Ruu once had feelings for Asuta as well...

On the night of Gazraan and Ama Min Rutim’s wedding, Reina Ruu had told Asuta that he should join the Ruu clan. She didn’t seem to mean he should marry her, however... Though at the very least, based on what she heard from Asuta, she felt that the girl’s words had held an unmistakable yearning. Besides,

it would be unthinkable to suggest such a thing to someone she had just met like Asuta otherwise.

What's more, back then Reina Ruu had the same look in her eyes when she stared at Asuta that Yun Sudra does now.

At the forest's edge, you were able to be wed once you turned fifteen. Yun Sudra was right at that age now, and Reina Ruu was already seventeen. It was no surprise that such feelings would rear their heads between unmarried men and women at that age.

However, Ai Fa was a woman who had decided to live as a hunter rather than get married. What sort of feelings did she have toward Asuta, and what did she want out of the future...? And furthermore, when other women showed their attraction to Asuta, what kind of emotions did that evoke in her? Those questions weren't so easy to answer, though she had no intention of sharing her thoughts about them regardless.

"From what I hear, Yun Sudra is as skilled at manning the stove as Li Sudra... If that is the truth, then I am glad she is lending her talents to Asuta to assist in his work," Ai Fa evaded, trying to use an intentionally relaxed tone.

Reina Ruu frowned ever so slightly, bringing her face in close to Ai Fa's. "Is that really all you feel toward Yun Sudra, Ai Fa...?"

"Is there something other than that I should be feeling?" Ai Fa asked, wanting to avoid speaking falsely if at all possible.

Reina Ruu pulled back, seemingly having given up. "No, you're right. Yun Sudra has been showing quite a bit of skill at working the stalls. I'm sure she'll continue to be of help to Asuta in the future as well."

"Indeed. That is quite heartening to hear."

Reina Ruu gave a faint, awkward-looking smile and then headed back over to Sheera Ruu. Now by herself again, Ai Fa just kept silently scrubbing her body.

My apologies, Reina Ruu. There's...nothing I can say, Ai Fa thought to herself as she looked down on her own body.

It was the body of a hunter, replete with taut muscles. Looking closely, she

could spy old scars faintly showing here and there. Though they were all points of pride to Ai Fa, it was utterly unthinkable that anyone would think her beautiful as a woman because of them.

You all are far more beautiful than I am.

That went for Reina and Sheera Ruu, Ama Min and Morun Rutim...and though they were still young, even Rimee Ruu and Toor Deen. Those women all possessed the beauty Ai Fa lacked as one who chose to live as a hunter. That was the one and only truth, as far as she saw it.

That's why I have no right to speak about that kind of thing.

After that, time passed on by, and they all exited the bathhouse.

In the small adjoining room they got dressed again, with Ai Fa putting her hunter's cloak back on and retrieving her blade. These were two more points of pride for her. And the necklace with the blue stone that she had received from Asuta brought her great joy as well.

"And that's everyone. Now, how about we head for the kitchen?" Asuta said with a smile. He had been talking with Dan Rutim and the other hunter, since he had finished up with the bathhouse a step ahead of the women. From here on out, he would be busy preparing dinner for nobles.

Under that Chiffon Chel woman's guidance, they proceeded down the stone hallway. As he walked alongside Ai Fa, Asuta was completely unable to hide his excitement.

"You seem rather worked up, Asuta."

"Hmm? Well, yeah. I mean, I'll be working the same kitchen as that Varkas guy."

Those black eyes of his looking at Ai Fa were filled with a strong, bright light. While there was a childlike innocence in his gaze, there was also an unshakable strength hidden beneath that. His eyes had the look of a hunter heading out into the forest after giba.

He lacked the strength needed to swing a blade, and had a gentle appearance like a woman's, but there was a great power hidden inside of Asuta. There

couldn't be many people out there as mysterious as him, not just in the settlement at the forest's edge, but even in the post town and castle town.

With that in mind, I suppose it's no surprise that some women would be taken with him... Ai Fa thought to herself, only for Asuta to give a little tilt of his head. It was a childish gesture that called Rimee Ruu to mind.

"What is it, Ai Fa? You've got a real serious look on your face for some reason."

Now he was wearing such a childlike expression that it made it hard to believe he had been showing so much strength just moments before. That was yet another irreplaceable part of Asuta's charm.

"You truly are unfair..."

"U-Unfair? What are you saying, all of a sudden? I didn't even do anything."

"Quiet, you," Ai Fa retorted, but she was unable to hold herself back from breaking out in a smile.

The head of the Fa clan found her heart filled with unparalleled joy. Even if she was not permitted to speak of her true feelings and desires because she was a hunter...as long as Asuta remained by her side, Ai Fa would be happier than anyone.

Asuta said he wanted to remain beside me his whole life long. Even if we are never married...those words alone are enough for me.

Perhaps someday Asuta would marry some other woman. Even if that happened, as long as he remained a member of the Fa clan, he and Ai Fa would always be family.

When she thought about Asuta growing to love another woman, she felt a throbbing pain deep in her chest.

But even so, it was Asuta's presence that was most important to her. And she felt proud of herself for being able to feel that way.

Still, as his clan head, I cannot permit him to marry just any woman, Ai Fa thought to herself, then she delivered a kick to Asuta's leg.

"I'm telling you, I didn't do anything!"

But all Asuta got for his whispered complaint was Ai Fa once more replying, "Quiet, you."

If others weren't watching, Ai Fa surely would not have been able to hold herself back from throwing her arms around Asuta. But since she couldn't do that, Ai Fa simply smiled, and Asuta fell into a bewildered silence.

Group Performance: The Rutim Wife and the Four Ruu Sisters

In the early afternoon on the ninth of the ashen month, Ama Min Rutim visited the main Ruu house. Upon arriving, and before stepping inside, the first person she ran into was the eldest daughter, Vina Ruu.

“Oh my, what brings you here, Ama Min Rutim? You aren’t supposed to be on duty till tomorrow, isn’t that right?”

For some reason, Vina Ruu was outside the house, seated leaning against the wall and deliberating about something. With a nod directed the girl’s way, Ama Min Rutim pointed to the pulling board she had dragged here.

“You see, the Rutim managed to take down a nice plump giba for the first time in a while, so I came to deliver it to Asuta.”

“Ooh... Maybe this isn’t the proper way to put it, but I’m surprised Dan Rutim was willing to let such a high-quality giba go...”

“Well, they caught another that was just as good, and so they decided to send one to the Fa clan.”

It would soon be a month since the Rutim’s break period came to an end, so they wouldn’t be lacking giba meat anytime soon. From that perspective, it made sense that Dan Rutim would want to hand it over, even as great of a catch as it was. The Fa clan would be entering their own break period soon, so they would have more and more trouble supplying enough giba meat for all their needs.

“A giba’s less tasty when it doesn’t have much fat... Not that I ever worried about stuff like that before Asuta taught me how to make a good meal, though.”

“Fat, huh...?” Vina Ruu repeated with a sad look in her eyes. “Ama Min Rutim, you have just the right amount of fat for a woman, don’t you? Not too little, but not too much either...”

“H-Huh? What in the world are you talking about?”

“Well, I mean, there’s more fat on me than most people...”

While it was a bit rude to do so, Ama Min Rutim gave Vina Ruu a thorough once-over. She didn’t look overly fat in the least. Of course, she wasn’t slim-figured either, but she had a truly healthy-looking body with womanly curves that would surely be attractive to a great many men out there. As a fellow woman, Ama Min Rutim certainly didn’t think she had anything to worry about in terms of her appearance.

Besides, Vina Ruu possessed an incredible amount of charm and sex appeal. She garnered a great deal of interest from the opposite sex not just throughout the settlement at the forest’s edge, but in the post town as well. Her droopy, sleepy-looking gaze, plump lips, and beautiful yet somehow still childlike face all served to lead men astray.

Normally, Vina Ruu should instead be worried about attracting too much male attention. After all, you couldn’t even count on two hands the number of times that she had turned down marriage proposals over the course of the past five years.

“It’s embarrassing when you stare like that...” Vina Ruu said, wriggling her body and looking worried. Even if she didn’t mean to, that action was another one that would earn her more attention from men.

“My apologies. But you’re beautiful enough that anyone would be jealous of you, Vina Ruu. Of course, standards of beauty can vary from country to country.”

Vina Ruu went silent when she heard that.

“But even so, that man from Sym said he was attracted to what was inside of you rather than your appearance, didn’t he? I don’t think there’s anything for you to worry about.”

“How do you know about that, Ama Min Rutim?”

“Ah, sorry. I just happened to overhear Lala Ruu and Asuta discussing it.”

After giving a long, heavy sigh, Vina Ruu broke out in a childish pout. “It’s not

like it matters to me all that much how that man saw me... It just made me notice that I've got too much meat and fat on my bones..."

"I certainly don't think so. Even if you're not overly skinny, you're certainly not fat either." Then, with a bit of a worried look, Ama Min Rutim added, "So, uh...please don't try to force yourself to lose weight, all right?"

"What makes you think I'd want to do that?" Vina Ruu retorted with a displeased look, but that was soon replaced by a weary expression. In all likelihood she was doing it unconsciously, but she gripped the jeweled bracelet around her left wrist. According to Asuta, it was a gift meant to ward off disaster, given to her by that easterner Shumiral.

"You're worrying about whether or not you should marry that man, aren't you?"

"There's no way my dad would accept that... The Ruu are one of the leading clans, and have to serve as an example for the people of the forest's edge..."

"Is that your real worry? How you should conduct yourself when Donda Ruu refuses?"

Vina Ruu held her tongue.

Leaning over in front of the girl, Ama Min Rutim peered into her eyes.

"I think that's probably the right way to approach things. Since the man is prepared to cast aside his god Sym in order to marry you, you should give it some serious thought regardless of whether you decide to accept or refuse his proposal in the end."

"I don't know what's right, though..."

"It's about what you feel is best. You should choose what would make you happiest, Vina Ruu."

Vina Ruu shot Ama Min Rutim a reproachful look back. "It's too difficult for me to decide... After all, what makes me happiest may be bad for my family and others..."

"I don't believe that's true. What will make the people who care about you the most happy is seeing you happy."

At that, Vina Ruu's expression shifted entirely again. Now, she had the look of a worried child who had gotten separated from her parents. "Lately, I can't even tell what it is I want... I'm sure Lala and Asuta must have talked about that too, right?"

"Well, yes, they did."

Apparently when she said farewell to the easterner Shumiral, Vina Ruu had expressed her admiration for the outside world. However, she had given up that desire and made up her mind to live as a person of the forest's edge.

It certainly was something for a person of the forest's edge to want to see what lay beyond. As far as Ama Min Rutim knew, there wasn't anyone else like that out there. And then who should fall for her, but a man from far, far away, Shumiral.

That must have caused Vina Ruu to second-guess herself terribly. It was possible he could take her out into the world, if she asked. It couldn't have been easy for her to figure out how she should regard someone like him...and after deeply agonizing about it for a long, long time, Vina Ruu had firmly decided to keep living at the settlement at the forest's edge.

Normally, that would have been the end of things. But unexpectedly, that Shumiral man didn't ask to take Vina Ruu away with him, but rather said he would marry into the people of the forest's edge. He must have greatly agonized over it himself, and in light of how difficult it would be to have Vina Ruu marry into his family, as she was a member of a leading clan, he decided to forsake his god and homeland.



It's only natural that would leave Vina Ruu feeling confused, Ama Min Rutim thought to herself as she kept on staring at the other girl's worried face. As Vina Ruu fidgeted with the tips of her brown hair, she gave another deep sigh.

"There's no way that I can choose the right path forward if I don't even know how I feel, right? What does it even mean to love someone to begin with...?"

"I imagine nobody can give you a clear answer to that question."

"Really...? But Ama Min Rutim...didn't you marry Gazraan Rutim because you love him?"

"Yes. But I found out how Gazraan felt about me some time before that. If I hadn't, I'm sure nothing would have happened, and I would have given up on marrying him," Ama Min Rutim replied, feeling her cheeks grow warm. "I don't doubt my feelings for him now, but I never realized what they were until then. In fact, I even thought it would be better if Gazraan would just hurry up and marry some other woman."

"Really? I find that hard to imagine, looking at you now..."

"That's understandable. But I am so glad that Gazraan opened up to me first. Just the thought of a life without him by my side is enough to make my heart ache now," Ama Min Rutim said, and then she placed both hands over her cheeks. "I'm sorry. I must've sounded really embarrassing just now. You probably think I'm a fool, going on like that."

"Of course I don't. But for you to be so open about all that for my sake... You're very kind, Ama Min Rutim..."

"Well, we're relatives, and you're important to me."

"I had thought...that maybe you hated me..." Vina Ruu said with a bit of a worried look, her upturned eyes staring at Ama Min Rutim.

For a moment Ama Min Rutim had no idea what she meant, but then she understood and said, "Ah, you mean how you turned down a request to marry Gazraan? Neither of us are concerned about that at all. And besides, after that I thought it was obvious you only wanted to marry someone who was truly right for you."

“Yeah...”

“Gazraan and I were only able to finally find one another after all sorts of hand-wringing. I suspect it’s a given that people will fret excessively when they’re choosing someone to spend their life with. So I think it’s fine if it takes you a while to work through your struggles, trying to find the right solution to this problem and grab hold of a happy future for yourself.”

“It’s normal to worry? I hadn’t even thought of that...”

After staring at the ground for a bit, Vina Ruu eventually looked straight back at Ama Min Rutim.

“Ama Min Rutim... I’m sure if I were a man, I would have fallen for someone like you... So modest, and yet resolute too... You’re incredibly charming.”

“Huh? No, I’m just good at making myself look that way. For a long time, my family was worried about what would become of me because my personality was so intense, you know.”

“Really...? That’s definitely hard to believe... But thank you. I feel a bit more at ease now, hearing you say that it’s okay to worry...” Vina Ruu replied with a beautiful smile. “I’ll keep thinking it over for the next few months, until my brain wears out... And I’ll try to figure out what I should do...”

“Right. And whenever things get tough, feel free to talk to me.”

Just then, there was a commotion around the entrance to the settlement.

There was a totes-drawn wagon rolling in, which meant that Asuta and the Ruu women had returned from the post town.

“Oh my, it’s already this late? I have to handle the dried pico leaves...” Vina Ruu said, slowly rising to her feet. But then, out of nowhere, she wrapped her graceful arms around Ama Min Rutim in a hug.

“V-Vina Ruu? What is it?”

“Nothing... I just suddenly felt so fond of you... Maybe as the eldest sister, I’m drawn to reliable women?” Vina Ruu reluctantly pulled back from Ama Min Rutim, her cheeks flushing red like those of a lovestruck maiden. “I’m sorry... Um, whenever you next stop by the Ruu settlement, I’d love it if we could talk a

lot more...”

“R-Right,” Ama Min Rutim nodded back, thinking to herself that men probably wouldn’t be able to get enough of those watery eyes.

With that, Vina Ruu disappeared around the side of the house, and the tolos wagon drove up close to Ama Min Rutim.

“Oh it’s you, Ama Min Rutim. I was wondering who it was,” Asuta said with a worried look, now holding the reins after having gotten down from the driver’s seat. “That was Vina Ruu with you, wasn’t it? Was something the matter?”

Naturally, Asuta must have seen everything on his approach. For some reason, Ama Min Rutim’s cheeks flushed red as she replied, “We were just having a bit of a talk.”

“Oh, Ama Min’s here?”

“Ah, you’re right. What are you doing here? Shouldn’t you be handling work around the house?”

Morun Rutim and Tsuvai similarly got down from the wagon and walked over as they spoke. They had both been helping out at the Ruu clan’s stalls, Morun Rutim starting when the sun hit its peak, and Tsuvai from the early morning on.

“Well, our clan hunted down this splendid giba, and I was sent to ask if you would buy it off us, Asuta.”

“Huh? Really? Aren’t the giba around the Rutim settlement supposed to be pretty lean right now?”

“Sometimes plump, healthy giba like this wander nearby. I’m not a hunter myself, though, so I don’t exactly know the details.”

“A fatty giba like this would be a huge help! We’ve been buying meat from the Gaaz and Ratsu and the like, but I have been getting a little concerned about our reserves.”

There was a twinkle in Asuta’s eyes. Today was the fourth day since he had reopened for business in the post town, and with each passing day, he seemed to be filled with more vigor and drive.

“Please, go ahead and look it over in the kitchen. It’s not all that large of a

giba, but I believe it should have plenty of fat.”

“Thank you! Well then, let’s take care of that right away!”

The two of them moved the leather bag from the pulling board to the wagon. In the meantime, the remaining women got out of the vehicle. That included Li Sudra and Lala Ruu, who had been helping out with Asuta’s stalls, as well as Sheera and Reina Ruu, who were in charge of the Ruu stalls.

Reina Ruu was the last one to descend, and when Ama Min Rutim saw the girl, she tilted her head and said, “Oh? What’s the matter, Reina Ruu? You look rather worn out... Are you feeling under the weather somehow?”

“Ah, Ama Min Rutim... No, I’m fine, I’m just a bit tired, mentally...” Reina Ruu replied with a strangely troubled smile. In the meantime, the rest of the group circled around to the rear of the building. Asuta had returned to the Fa house four days ago, but he had been stopping by the Ruu settlement after work like this in order to give cooking lessons.

Still seeming troubled, Reina Ruu came in close to Ama Min Rutim.

“You see, this noble who visited the stall kept talking to me, and he refused to leave. I got really worn out dealing with him.”

“A noble visited the stalls? Could it be the one from Banarm?”

She had heard about that from Rau Lea. Apparently, while working that dinner party in the castle town, Reina Ruu had both a young noble and a chef she had met fall for her.

However, Reina Ruu shook her head, “No. It wasn’t the one from Banarm, but one who lives here in Genos. He belongs to the house of Saturas that rules over the post town, and I believe he said his name was Leeheim.”

“The house of Saturas? What does a man like that want with you, Reina Ruu?”

“Well, he was also at the dinner party the other day, the rest of us who cooked with Asuta were introduced to them at the end. Ever since then, he seemed to be trying to talk to me a whole lot... Today he stuck right there next to me the whole time I was working the stall, and just kept gabbing on and on.”

“Oh my,” was all Ama Min Rutim could say, her eyes opening wide. “So on top

of that noble from Banarm and chef from the castle town, now it's a noble of Genos? You're a very charming woman, of course...but a noble of Genos growing so fixated on a woman of the forest's edge is unheard of."

"That's for sure. What in the world is he even thinking?" Reina Ruu looked plainly troubled. However, that was no real surprise. If Ama Min Rutim were in the same position, she probably would have sprinted straight past that stage and gotten mad or started laughing or something.

"Well, I can't imagine a noble of Genos asking a woman of the forest's edge to marry him, so the way he was trying to show affection for you feels more than a little insincere to me."

"Yes, that's exactly right. Though it would be a much bigger problem if he actually *were* asking me to marry him, of course..."

"So what sort of person is this noble?" Ama Min Rutim asked, her curiosity winning out, only for Reina Ruu to break out in a childish peevish expression.

"He's a young man who certainly fits the mold of a noble, with a greasy head and everything. He tries to keep up appearances in front of me, but he has this really haughty look in his eyes. And on top of that, he can't hide how weak and frail he is, like he would collapse on the spot if you were to smack him..."

"I see. That certainly does sound unfortunate."

"Yeah, it's a disaster," Reina Ruu replied so flatly that Ama Min Rutim couldn't stop a chuckle from slipping out. "It's no laughing matter for me. I can't be too blunt with a noble like him, so it really is a problem."

"My apologies. I understand how you feel," Ama Min Rutim replied, wiping the smile from her face as she stared back at Reina Ruu.

While Vina Ruu was somewhat taller than Ama Min Rutim, the second daughter Reina Ruu was more than a fist's width shorter. However, she was every bit as charming as her older sister. Her black hair—rare for the forest's edge—was tied off and hung down on both sides of her neck, and her blue eyes sparkled brightly on her small face. Though she was short, she had a wonderful build, so there was certainly no shortage of men at the forest's edge who would want to marry her.

“Still, it just goes to show how charming you are, Reina Ruu, for a noble of Genos to so boldly try to woo you. Can’t you be happy about that much, at least?”

“I don’t feel happy about any of it. If he had happened to see Vina Ruu first, I’m sure he would have fallen for her instead.” Reina Ruu was seventeen just like Ama Min Rutim, but she still kept her speech formal when speaking with the girl. That was why she had referred to a member of her own family using their clan name. Even though Sheera Ruu from the branch houses was older, Reina Ruu would speak casually with her. Ama Min Rutim always felt the second Ruu daughter didn’t need to act so formally around her, especially considering the Ruu were her parent clan.

“I’m not so sure. You and Vina Ruu are both quite charming, but your personalities are so different. I don’t think there’s any guarantee that a man who fell for you would feel the same way toward her.”

“Well, that still doesn’t change the fact that it’s a hassle. With my current state of mind, having men develop feelings for me isn’t exactly welcome.”

“Huh? Even men from the forest’s edge?”

“That’s right. For now, I want to devote everything I’ve got to training my cooking skills, so men trying to court me is nothing but a pain.”

Her way of thinking very much went against the customs of the forest’s edge.

“But getting married and having children is a crucial job for us women. Making good food is important, but there’s no comparison between the two.”

Reina Ruu childishly bit her lip. Since she had a youthful appearance to begin with, that only made her look all the younger.

“I mean...this is just how I honestly feel. It may go against the customs of the forest’s edge, but I can’t imagine not being true to myself.”

“That certainly is a problem. What exactly is making you feel that way?”

“That’s...” Reina Ruu started to say, and then her gaze fell down to the ground. “I don’t exactly know... But I want to become more skilled than even Asuta.”

“More skilled than Asuta? That...sounds like quite a difficult path to walk.”

“I’m well aware. But if I can’t do that, then I don’t know how to stop feeling this way,” Reina Ruu childishly asserted, but there was no hesitation whatsoever in her eyes. Ama Min Rutim thought to herself that maybe she was even more strong-willed than her older sister.

“I see... In that case, I suppose you have no choice but to continue down the path that you believe is right,” Ama Min Rutim replied, to which Reina Ruu’s eyes shot open wide in surprise.

“You’re not going to admonish me? I was expecting you to say something about how a member of the main Ruu house can’t be so selfish.”

“I’m not the sort to put too much value on what’s normal and expected. I believe that as long as you’re not breaking the laws of the forest’s edge, you should follow your feelings above all else,” Ama Min Rutim said, sticking her tongue out a little. “Up until it was decided I would marry Gazraan, my parents were always worried I intended to live out my life alone. But all I wanted was to listen to my heart more than the customs of the forest’s edge.”

“Really...? I always thought you didn’t have any problems reconciling what you want with what our customs demand.”

“You know, I told Vina Ruu this exact thing just a little while ago, but I’m simply good at making it look that way. I’m nowhere near that perfect.”

“That really is a surprise. It seems I misunderstood you, Ama Min Rutim,” Reina Ruu admitted, and then she broke out in a smile as charming as her elder sister’s. “In that case, could I ask you to keep this between us? I don’t want to worry my family.”

“I won’t say a word to anyone. And I’ll be eagerly awaiting the day your efforts pay off.”

“Thanks,” Reina Ruu said, grinning sweetly.

A moment later, two small figures returned from the rear of the house: Tsuvai and Lala Ruu.

“How long are you gonna keep talking, Reina? Asuta and the others have

already started preparing for tomorrow.”

“Huh, really?! Sorry, I’ll come right away! See you later, Ama Min Rutim...”

“Right. I’m on duty tomorrow, so we’ll be working together at the stalls and cooking practice.”

“Yeah, I’m looking forward to it,” Reina Ruu replied, her tone changing to sound just a bit more mature. But just as Ama Min Rutim was feeling all warm inside for some reason or another, Tsuvai called out to her.

“Ama Min Rutim, Asuta went ahead and purchased that meat from before. I received payment from him, so let’s hurry back.”

Morun Rutim would be staying in the Ruu settlement and getting in some cooking practice as well as helping to prepare dinner, so Ama Min Rutim nodded back, saying “Right,” only for Lala Ruu to interject.

“Umm, there’s actually a little something I wanted to discuss with you, Ama Min Rutim. Sorry, but could you kill some time at Shin Ruu’s house, Tsuvai?”

“Huh? But I’ve hardly ever talked with Shin Ruu at all.”

“He’s still out in the forest. But you should be able to help Mida and Ryada Ruu with work around the house, right?”

Tsuvai instantly looked displeased when she heard that suggestion. “Mida and I had our blood ties severed, so it’d set a bad example if we see each other so casually, wouldn’t it...?”

“That’s not true at all. You fall under the Rutim clan while Mida’s a member of the Ruu, so you’re undoubtedly still relatives. And there’s nothing wrong at all about relatives having a nice friendly conversation. You and Mida, and Yamiru Lea over in the Lea clan, you’re all trying hard to live properly as people of the forest’s edge, so you’ve got nothing to feel ashamed of.”

“I didn’t really feel ashamed of anything to begin with.”

“I know, so go ahead and hurry to Shin Ruu’s house already. I’ll get Ama Min Rutim back to you soon enough.”

Though she looked incredibly reluctant, Tsuvai started walking. Still, Ama Min Rutim felt relieved to see that the pair of girls who were around the same age

got along surprisingly well. Both of them were short-tempered and frank, so perhaps their unreserved natures caused them to click.

“So, what is it you wanted to talk to me about?” Ama Min Rutim asked while watching Tsuvai leave.

Lala Ruu rustled her bright red hair and said, “Ah... Could we move over to that tree? I feel like somebody could suddenly walk out and hear us if we stand in front of the house.”

“All right.”

Just as the girl had asked, they walked into the shade of a large tree to the side of the main house. However, even after moving there, Lala Ruu still wasn't speaking up about her business.

“It's unusual for you to want to talk with me. Is it something to do with business in the post town?” Ama Min Rutim prompted, though she figured it had to be something else.

As expected, Lala Ruu shook her head and said, “No. Umm, if you don't feel like answering, you don't have to, but...have you ever fought with Gazraan Rutim?”

“Have we fought? No, not that I can think of.”

“Right, you two have such relaxed personalities... But what about before you got married? Did your opinions clash any more than now?”

“I'm not sure. Of course, there were little things we differed on, but Gazraan and I just naturally seem to think in similar ways.”

“I see... So it really is best to marry someone like that, huh?”

“Oh, no,” Ama Min Rutim replied. “That sort of thing varies from person to person. As long as you match each other where it matters most, in the foundation of your being, nothing else is important. And even if Gazraan and I think alike, our personalities and temperaments are very different.”

“Really? You two seem so similar to each other, though.”

“I wouldn't say that. Gazraan and I are both just good at making it look that way.”

Ama Min Rutim had never imagined she would be saying almost the same thing three times in one day. It wasn't as if she particularly tried to hide how she felt, but her family had taught her to treat others politely, and perhaps she had been a little too successful at that.

"Still, it's not like the two of you regularly fight or anything..." Lala Ruu said with a sigh, looking depressed.

Her bright red hair was done up at the top of her head, and she had only just turned thirteen years old. It seemed her womanhood was showing in her height first, as she was rather slender, and Ama Min Rutim felt that the way the girl was always lively and open like a boy was her greatest charm. The fact that she was acting so uncharacteristically down suggested she was dealing with even greater concerns than her older sisters.

"You see, I'm always fighting with this boy, Shin Ruu... Actually, rather than a fight, it's more just me getting mad and yelling at him."

"I see. So that's why you were asking, is it?"

"Yeah. But Shin Ruu is a fine hunter at the age of sixteen, and on top of that he's the head of a branch house responsible for his family of five. It doesn't seem right for a younger woman like me to be yelling at him. I really don't want to make Shin Ruu look bad if I can help it..."

"Reputation certainly is important. Especially with men of the forest's edge, as they take strength from their pride as hunters," Ama Min Rutim stated, but then she added, "However, reputation and pride may seem similar, but they're not the same. Reputation is a word for how other people see you, while pride is a personal matter."

"Huh? I'm sorry, I don't get it. Maybe that's a little too complicated for me."

"It isn't complicated at all. What I mean to say is that what's important is how Shin Ruu feels. If he thinks you're more precious and important than anyone else, then it shouldn't be any issue no matter what you yell at him."

"Huh? But shouldn't I be more considerate of someone important to me?"

"Do you think you're being thoughtless with him, Lala Ruu?"

“Of course not! But I’m always hitting him with my personal opinions and feelings...”

“If our opinions and feelings differed, then I wouldn’t want to hide that from Gazraan or have him do so to me.”

“Yeah...but you don’t yell at him, right, Ama Min Rutim?”

“That’s true. But I do try to get my feelings across the best I can,” Ama Min Rutim explained, breaking out in a smile. “You’re not the sort to hide your feelings, are you, Lala Ruu? That can lead to you yelling without meaning to, but on the other hand, it can also help you get your feelings across to him, so I don’t think you have anything to worry about.”

“D-Did you already know about Shin Ruu, Ama Min Rutim?” Lala Ruu asked, her cheeks going adorably red in a way that was very easy to read.

“No,” Ama Min Rutim said with a shake of her head. “But I’m well aware of how earnest you are. I’m sure you’ll be just fine.”

“No, I won’t! I’m so immature, just a kid who can’t even control her own emotions!”

“Not so. If you were to tell someone how you feel about something and they get upset about it, they would be in the wrong.”

“That can’t be right!”

“If that’s what worries you, why not check with him directly? Wouldn’t that be the most certain method?”

Lala Ruu looked utterly bewildered. “Ch-Check with him? How would I even bring up something like that?”

“There’s no need to be indirect. You just need to tell him like you did with me before. Then your feelings should get across just fine.”

“Huh?! Saying something like that to Shin Ruu...it’d just be so embarrassing.”

“You feel uneasy and anxious, don’t you? I think the best way to get past that is to be open about your feelings. And I think getting your feelings across is something you’re really good at, Lala Ruu.”

Lala Ruu hung her head while covering her mouth with her hands. Her face had gone as red as her hair. She was sure to grow as beautiful as her older sisters in the next few years. That man she had fallen for was quite a lucky fellow.

“People are equally drawn both to what’s similar to them and what’s different. Perhaps that Shin Ruu boy is the sort who doesn’t let his emotions show all that much?”

“Y-Yeah. I’m surprised you knew that. But you’re right, Shin Ruu is pretty bad at being open with his feelings.”

“It’s said that we people of the forest’s edge are descended from a mix of Sym and Jagar blood, after all. Perhaps that is why most of us are divided into one of two extremes, either not letting our emotions show much at all, or being very open with them instead. So I suspected there was a chance that if that boy was bad at showing his feelings, someone as open as you might be very precious to him,” Ama Min Rutim explained, once again smiling. “And what’s more, I think he’d find it sad to see you try to suppress your feelings on his behalf. So rather than fretting all on your own, I believe you should share what you’re feeling with him.”

“You’re amazing, Ama Min Rutim... You may be the only woman I’ve met other than Sati Lea who can talk about something so difficult.”

“Really? I’m just someone who has trouble keeping her composure, so I try to express what I’m feeling as accurately as possible.”

“No, you’re seriously incredible! I’m really glad I talked to you, Ama Min Rutim!” Lala Ruu declared, a brilliant sparkle in her blue eyes. “I’m sorry for stopping you when you were about to leave. I guess you should get going before Tsuvai gets sick of waiting, huh?”

“Right.”

Ama Min Rutim didn’t often have a chance to talk to the Ruu sisters, but they certainly were opening up to her today. It certainly had been an unusual day for her.

After that, she followed Lala Ruu over to Shin Ruu’s house...only to find quite

a few more people there than she had expected. There were Tsuvai and Mida, as well as that hunter from Masara, Jeeda, and the youngest Ruu daughter, Rimee Ruu, making for quite an unusual crowd.

“Ah, Ama Min Rutim! Long time no see!” Rimee Ruu exclaimed, unreserved as always.

“You’re right.” Ama Min Rutim smiled back. At the same time, she took note of Lala Ruu glaring at Jeeda out of the corner of her eye.

“I was wondering why you weren’t at the main house, but what are you doing in a place like this?”

“I’ve been helping them cut firewood. I can’t see why you’d want to complain about that.”

This foreign hunter Jeeda had been heading into the post town alongside Asuta and his fellow chefs to act as a bodyguard. Since the wagon was full with six people in it, he had instead rode on a Ruu clan tolos, and it seemed he had headed over to Shin Ruu’s house as soon as he got back to the settlement. The tolos Ruuruu, meanwhile, was tied to a nearby tree and munching on leaves.

“You could help some other house with cutting firewood. But this one has both Ryada Ruu and Mida, so they aren’t lacking for men,” Lala Ruu stated in a tone that was none too pleasant. Ama Min Rutim figured she must have harbored some sort of grudge against Jeeda.

A few moments later, Rimee Ruu tugged on the hem of Ama Min Rutim’s clothing and explained, “See, Jeeda beat up Shin Ruu a while back, so Lala doesn’t really like him. But Shin Ruu’s been practicing real hard so he can take on Jeeda in a contest of strength once his injuries are healed.”

“Rimee! What are you whispering about?!”

“Nothing. Honest. But you know, Jeeda has a hard time relaxing with lots of people around. That’s probably why he came to Shin Ruu’s house instead of the main house, right?” Rimee Ruu said while hiding behind Ama Min Rutim’s back. “Besides, the other men aren’t back yet, so he must have picked this house because Mida and Ryada Ruu are here. Our dad let him have a sword, so it might be a bit scary if he hung out in a house with only women around.”

“I wasn’t thinking about anything that complicated...” Jeeda grumpily replied, a shine in his yellow eyes, but it was entirely possible she had hit the nail on the head. Despite being only eight years old, Rimee Ruu was surprisingly skilled at intuiting how people felt.

“Are you leaving already, Tsuvai?” Mida suddenly interjected just as Lala Ruu was about to say something again with her brow furrowed. Tsuvai was looking even more displeased than Lala Ruu and Jeeda as she glared up at her former big brother with those large eyes of hers.

“Ama Min Rutim’s back now, so I’ll be leaving right away. There’s still work to handle back home, after all.”

“Okay...” Mida mumbled, his plump cheeks trembling. Quickly taking notice, Rimee Ruu tilted her head.

“Hey, Ama Min and Morun Rutim take turns studying how to cook, so why don’t you, Tsuvai?”

“Eh? My job is counting money! I’ve already mostly learned how to handle the stalls, so what are you complaining about?”

“Hmm? But Reina said it’d be a big help if everyone knew how to make the myamuu dish. And you can still only make giba burgers, right?”

“Lala Ruu here can’t make it either...so why do I have to be the only one practicing?”

“But Lala’s helping out Asuta. The Ruu stalls took over that myamuu dish, so wouldn’t it be good if all three of you helpers from the Rutim clan could make it?”

“Ah, but...” Ama Min Rutim started to interject. While Rimee Ruu had a point, Tsuvai had been charged with the difficult task of managing the money. Currently, Asuta and Tsuvai were the only ones who could easily calculate things like how much money was needed to make a hundred meals, and how much profit could be made from them.

Since the number of stalls had been raised to four after reopening for business, there was talk about bringing more people on. If that happened, there wouldn’t be any need for Tsuvai to force herself to improve her cooking skills.

Ama Min Rutim had intended to say all that, but Rimee Ruu tugged on the hem of her clothing again and stared up at her with those big eyes, causing her to hold her tongue reflexively.

Could it be...? she thought to herself, and then decided to say something else.

“Naturally, it would be helpful if Tsvai were to get more skilled at cooking, but I wouldn’t feel comfortable with trying to force her to push herself... After all, she handles the difficult task of calculating the money...”

In response, Tsvai sulked and said, “Hey. It’s not like I care if things are a little tough for me, you know. But the one who would really have it hard is Asuta, who’d have to try teaching someone as talentless as me.”

“I certainly wouldn’t call you talentless.”

“I’m talking about when it comes to manning the stove! I hadn’t done it at all until recently, so it’s only natural I’d have no skill at it... But on the other hand, nobody can beat me when it comes to calculating money. Isn’t it simplest to just have everyone handle the work they’re good at?”

“That’s certainly true, but I don’t think it’s right to leave all the money calculations to you alone either. After all, if you were to get sick or injured and had to take time off, we would all be in quite a pinch.”

“Hmph! As if I’d get sick!”

“Even so, you don’t know what the future may hold, right? And you’re still only twelve, so I think it’s much too early to say you have no talent for manning the stove... You’ll get married someday too, so wouldn’t that be a good reason to improve your cooking skills?”

“There’s no way that someone without a clan name would be able to get married...”

“Our clan head Dan wants to give you and Oura the Rutim name as soon as possible. And since you’ve been entrusted with the important task of handling work in the post town, I doubt that day is very far off.”

Tsvai glared at Ama Min Rutim with a look like she had jerky caught in her throat. “I don’t particularly care one way or the other. But if the clan head

wants me to do something, then he should tell me.”

“That’s true. Then, when we get back, how about we consult with our clan head Dan? I’m sure it’ll be a good talk for you,” Ama Min Rutim concluded, only for Mida to speak up again.

“Then...will Tsuvai get to visit the Ruu settlement lots more?”

“Hey! Let me tell you now, I’m not coming here to play! Don’t expect me to make a detour to chat like this all the time!”

“Okay...” Mida replied with a weak sway of his large head, but there seemed to be a very happy light shining in his eyes.

Then, Ama Min Rutim felt a third tug on the hem of her clothing. When she glanced down, she found Rimee Ruu looking even happier than Mida.

“I knew I could count on you, Ama Min Rutim,” the young girl whispered into Ama Min Rutim’s ear as she bent down. The older of the two gave a strained smile, feeling like she should be thanking the youngest Ruu daughter back. After all, if it hadn’t been for Rimee Ruu’s prompting, she wouldn’t have realized how Mida was feeling.

Really, these four Ruu sisters...

Once again, Ama Min Rutim couldn’t help but feel that they were all quite the characters, not to mention wonderfully charming as well. And her impression of them was about to become even more keenly felt. From this day on, whenever she stayed over at the Ruu settlement, she would talk to whomever she was sharing a bedroom with until they fell asleep, and there would be fights over who got to be with her.

Knowing nothing of that future yet to come, Ama Min Rutim headed back home alongside Tsuvai, filled with a vague sense of satisfaction.

Afterword

You have my deepest thanks for picking up this book, the 16th volume of *Cooking with Wild Game*. Since this will have to be a short afterword, I need to hurry things up a bit.

This time around, there was just a single Group Performance story. Looking back, both it and the intermezzo ended up being a gathering of girls from the forest's edge. But, well, I figure it's good to focus on the women from time to time like that.

In the main story, Varkas finally appears. He's a bit of a unique fellow, and I hope that he will continue to be likable for you.

I'm truly grateful that the manga version seems to be progressing smoothly. I once again hope that you're able to enjoy the expressions and staging that version brings.

As always, let me finish by giving thanks to everyone involved with the production of this book, and of course all of you who purchased it.

I hope to see you all again in the next volume!

December 2018, EDA



Bonus Short Story

A Sweet Moment

“Hey, what’s with all the commotion?” Ludo Ruu asked after returning from his hunt, peeking into the kitchen with Darmu Ruu standing behind him.

The women working inside greeted the two young men, but Rimee Ruu went a bit further, waving her hands and shouting, “Welcome back! Hey, we’ve been trying to make pudding today! You should give it a try, Ludo and Darmu!”

The young girl held out a scoop of pudding on a wooden spoon. Ludo Ruu took a bite without any hesitation whatsoever. “Hmm, that’s a weird taste. And it’s super sweet.”

“Yeah! But it’s yummy, right?”

“I guess. Let me have some more.”

The contents of the container Rimee Ruu held started disappearing in a flash. All the while, Darmu Ruu just stared at them out of the corner of his eye.

“Hee hee! You wanna try it too, right, Darmu?”

“There isn’t even any left for me to have, is there?”

“No worries! Sheera Ruu made lots too!”

Sheera Ruu was staying over at the main house for the day. With a bashful smile, she held out her container toward Darmu Ruu.

“Oh, wait! You two brought a giba back with you, right, Darmu? If your hands have dirt and grime on them from touching its fur, we don’t want it getting on a container or a spoon.”

“Huh? Then what should I do?”

“What about feeding him like this?”

Blushing deep red, Sheera Ruu scooped up some pudding with a spoon and

timidly held it out. Darmu Ruu frowned and hesitated for just a moment, but then he gave in and took a bite.

“H-How is it?”

“It’s not bad... But eating it that way felt a bit odd, as if I was being treated like a young child.”

“O-Oh! I’m so sorry!”

“You don’t need to apologize.”

The feeling in the air between the two of them was even sweeter than the pudding, but the only one present who seemed to notice that was Rimee Ruu.

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Cooking with Wild Game: Volume 16

by EDA

Translated by Matthew Warner Edited by Adam Fogle

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